



The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the Community Education and Training College system in KwaZulu-Natal

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Abstract

This chapter gives an account of how adult learners and educators in the Community Education and Training College system in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN CETC) have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdown, and considers implications of their experiences for the future of the system.

The current COVID-19 pandemic is contextualised against the history of previous pandemics, some of which had devastating effects on society. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the CETC system is described, including the denial of access to learning venues and initial difficulties in procurement of protective equipment and products required for the re-entry of learners and educators. The keen sense of injustice felt by some learners and their responses to this injustice are noted, as is the exposure of shortcomings in the system, and the associated transformational learning opportunities for adult learners, adult educators and the managers of the system.

Introduction

This book calls for us to reflect on adult education in a time of crisis in South Africa, and refers to a number of factors currently compounding the situation in our country, to the detriment of the lives of adult learners. The most recent, the COVID-19 pandemic, appears to have exacerbated the effect of other negative factors such as gender-based violence, inequality, unemployment and poverty. This chapter gives an account of challenges faced by adult learners, adult educators and community learning centre (CLC) managers after March 2020 when lockdown protocols were introduced, as well as of their experiences under lockdown rules as the COVID-19 virus took its toll on South African society. It also describes unexpectedly positive spin-offs of the pandemic that arose as people responded to the effects of the limitations brought about by the illness itself, and to the limitations brought about by lockdown rules.

A commonly expressed view in casual discussion of the COVID-19 virus is that nothing like the current pandemic has ever been experienced before. Therefore, it may be useful to first consider the current pandemic in the perspective of the history of past pandemics that humanity has survived across the globe.

The COVID-19 pandemic in historical perspective

Pandemics, plagues and famines have affected swathes of people in different communities around the world since medical history was recorded, and no doubt before that as well.

One of the earliest pandemics on record was the Justinian Plague that killed about a third of the population in countries surrounding the Mediterranean (Little 2006) about one-and-a-half-thousand years ago. Attempts to curtail the spread of the plague through restrictions on travel and trade were not successful, and people continued to contract the disease and die. Foreshadowing the negative effects of COVID-19 and the lockdown on modern-day economies, many farmers and labourers involved in growing crops or tending to domestic animals contracted the disease and died. As a result, food production stopped, and many who had escaped infection died of starvation in the famine that accompanied the plague (Little 2006).

Even more severe was the 'Black Death' (2020) in Asia and Europe, which killed half of the population in some countries between the years 1360 and 1400 CE. At that time, people had no knowledge of viruses or bacteria, and many believed that the plague was a punishment from God. Nevertheless, there was a shared sense that the disease was spread through contact. Because of fear of infection, ships were refused access to ports or were quarantined (Medix 2020), merchants were refused access to towns, and infected people were separated from their

healthy neighbours and their houses boarded up. Basically, cities were in a lockdown similar to the one imposed in South Africa in 2020, but, as in previous pandemics, farmers and farm workers were affected, crops and livestock were not attended to, and there was famine and further loss of life in Europe ('Black Death' 2020).

Viral pandemics have included the polio pandemic of 1916, which, like COVID-19, was usually a mild, temporary illness but could cause paralysis or death, and a series of influenza pandemics in the 20th century. These influenza infections included the Spanish flu (which killed millions of people in 1918), the Asian flu (1957), and the Hong Kong flu (1968) (Kilbourne 2006). In the 21st century, we have seen, among others, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, commonly known as 'SARS flu', that ran from 2002 to 2004, the H1N1 flu of 2009 (McIntosh 2020), and now, with more devastating effect, COVID-19. At the time of writing, towards the end of 2021, this virus was known to have affected people in 221 countries and territories around the world, caused the deaths of close to five million people (Worldometer 2021), and, through efforts to limit its spread, resulted in the closure of many business initiatives. With these closures have come decreased income, increased unemployment, and disruptions in industries, transportation, and services on all continents (Pak, Adegboye, Adekunle et al. 2020).

While pandemics are obvious crises of health, their effects are always wider and they are usually accompanied by economic depression as well as widespread anxiety, depression and fear. Consequently, they impact on economics, politics, social issues, technological development and other spheres. In 2014, the West African Ebola virus epidemic was associated with violent riots when some groups started believing that the curfews, quarantines and treatment centres were part of a secret political plot on the part of the party in power and consequently vandalised the treatment centres and attacked staff working there (Shang, Li & Zhang 2021). It seems common that, during pandemics or epidemics and the application of measures taken to contain them, suspicions of social or political manipulation tend to be aroused in some people, and they are attracted to suggestions of political conspiracy. The current pandemic is no exception, and belief in conspiracy theories is resulting in resistance by some people to adhering to lockdown regulations and to the use of vaccines as protective measures.

Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic

What this brief review of previous pandemics tells us is that the COVID-19 pandemic is not something new to the world, and, although it has brought tragedy to many families, the loss of life and disruption to society are not as great as that brought by pandemics in earlier centuries. Even in the worst-affected countries, life appears to be returning to normal after the disruptions of lockdown just two years after the pandemic began. However, the virus does have a particular feature

that, counterintuitively, makes it difficult to contain and may even ensure that it becomes endemic. This distinguishing feature is that many infected people experience mild or no symptoms. Pandemics where everyone who is infected experiences and displays severe symptoms are easier to contain and control because it is obvious who is infected, and people who are infected are aware that they have the virus and may infect others. In contrast, many COVID-19 virus carriers look and feel perfectly well, and continue circulating in their communities, travelling to other places without realising that, as they do so, they are infecting others who may become ill and die. In spite of this possibility, COVID-19 is simply the latest in a long line of pandemics that humans have suffered and survived, and no doubt there will be more pandemics that afflict humans in the future.

Fortunately, along with the suffering they bring, pandemics can have positive impacts such as advances in medical understanding. With each pandemic, our understanding of how infection occurs, how the dynamics of infections play out, and how to treat afflicted people increases (World Health Organization 2009). With these advances in medical understanding, and especially in vaccinology, we are better able to save lives and sustain our way of life. An indirect effect of COVID-19 that many would see as positive, is that it has catapulted the adoption of online communication forward, especially in developing countries (Shang et al. 2021). Outcomes include, for example, that it has become commonplace for university students to chat with supervisors online and to attend cohort sessions offering support without having to travel to campus. Increased online communication improves people's safety by reducing road travel, saves people time and money otherwise spent on travel, and reduces our impact on the environment.

These positive spin-offs, while welcome, are naturally obscured by the negative effects of the pandemic. As noted in the introduction to this book, and, as with most other pandemics, those hardest hit by the negative effects of COVID-19 are the most vulnerable people in society – in other words, those lacking access to good medical care, and those most likely to have their livelihoods severely compromised by illness, death of a family member, or lockdown. For example, informal traders who make a living selling cooked food to passing commuters at taxi stops are among the first to suffer when workers must stay at home, or become ill. Their income, which they have come to count on as steady and dependable, simply disappears. Likewise, informal workers who are paid for 'tog' work, are sent home, on the understanding that they will be called if they are needed. These are people eking out a living on the margins of the working economy. They are the people that the new Community Education and Training College (CETC) system should be serving in terms of the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET 2013) and the National Policy on Community Colleges (DHET 2015). For people 'on the edge' with little agency and power in society, negative discrimination, oppression and crises are frequent visitors in their lives. For instance, many mature women in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) were denied primary education by their fathers, who did not believe

there was value in educating girls (John 2016). Also, as a result of the enforcement of apartheid laws before 1994, as well as numerous political conflicts in the province, it is not uncommon for people to have barely survived political violence or lost family members to it, or to have suffered repeated trauma in their lives, such as witnessing the forced removals under apartheid, or horrific acts of political violence (John 2016). Or they may have simply never been offered a real chance to gain a solid education or develop their skills and interests. For them, the CETC system promised opportunities for adult learning that were supposed to redress the educational neglect experienced in their early lives.

How the COVID-19 pandemic affected the KwaZulu-Natal Community Education and Training College system

The KZN CETC is part of the post-education and training (PSET) sector as promulgated by the Continuing Education and Training Act 16 of 2006. It is the third tier of higher education institutions after universities and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges. The community learning centres (CLCs) that adult learners attend, operate mostly in schools, as there are very few dedicated facilities for the KZN CETC, and insufficient funding to build facilities. Therefore, the platoon system is used, and most CLCs begin their classes at 15:00 or 16:00 after the schoolchildren have left the school buildings, and run until 17:00 to 18:00, from Monday to Thursday. Inevitably, all teaching and learning programmes of all CLCs are aligned to the Department of Basic Education's (DBE's) school calendar to ensure access to DBE facilities.

It is important to note that the components of the PSET sector outside universities have long been under-resourced and poorly developed, with CLCs suffering the most from the perennial problems of:

- Inadequate funding and infrastructure;
- Inadequately trained educators;
- Poor conditions of service for educators;
- Classes that are not easily accessed in terms of time and location;
- Unattractive learning options and lack of publicity; and
- Insufficient support from state structures.

