



Community-based learning in higher education: A portal for knowledge production in the time of COVID-19

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Abstract

At the onset of COVID-19 in 2020, the world-renowned writer and political activist, Arundhati Roy, signalled that the pandemic is “a portal, a gateway between one world and the next . . . [and] we can choose to walk through it.” Roy’s views highlight how we can imagine our world anew through reflection in the time of COVID-19. In this article, we examine the epistemological experiences of students enrolled in a course in community-based learning (CBL) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and consider how CBL during COVID-19 serves as a portal for understanding knowledge that is produced at the nexus between the university and the community. We deemed the Community of Inquiry framework to be a suitable theoretical lens based on its appreciation of the nexus between social (community), teaching (classroom), and cognitive (critical thinking) elements in an online educational experience. Our findings indicate that COVID-19 provides an opportunity for CBL to serve as a portal for understanding how the students’ epistemological experiences during the pandemic influenced knowledge production. This is beneficial since university education most often places at the periphery knowledge that students from the surrounding communities bring to the classroom. It is our contention that students bring epistemic value to the university that is not affirmed during the knowledge production process. We conclude that CBL can indeed serve as the gateway for knowledge production between universities and communities during and beyond COVID-19.

Keywords: community-based learning, community engagement, COVID-19, knowledge production, community of inquiry, online pedagogy

Introduction

When the first case of COVID-19 was discovered in South Africa on March 5, 2020, the government imposed a 21-day national shutdown that commenced on March 26. COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc globally and in this country by affecting all spheres of social life and disrupting face-to-face teaching and learning in higher education (Le Grange, 2020). At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) quickly transitioned to emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) and accompanied this with capacity building sessions to prepare both staff and students for virtual classes. For Hodges et al. (2020), ERTL denotes the type of learning instruction delivered in times of crisis to ensure the quick transition to a new modality of teaching and learning. In this case, it was in response to “the collapse of campus-based teaching” (Walwyn, 2020, p. 20). Such measures were instrumental in salvaging the 2020 academic year by ensuring that the curriculum was completed, albeit later than usual, and ending semester two in February 2021.

COVID-19 has exposed and deepened structural inequalities that exist in institutions of higher learning such as gender, race, and class, inequalities, to name a few that result in mental illness (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020). Such inequalities disproportionately affect African students from previously disadvantaged communities since they often lack access to laptops, internet connectivity, and study spaces (Nyambuya et al., 2021). COVID-19 exacerbates existing inequalities in higher education, thereby marginalising students from poor communities even further. A survey of 30,383 students from 62 countries revealed that the negative impact of COVID-19 on less privileged students is a global phenomenon that is not restricted to developing countries (Aristovnik et al., 2020). In light of this reality, we argue that while the level of student responsiveness through ERTL is commendable, it is inadequately incommensurate to these systemic challenges especially in relation to the process of knowledge production.

In this article, we examine the epistemological experiences of third-year students who enrolled in a course in community-based learning (CBL) in the context of community engagement at UKZN during COVID-19 in 2020. The findings interrogate the epistemic value that students from poor communities (non-traditional students) brought to university spaces in the time of COVID-19 that is under discussion. We begin by foregrounding the socio-cultural environment of community engagement in South African Higher Education Institutions (SAHEIs) and then present the qualitative research design and methodology that we adopted to produce the data. We go on to provide an explanation of Garrison et al.’s (2000) Community of Inquiry (CoI) that we used as our theoretical framework. It fosters a collaborative-constructivist process premised on the three overlapping tenets of cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. We were able to draw on these elements to make sense of the knowledge that is produced at the intersection between the community and the university. We go on to discuss the study location and the structure of the CBL course. Although the impact of COVID-19 on SAHEIs is devastating, the key findings foreground the relevance of the CBL module in times of crisis. We conclude with pedagogical

perspectives on setting an agenda that embeds CBL as a portal for knowledge production in the time of COVID-19 and beyond.

The socio-cultural context of community engagement

While the terms *community engagement* and *service-learning* are often used interchangeably (Bender, 2008), service learning is generally applicable to the acquisition of professional degrees in, for example, teaching and nursing, where practicing student teachers or nurses provide a service to a community while learning during the process of doing so (Preece et al., 2011). This is deemed appropriate as an entry point for community engagement (Lazarus et al., 2008). The application of the term *engagement* rather than *service* “opens up possibilities for a more collaborative process between universities and their communities” (Preece et al., 2011, p. 718).