(Aitchison 2018)

Aggravating the already difficult conditions that South African CLCs operate under, the COVID-19 lockdown began in March 2020, and school facilities were closed. For most of the year in 2020, all the CLCs in KZN were closed, impacting close to 25 051 CETC students in the province. The lockdown was implemented

suddenly and swiftly, and KZN CETC management had no time to put in place any alternative learning options for their adult learners, and, in any case, had no budget to cover the development of even a rudimentary online system.

What follows below is a description of how the running of KZN CETC teaching and learning programmes has been impacted by the pandemic and associated lockdown, and the implications this has for future activities and developments for adult education and training in the country.

Data collection

For education management purposes, the province of KZN is divided into 12 districts, and, in the restructured CETC system in the province, there are 40 CLCs, each made up of a main office and centre, and a number of satellite centres. Each CLC is in the charge of a manager responsible for the CLC and its cluster of between three and five satellite centres. The data gathered for this study were obtained telephonically from CLC managers during 2021 by the KZN CETC principal, who is one of the authors of this chapter. Two CLC managers from each of the 12 districts in KZN were consulted, constituting a sample of 24 CLC managers from the total of 40 CLC managers, and thus more than 50% of the CLC managers in the KZN province.

The telephonic conversations were based on open-ended questions concerning closure and reopening of classes, access to venues, obtaining protective equipment and sanitisers, and other issues related to the running of CLCs. Therefore, in each conversation, the KZN CETC principal and CLC managers discussed the sudden denial of access to learning venues, difficulties in procuring COVID-19-related personal protective equipment, and the development of strategies for cleaning and disinfecting the learning areas according to COVID-19 protocols. Beyond that, the conversations were free-ranging. In these conversations, shared familiarity with the context of each CLC and established trust between the KZN CETC principal and CLC managers facilitated their communication, thus enhancing trustworthiness. There is a possibility that the power relations between the KZN CETC principal and the CLC managers who report to him may have influenced the collection of data. To mitigate this, the CLC managers were assured that their identity would not be revealed in reports based on the data they provided, and that there would be no negative consequences in respect of any information communicated during these conversations.

The COVID-19 impact effects

Overall, the effects of COVID-19 and its impact on the college manifested in the following pattern:

- Fear;
- Lost access to learning venues;
- Challenges of screening and cleaning;
- Frustration and anxiety;
- Uncompleted syllabi and rescheduled assessment programmes;
- Loss of adult educators;
- Loss of adult learners; and
- Pressure to adapt.

Fear

Many adult learners experienced fear and anxiety about the pandemic, and, not knowing which sources of information they could trust, came to suspect that COVID-19 was a planned political and biological attack by groups in society that they believed might act against them. In addition, some believed that measures put in place to protect people were a new version of apartheid-era-like restrictions of freedom, or a hoax, or somehow not applicable to them. For many adult learners and educators, fear was the predominant response, and they were reluctant to venture out of their homes.

There were also fears on the part of principals of schools, who felt responsible for the children in their schools; some of them feared that, if any of their chairs or desks were touched by a person with COVID-19, they would be permanently contaminated, or that they needed to fumigate their schools to get rid of the COVID-19 virus.

Lost access to learning venues when CLCs were evicted from DBE facilities

The lockdown that was announced for the entire country had a devastating effect on CLCs in KZN, as it brought the already limited time available for teaching and learning to a sudden halt. While this was to be expected as part of the lockdown for the entire country, the blow for adult education was compounded when CLCs were not reopened when DBE schools resumed their normal teaching and learning activities. This extended closure was in response to a circular emanating from the DBE head office which instructed principals to halt all community activities in schools with immediate effect in order to minimise unnecessary contact and the spread of the virus. The principals of the DBE-run schools classified formal classes of CLCs that had been running at their schools as part of community activities and consequently barred all CLC-related activities from schools, literally stopping adult educators and learners at the school gates. This

denial of access to DBE facilities caused hurt and frustration to CLC educators and learners who were anxious to continue with their programmes and were thwarted.

The refusal to allow adult learners and educators to enter schools constituted an overwhelming problem for KZN CETC management, as it brought all formal adult learning activities to an abrupt halt, with no foreseeable return to normal. The management recognised that school principals' actions were based on well-founded concern for the safety of the children at their schools, and that many were acting in accordance with the apprehension shared by the staff and school governing bodies (SGBs) of their schools, who were anxious about keeping their schools as safe as possible. The KZN CETC management then worked with CLC managers and satellite heads to devise strategies for minimising chances of contamination, and for how CLCs could ensure that the learning venues they used could be disinfected. They then negotiated with district directors and circuit managers of the DBE, who, once they understood how the CETC system is designed to operate, and how the devised strategies would effectively protect school children from infection, sent circulars to school principals giving instructions for readmission of CLC learners and educators to the learning venues. Readmission happened at different times in different districts and schools between July 2020 and February 2021.

A positive spin-off from the exercise was that many DBE officials, school principals and SGB members' schools who had not understood that the CLCs were part of the DHET system, gained a sound understanding of the CETC and CLC systems. That they had no knowledge of the system before they were approached by the CETC management, highlighted the depth of the need for advocacy and information about how adult learning opportunities are offered in communities through the CETC system. 'We were not aware' was a commonly heard exclamation during the communication about CLCs with DBE staff and SGB members, some of whom understood for the first time that the CLCs were part of South Africa's official education system, and not initiatives of private groups or churches. Once they had gained this understanding and were persuaded that adult learners and educators would be able to screen people coming to class and disinfect venues used, they became much more accommodating and allowed adult classes to resume in their schools throughout the KZN province.

Challenges of screening and cleaning

While the KZN CETC management negotiated with district management of the DBE about access to learning venues in schools, the issue of hiring people to screen learners and educators, and to clean and disinfect venues posed another major challenge. No funding had been provided to pay for screening and ensuring that venues were cleaned and disinfected, and the time taken to find a solution to this lack protracted the period of halted teaching and learning in CLCs. This was an amplification of a problem that had existed as a resource deficit in CLCs long

before the advent of COVID-19. The reason for this was that, while schools run by the DBE had in place people paid as cleaners and screeners who would ensure that everyone who came together was screened, and that school buildings were sanitised, the CLCs using the same facilities had none, and no plan in place to provide these. With no provision of cleaning materials, some CLC and satellite managers and adult educators had to draw on their own personal resources to have the learning venues cleaned, or call on their learners to contribute to costs and to help with cleaning. Thus, the advent of COVID-19 served to compound this long-standing challenge of cleaning CLC venues, and the problem had to be resolved before classes could resume. This challenge was complicated further when the issue was taken seriously by labour organisations, which insisted on a literal interpretation of policies and maintained that educators could not perform cleaning functions. This became a sparring and bargaining point used by labour unions. The DHET ultimately provided funds to pay for cleaners in CLCs. Following the supply chain processes, the CLCs identified service providers to perform the functions of cleaning in learning venues. In addition to this, the DHET later initiated a partnership with Higher Health which saw the provision of screeners to some CLC sites. As a consequence of these initiatives, people were in place to fill those roles, and access to school facilities for CLCs was once again allowed.

However, even after regained access to learning venues, restrictions on attendance at CLCs by adult learners and educators who were over 60 years old or had medical conditions that made them particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus continued, putting learning and teaching out of reach once again for some individuals.

Frustration and anxiety about impending assessment

During their exclusion from venues for learning, adult learners became increasingly frustrated and anxious as the time for them to write examinations approached with no hope of readmission in sight. In CLCs located in urban areas around Durban, the anxiety, frustration and uncertainty culminated in formal, peaceful protest action by some adult learners and educators against what they viewed as injustice and a violation of their basic human right to education, as enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa. In two KZN areas, the student representative councils (SRCs) of adult learners led organised, peaceful protests in a way that set them apart from the violent student protests we have become used to in South African universities. The route they chose was to appeal to local councillors for their assistance and support, and then to send orderly delegations representing their groups to the offices of DBE circuit management to make people in this structure and district directors aware of their plight. It was during these negotiations that the adult education delegations discovered that some DBE officials had no knowledge of the CETC and of the programmes it could offer. This careful approach has paid dividends in that it has made DBE officials aware of how the CETC operates under the DHET, and has gained the support of DBE officials for the CETC system going forward.

Uncompleted syllabi and rescheduling of the assessment programme

The platoon system currently followed in conducting teaching and learning at all KZN CETC centres confines teaching and learning to the very limited time of one hour per day, per subject, for four days per week, since no teaching is done on Fridays. COVID-19 lockdown rules and the time taken to negotiate readmission to venues further diminished this already limited contact time with students, and the months of lost teaching and learning time made it impossible to meet the programme targets of the original work plan. Consequently, it was inevitable that the assessment programme had to be rescheduled. After marathon consultation meetings, it was agreed that the mid-year Amended Senior Certificate (ASC) examination would have to be rescheduled to be written at the end of the year 2020.