SAHEIs evolve within a specific socio-cultural context that is informed and shaped by national and global realities. In line with the pre-1994 apartheid ideology, higher education institutions were divided “in terms of politics, culture, language, programme mix, research output, postgraduate enrolments, staff, and student profiles” (Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2015, p. 58). This had a negative impact on teaching and learning, as shown in the *White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education* (Department of Education (DOE), 1997). This is consistent with the Soudien Report that observes the impact of racial discrimination on teaching and learning in higher education (DOE, 2008). To foster equity, institutional policies embrace, *inter alia*, academic support and development in research, teaching, and learning for the benefit of non-traditional students (CHE, 2015) i.e., those who belong to the cohort that was previously underrepresented in higher education (Davis, 2010). Despite developments to accommodate them, institutional cultures in SAHEIs are transforming at a slow pace (CHE, 2016). This is clearly articulated in a five-year longitudinal study that sought to analyse black students’ experiences of SAHEIs as a way of assessing the implementation of the Soudien Report. This study sampled participants from eight South African universities who still feel unwelcome in SAHEIs since they are subjected to institutional racism (Swartz et al., 2018). Dominant narratives in the literature locate what is wrong at the level of the individual student while overlooking pervasive institutional cultures that are slow to transform (Higgs, 2012). Part of the challenge is that transforming institutional cultures is “less successful at the individual and intellectual level, [it] needs to be tackled primarily at the level of culture and practice” (CHE, 2015, p. 73). Unless nuanced descriptions of the students’ lived experiences are validated, they will continue to bring with them relevant knowledge and cultural experiences that are not valued in SAHEIs as Nieto (2015) has reminded us. These are pertinent epistemic issues that need to be urgently addressed by SAHEIs. Epistemology based on the Greek word, *episteme*, for truthful knowledge (Mouton, 2001), is the branch of philosophy that is concerned with how knowledge is acquired (Bengtsen, 2018). While there are different types of epistemology, we were interested in the socio-political dimensions of knowledge that are concerned with social epistemology (Siegel, 2004) to ascertain how individuals gain knowledge through interaction with one another (Kusch, 2011). Apple’s (2000) perspective on epistemology is concerned

not only with the nature of knowledge, but also with the sociocultural context in which knowledge is produced. Similarly, in this article we acknowledge that students' lived experiences influence what they know since knowledge does not "exist in a social and personal vacuum" (Boud & Miller, 1996, p. 18). Rather, it "is continuously derived from and tested out in the experiences of the learner" (p. 27). Epistemology and learning, in being interrelated, have implications for how educators develop conducive learning environments (Kember, 2001) and this points to the importance of our study given its focus on students' epistemological experiences in the time of COVID-19.

Following Preece (2016), we conceptualise community engagement as a counter-hegemonic tool aimed at mediating power through dialogue and listening. While community engagement has always been about "social justice, civic engagement and community development," it was originally intended to expose development practitioners from affluent communities to underprivileged communities of the "Other" (Goulet, 2014, p. 14). This is slowly changing to ensure that SAHEIs are socially responsible in their localities (Maistry & Ramdhani, 2010). This is illustrated in a review of 16 community engagement units in SAHE that showcases university responses to COVID-19 in 2020. The review report *SAHECEF—2020 in Review: Rethinking Community Engagement amidst COVID-19 Pandemic*, is the initiative of the South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum (SAHECEF). Notwithstanding university-based community engagement units that have been severely affected by budget cuts, universities are socially responsible in their communities through service and acts of kindness such as providing food, masks, and other essentials. At a recent university wide seminar on community engagement, UKZN reported on some activities offered by the Department of Occupational Therapy and the Centre for Creative Arts. The former was involved in screening, treatment, and health promotion in schools, while the latter presented virtually two major community events during the lockdowns (SAHECEF, 2020). Further, final year medical students from the School of Medicine instituted a community-centred response to COVID-19 awareness campaigns in partnership with the Human Sciences Research Council (UKZN, 2020c). Other Schools across UKZN participated in community engagement activities that can be viewed via the institution's website. The point that we are raising here is that while the level of responsiveness is significant in emergencies and crises, the main question we ask is related to how CBL can serve as a portal for knowledge production during COVID-19 and beyond.