In addition, the scheduled dates for conducting and monitoring site-based assessment (SBAs) had to be changed and aligned to the revised teaching and learning programme. This meant that examinations and the marking of scripts had to be rescheduled to be ‘in sync’ with the new timing. The effect of all these changes on the teaching and learning operations of the KZN CETC and CLCs was negative; most educators struggled to adapt and keep up when so many changes occurred in a short space of time. In addition, the number of learners registering for examinations was much lower than would have been expected if it had not been for COVID-19.

Loss of adult educators

Inevitably, some adult educators contracted COVID-19 and were ill for protracted periods of time. Some lost their lives or were traumatised by illness and death in their families or did not return to class for other COVID-19 related factors, even after lockdown measures were eased. Also, according to COVID-19 prevention protocols that came with risk-adjusted levels, educators with comorbidities and those who were over 60 years were expected to work from home. But in the CETC system, no provision was made to enable adult educators to be effective working from home or even to keep in contact with their learners. Inevitably, in CLCs where this COVID-19 measure was applied, learners were left with no educators in the place of those who could not be in class.

To contend with the loss of educators, CLC managers had to reorganise placements of other educators within the system and deploy them in the place of those who were lost to the system or advised not to teach. Some adult educators who were over 60 years took early retirement, but, by October 2021, most of those whose access had been restricted had returned to work, and, with the reduction in the number of learners, the KZN CETC system did not suffer a shortage of adult educators in CLCs. However, it must not be forgotten that many of those who work as adult educators have no education beyond Grade 12 and

no teacher training, so the CETC system continues to suffer from a shortage of well-trained adult educators.

Loss of adult learners

Like their educators, some adult learners contracted COVID-19 and were ill, and some lost their lives. Others were traumatised by their family members' illness or death or could not afford to continue with classes because they had lost their income, or lost the motivation they had to learn, or had other reasons for not returning to class, and have stayed away since the start of lockdown.

As noted above, news of the COVID-19 virus sowed fear amongst both adult learners and teaching staff. Given that this was a novel situation for them, and that they could access little information about the pandemic at that time, this was understandable. This fear drove many adult learners to refrain from venturing out of their immediate communities, so that they were too afraid to attend class and mix with people from other communities. Even those who returned to classes suffered because, after their protracted absence from learning, they struggled to remember what they had learnt. Some believed that they had lost the memory of what they had learnt. This resulted in discouragement and an increased dropout rate. The number of adult learners who sat for the 2020 final General Education and Training Certificate (GETC) AET Level 4 examination was only 3 435. This figure represents a massive drop from the 13 106 who sat for this examination in 2019, and only a fraction of the 22 535 who sat for this examination in KZN in 2018 (DHET 2019), before the effects of COVID-19 and the associated lockdown.

The absence of student support services in the CETC system meant that, for the most part, students who stayed away were not contacted and encouraged to return. If they had been contacted, and perhaps redirected to a class where an educator was physically present, and where they could have continued with classes, this dropout rate could possibly have been reduced. For many of them, the presence of an educator is an imperative in terms of their expectations of how learning and teaching happen.

Pressure to adapt

With the sudden loss of access to learning and teaching venues described above, suggestions that the CETC system should be adapted to incorporate technologically based models of teaching and learning had to be considered. However, there was complete unpreparedness on the part of CETC management, CLC managers and adult educators to adopt unfamiliar technology, and there was no possibility of organising or accessing training and equipment that would enable them to even start offering online learning.

Even if the management and educators had been in a position to consider adding the option of online learning to the offering of the CETC system, very few learners

would have been able to take advantage of it. Not many of those attending classes below ABE Level 4 (at NQF Level 1) would have known how to access online learning, and very few of those who knew how this learning could take place have access to computer facilities or the Internet.

In essence, from a theoretical standpoint

It is difficult to imagine a starker practical example of the concept of social exclusion (Sen 2000; Bernard, Contzen, Decker et al. 2019) than that of adult learners and educators being denied access to their places of learning at the beginning of the pandemic and of the lack of provision of the products and means needed for readmittance. The concept of social exclusion relates to the failure or disruption of mechanisms that should serve people in society and provide interconnections and resource allocations, so that some groups suffer multidimensional disadvantage.

Although, theoretically, the CETC system should be able to offer learning of different kinds to satisfy all the formal and non-formal learning interests of adults from all socio-economic and educational levels, practically all adult learners in South Africa attend classes at CLCs to make up for educational loss. They are either attempting to gain education that they were deprived of as children or are taking advantage of a second chance to gain a grade that they failed. For these groups of people to be deprived of access to learning, is indefensible. Yet, for many of them who have joined classes in the CETC system, the experience of education as adults is one of continued exclusion – from adequate learning materials, from adequate infrastructure, from well-trained educators, from current technology, and from a curriculum that will adequately address the needs that they experience as under-educated adults (Aitchison 2018).

This social exclusion and deprivation are indicators of the long-term underlying pattern of lack of development of the adult and community education component of the PSET sector, and an example of the iceberg metaphor common in systems thinking (Christiaens 2018). In this image of an iceberg, the submerged, not obvious but determining factor is the generally accepted mental model of adult and community education in South Africa, which is that it is an expendable part of the system, and that adult learners are not in need of the solid support and provisioning that are generally accepted as necessary for schools and universities.

At the level of personal experience, many adult learners experienced fear and anxiety about the pandemic and had no definite access to reliably accurate information. This could be seen as another instance of social exclusion, since under-educated adults have not had the education that would enable them to develop the critical reading and language skills needed to discriminate between information that has the marks of validity, and fallacious information. As

described above, for some adult learners, uncertainty and the interruption to their already minimal learning arrangements were simply too difficult for them to cope with. They lost momentum and hope and dropped out of what they had registered for. Social exclusion almost inevitably results in poor development of functionality in mainstream society (Sen 2000), and those adult learners who dropped out were likely to have been overwhelmed by the obstacles in their path and unable to find the agency needed to cope with them, and thus experienced 'capability failure' (Sen 2000: 7).

In complete contrast, for some adult learners, notably the SRCs in two KZN districts, the denied access to learning venues and extended interruptions that jeopardised the only opportunity for learning that they had, led to a heightened sense of injustice which spurred them to action. In the image of a theoretical coin with social exclusion on one side, on the other side is strongly shared social identity as members of a particular group. Sharing a sense of injustice strengthens it, and this common experience and shared association exemplify Tajfel's social identity theory (Brown 2020). The fact that this strong sense of injustice culminated in a well-organised delegation of learners and CETC staff who travelled to the offices of the DBE officials to state their case, is significant, both currently and potentially for the future. The group was successful not only in regaining access to learning venues in schools run by the DBE, but also in gaining the attention of DBE officials and establishing improved understanding and relations with them. This is likely to have consolidated the sense that these adult learners have of themselves as a social group, stigmatised and excluded from mainstream advantage, but with shared identity and potential power. The difference between the route they chose to convey their dissatisfaction and the violence of the numerous student demonstrations we have come to expect in South Africa could possibly become significant for their development of agency as a distinct group, far less privileged but with more gravitas and self-possession than many of the young students who protest at South African universities.

Unpreparedness for a new model of teaching and learning

The impact of COVID-19 and the associated lockdown gave rise to a textbook example of Mezirow's transformational learning for the managers of the CETC system. Mezirow sees all of us as bound by our habitual frames of reference, which determine the way we understand issues and events in our world, and, importantly, the limits to what we believe to be possible (Kitchenham 2008).

COVID-19 and the lockdown exposed the extent of unpreparedness in the KZN CETC and CLCs to deliver any form of learning other than face-to-face teaching. With this exposed shortfall came the awareness that the traditional method of

teaching and learning need not be the only channel of delivery in the CETC system, especially if it is to cope with the continued risks of COVID-19 and other future pandemics, or other unpredictable disruptions that may interfere with face-to-face teaching. This realisation disrupted the strong belief or mental model (Christiaens 2018) that had been shared by most people active in the CETC system, namely that adult learners in the CLCs cannot learn if they do not have an educator present. In a classic example of effective, critical self-reflection and the consequential reframing of frames of reference (Kitchenham 2008), and with very constrained resources, the KZN CETC had to start considering how it could begin to offer blended teaching and/or e-learning to mitigate the risks of compromised teaching and learning.