Research design and theoretical framing

This was a qualitative study located in the interpretivist paradigm. We sought to understand the students' epistemological experiences during the CBL module with a view to determining the epistemic value that non-traditional students brought to university spaces in the time of COVID-19. The study participants were the first cohort of CBL students to complete the module under the lockdown regulations in 2020. A purposively chosen sample of 10 CBL students together with their academic coordinator were interviewed telephonically in order to

adhere to the national and UKZN COVID-19 guidelines.¹ We also reviewed a course outline. Garrison et al.'s (2000) CoI with its three tenets (cognitive, social, and teaching presence) was used as the framework through which the data was generated.

Cognitive presence

There is a strong link between the Col's cognitive presence and critical thinking, "the ultimate goal of higher education" (Garrison et al., 2010, p. 6). In making sense of cognitive presence within a reflective process, Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) operationalised it through what they called the Practical Inquiry framework, based on John Dewey's (1938) seminal work on reflective thinking (experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation). Dewey believed that a worthwhile educational experience should be based on reflective inquiry that leads to critical thinking. The ability to think critically, according to the Col framework, does not happen in a vacuum. Rather, it is interdependent on the interaction of all three elements (cognitive, social, and teaching presence) (Garrison et al., 2010). This resonates with Dewey's conception of critical thinking; for him, a concrete experience is required to trigger critical reflection for the generation of new knowledge. The ultimate goal of cognitive presence is to develop the ability to connect ideas and apply new knowledge (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). This level of thinking is central to the CBL module under study.

Social presence

Proponents of the Col framework recognise that social presence is also central in establishing a community of inquiry. However, Garrison et al. (2010) critiqued studies that over-emphasised the social presence to the exclusion of the teaching and cognitive elements. Rather, they encouraged a multi-dimensional perspective that appreciates the interconnectedness of the social (community), teaching (classroom) and cognitive (critical thinking). Social cohesion and open communication are key dimensions in building a community of inquiry within social presence. There is an association between social and academic teaching that promotes comprehension of knowledge produced at the nexus between the classroom and the community (Garrison, 2009). This observation is critical in assisting us to understand the relevance of the knowledge that was produced by the participants of the study while undertaking the CBL module.

Teaching presence

While the social presence and course content interactions among learners are essential in virtual learning, such interactions by themselves cannot provide students with effective online learning. Hence, three dimensions are crucial in facilitating teaching presence in technology-mediated education, i.e., design, facilitation, and direction (Garrison et al., 2010) that are necessary "for the purpose of realising personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes" (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007, p. 163). Three additional components are

¹ The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the UKZN's Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee (ethical clearance number: HSSREC/00003079/2021).

critical in the attainment of this learning outcome: 1) instructional design and organisation; 2) facilitating discourse; and 3) direct instruction (Anderson et al., 2001). Studies conducted in the COVID-19 era on ERTL validated the importance of teaching presence for successful online learning (Aristovnik et al., 2020).

A strong link exists between cognitive, social, and teaching elements. This is clearly articulated in a study that was conducted by Shea and Bidjerano (2009) to investigate the causal relationships among these three dimensions. These study findings viewed social presence as a mediating factor between teaching and cognitive presence. Moreover, for these scholars, “teaching and social presence represent the processes needed to create paths to epistemic engagement” (p. 551). We deemed the Col framework suitable for our study based on its appreciation of the intersection between and among social (community), teaching (classroom) and cognitive (critical thinking) elements while considering the dynamics of an online educational experience. In addition, it acknowledges the importance of setting the climate, selecting appropriate content, and supporting emerging discourses for knowledge generation. We, therefore, argue that all three of these constructs are essential to a CBL course design for learning in times of crisis and beyond.

Study location and structure of the CBL course

The study was conducted in the Department of Community Development in the School of Built Environment and Development Studies at UKZN’s Howard College campus. UKZN was an appropriate setting for the understanding of students’ epistemological experiences because of the institutional changes that have taken place here in the broader context of transformation in SAHEIs. A growing number of students at UKZN hail from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. In a survey with a sample of 456 respondents, Sabi et al. (2020) reported that 53.1% of the students at UKZN are vulnerable to food insecurity, 44% experienced moderate levels of vulnerability while 9.2% were highly vulnerable. It is against this backdrop that UKZN’s internal policies tackle issues of access, equity, development, and academic excellence for the benefit of students from previously excluded communities. For instance, the university instituted a Food Security Programme in 2012 to address food insecurity among students from low-income households. UKZN is also leading the institutionalisation of isiZulu and shifting it to the centre of intellectual inquiry in SAHE (Khumalo, 2016). Ndimande-Hlongwa et al. (2010) asserted that students enrolled in isiZulu courses at UKZN are well-equipped to engage with the communities they serve in the university’s locality. This forms the basis of the design and implementation of the current CBL curriculum that we discuss below.