Thus, in an instance of the kind of situation that can lead to transformational learning, the disorienting dilemma presented by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown challenged the habitual perceptions and beliefs of the management and staff of the CETC system (Kitchenham 2008). In practical terms, they were forced to reconsider their long-held position that CLC adult learners can only be served in a face-to-face, paper-based model of learning. In addition, they had to recognise that, even in rural communities with few resources, an increasing number of families have access to smartphones. With this new realisation that limitations were not as insurmountable as they had supposed, and that new possibilities could be opened up, managers of the system realised that to move in this new direction would require:

- Identification of the needs and resources of both adult learners and educators in order to create and deliver effective interventions as an alternative to face-to-face teaching;
- Identification of an effective online teaching model that would suit the rural, poorly provisioned context of many of the adult learners in KZN;
- Plans to secure funding for resource provisioning for at least minimal electronic devices and Internet connectivity at CLCs, or, preferably, at satellite centre level; and
- Re-engineering the lecturer training model to ensure that educators at future CLCs and satellite centres will be able to deliver learning via channels other than face-to-face teaching; this would include ensuring familiarity with e-learning options and devices, and with educational use of the Internet so that educators will be able to play a role in the transformation of the CETC sector so that it is not excluded from the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Although the options listed above seemed impossibly remote before, the advent of COVID-19 and its effects exposed the shortfalls of the teaching and learning model of the CETC system. The contrast between the demonstration of what is possible online, with the better-resourced elements in other sectors of South Africa's education system, highlighted the poverty of offerings in the CETC system and enabled its planners to see that technologically based teaching and learning

must be an integral part of any growth in adult and community education offerings.

Given the extremely slow pace of change that is usual in adult and community education in South Africa, it is highly unlikely that any change will be speedily implemented in the CETC system. If it were, it would run the risk of what is known in systems thinking as a fix that backfires (Christiaens 2018). In the case of the CETC system, if planners switched to an online system in response to the problems outlined above, the change would immediately improve the situation for some adult educators and learners, but would simultaneously exacerbate the exclusion and disadvantage of those unable to access or use electronic devices or online learning options, and they would conceivably be worse off than they currently are.

The adjustment – catching up to the new normal

The weaknesses in the CETC system exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic forced planners in the system to consider the question of what adjustments could be made to draw closer to the new normal. This question needs to be asked even though many CLCs in KZN are in deep rural areas where there is a shortage of network and where few families have access to computer facilities.

Planners in the CETC management recognise that online learning requires specialised methodology and that few of the currently employed CLC educators understand what it entails and have the technical competence to attempt it. However, strides made by educators in other sectors have brought to their attention opportunities that could be explored, and factors in the context of CETC learners that could be exploited. These factors and opportunities include the following:

Regularising the use of basic technology

The use of increasingly common smartphones with their increasingly user-friendly systems and the ever-extending reach and performance of cell phone networks, are a factor to be considered and used to maximise the quality and accessibility of learning for adult learners.

DHET officials now recognise that basic and readily available technology like WhatsApp, Zoom and Teams may be viable as learning channels, even though, currently, very few educators are capable of teaching in this way. However, thanks to the COVID-19 lockdown, managers of the CETC system now recognise that steps could be taken to empower adult educators in the use of electronic devices and in basic online education strategies. While this is far from fully fledged online learning, it would constitute a step towards it, and may begin to mitigate the risk

of the absence of a dedicated online learning platform specially designed for adult and community education. Start-up outlays to begin offering online learning as well as ongoing data costs are often cited as unsurmountable barriers to considering any online education in the CETC sector, but it is possible that planners and managers in the CETC system have not yet fully realised how these costs could be offset by savings that would be made in even a modest, partial switch to online offerings.

Changing format of student recruitment and offerings at CLCs

The number of adult learners attending CLCs in KZN has been in decline for several years. From a 2016 high of 54 340, the number of learners dropped to 26 760 in 2019 (DHET 2021), representing a drop of 49% in four years, even before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although 2021 figures are not available, the COVID-19 pandemic, with all the associated factors described above, has caused a dramatic further drop. These figures tell a story of decreasing appeal of what is available at CLCs to the target population of potential adult learners in the province. It is clear that, to change the story and increase the appeal of CLCs and their offering to potential learners, as well as retain learners who do attend, the planners and management of the CETC system need to relook at a number of features of the system. Apart from reconsidering formal and non-formal options offered, extending learning options to include skills training, and the introduction of extramural activities, the system would need to be adapted to include new methods of outreach, the recruitment process, admission criteria and admission practices, and increased student support. These adaptations could be effective in shifting the CETC system towards a more student-centred trajectory.

Having a learner management system (LMS) and data management systems in place could be useful in adjusting the operations in community colleges towards practices that are more structured for student-centricity and relevance. The current absence of an LMS in all CETCs constitutes a lost opportunity for efficiency and responsiveness that could be remedied.

Improvement in learning material and learning options

There is a great opportunity at this time of reflection and possible new initiatives for the CETC system to address the paucity of teaching and learning material provided in CLCs and to start improving the quality of the learning material that is used in the teaching and learning process. This could be done by introducing links to digital books on the college website; these could additionally benefit from advantages associated with zero-rated material.

The timing of COVID-19 and the disruption it has caused are fortuitous in relation to a recent research project (Lyster & Land 2019), the findings of which indicate learning options desired by registered learners as well as community members who would consider registering at the CLC if these options were available. This

project generated proposals for community college pilot sites in each province, reporting on how they could expand and adapt to best fulfil the policies and plans for the new CETC system.

At the KZN pilot site, which is Ilungeloletu at Osizweni near Newcastle, registered learners stated that they wished they could learn skills related to running a business, working with electricity, plumbing, getting a learner's and driver's licence, working with computers, and growing vegetables. Community members who live within reach of Ilungeloletu but who have not registered for classes stated that they would register if they could learn skills, naming a wide range of skills they wished they could gain. These included running a business, baking, computer skills, and growing food crops and vegetables (Lyster & Land 2019). Ilungeloletu does not have the facilities and staff it would need to offer this skills training. However, expanded use of technological options could enable it to increase the range of non-formal learning opportunities and offerings through new technology. This could entail taking advantage of the increasing access to smartphones even in disadvantaged communities, to offer online demonstrations of skills and online tuition. For instance, in vegetable gardening alone, which many of the learners could practise at their own homes, there could be short demonstrations of a range of skills, and online tuition for anyone preparing for a learner's licence. Recorded commentary and guidance in all official languages could be a part of these learning options.

If one of the spin-offs of the COVID-19 pandemic was the addition of online options such as these to current offerings, and even if this was only at pilot sites, the pandemic would have spurred a leap towards the community colleges envisaged in the policy documents. This is because COVID-19 has presented the planners and managers of the CETC system with a real example of Mezirow's disorienting dilemma that irrevocably challenges their entrenched frames of reference (Kitchenham 2008) in relation to the delivery of adult and community education in South Africa. Experiences like these compel us to interrogate our habitual expectations. In this case, the disruption may bring new understandings not only of how modes of delivery could be shifted to embrace technology for more sustainable teaching and learning, but also of how the CETC could take advantage of this technological shift to renew itself, expanding its offerings and geographical reach at relatively low cost and in a short period of time.

Conclusion

It is interesting to consider the extremely slow pace of change towards what is still a community college mirage in terms of the limits-to-growth archetype from systems thinking. This recognises that, in spite of efforts to effect change in a system, there is often underlying resistance to change, which is so strong that it appears that the system itself is pushing back against change (Christiaens 2018).

In the case of the CETC system, expectations of positive change raised by the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET 2013) are frustrated, and policies relating to the community college system (e.g. DHET 2015) seem as yet to have had little effect on the poor experiences available to most adult learners in the country. This intransigence is possibly rooted in the mental model shared unconsciously by most South Africans, in which adult education is tolerated as an educational poor cousin, not deserving or in need of better resourcing, and we remain oblivious to the possibilities for positive change that substantial investment in a well-resourced adult and community education system could offer to members of society of all ages.

The COVID-19 pandemic has to date, near the end of 2021, not resulted in nearly as great a loss of life or disruption to society as have pandemics in earlier centuries. Nevertheless, it has taken a tragic toll on many families across the social and economic spectrum in terms of ill-health, loss of income and security, and the loss of family members. In terms of loss of livelihoods and learning and teaching opportunities, the most disadvantaged sector of learners and educators in South Africa appears to have been the hardest hit. These are learners and educators in the CETC system, who are surely the most deserving of 'front of the queue' treatment after years of deprivation and lost chances. Yet, in a classic example of social exclusion (Bernard et al. 2019), they have suffered denial of access to venues, and delayed implementation of strategies needed to ensure the restoration of access to venues and their protection from infection. For many of them, the fear and anxiety they have suffered along with the rest of society have resulted in the loss of their motivation to learn, and many have given up and dropped out, as is shown in the dramatic decrease in numbers of learners since the beginning of the pandemic.

Nevertheless, the saying 'Never waste a crisis!' springs to mind. The disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic may shift the limits to growth in the system, and spur on some of the positive and possible changes described above for the CETC system. If this happens, it could be a catalyst, nudging the system away from old offerings and modes of delivery that have attracted only a fraction of the potential adult learners to new beginnings, and to more appealing offerings delivered in more flexible ways.

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