The core modules in the three-year Bachelor of Community and Development Studies (BCDS) degree foster multi-disciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches since they are offered through 10 core modules and 11 electives from cognate disciplines in UKZN’s College of Humanities (UKZN, 2020b), i.e., anthropology, psychology, social work, political science, tourism, criminology and forensic studies, international relations, gender studies, philosophy, practical theology, sociology, social policy, etc.). Compulsory core modules

include: 1) Introduction to Community Development; 2) Institutions in Community Development; 3) Development Theories; 4) Local Economic Development; 5) Project Planning; 6) Community Profiling; 7) Local Government and Community Development; 8) CBL; 9) Contemporary Issues in Community Development; 10) Population and Community Development.

The community engagement unit in the Department of Community Development at UKZN has undergone many phases of transformation following the university's merger that took place in 2004 when the former University of Durban Westville merged with the then University of Natal, resulting in a shift in management structures (O'Brien, 2012). CBL is a year-long course offered to final year students who already have a sound understanding of development theories, concepts, and approaches. The course provides them with opportunities for the application of learning, thereby acting as a capstone that brings all the learning together. Through experiential learning, students gain hands-on experience in a community setting. This inculcates a culture of reflection and critical thinking as they learn in both the classroom and the community. CBL merges theory and practice and nurtures students to become critical, competent, empathetic, and ethical. The course is coordinated with the assistance of staff from non-profit organisations and government departments who act as student hosts (UKZN, 2020a).

The CBL module in 2020 had a total of 42 registered students. The course outline involved weekly community engagement activities and classroom-based learning. The teaching methodology was organised in a manner that promoted collaborative and individual learning through 1) Placement sites: students worked in teams of three to five members over a period of six weeks (with eight hours per week in their placement sites). They are accountable to an organisational mentor (supervisor) who guides learning. An agreement is signed between the Department of Community Development's CBL coordinator and managers of placement sites to ensure mutual understanding; 2) Personal learning journals: journaling as a teaching methodology gives students an opportunity to reflect critically on their practical experience; 3) classroom-based learning: a 90-minute session is arranged once a week to enable critical reflection and learning. In addition, problem areas are identified and addressed to equip students to meet the demands of their placements; and 4) Reflective writing and oral presentations: students are expected to reflect in writing and prepare for oral presentations.

The national shutdown and subsequent lockdowns in March 2020 disrupted the course delivery and this led to the discontinuation of all face-to-face learning and community engagement activities. ERTL was instituted between April and August 2020 as an emergency plan and students were encouraged to identify suitable placement sites in their home communities. This was a deviation from the norm since the Department of Community Development is responsible for the placement of students, small group allocations, and the disbursement of travel funds. When President Cyril Ramaphosa shifted the country to alert level 2 on 10 August 2020, students were able to return to campus for university-led placements in small groups. Students spent five days in their host organisations (between 8h00 and 16h00 each day) as opposed to spending an eight-hour day a week for six weeks.

These efforts ensured the continuation of the academic programme despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion of the findings

The community context in which students operate (social presence)

The findings revealed that participants from low-income households are hard-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic since they struggle to study from home because of the constraints of poor connectivity, and study space as well as data shortages. Two of the ten participants were unable to participate in CBL activities. One cited the lack of funds for travelling in a rural community, while the other maintained that no development agencies exist in a remote rural part of Ulundi, a small town located approximately 232km north of Durban. Eight of the ten interview participants live in poverty-stricken rural communities with high rates of unemployment. Participant 2, for example, maintained that “all households are affected by unemployment in my community. People depend on social grants for daily survival.” All ten participants reported that working from home was not conducive to learning. The participants were expected to attend to CBL in development agencies located in their localities during a strict lockdown phase (April to August 2020). Although eight of the ten participants managed to perform under pressure, with varying degrees of success, it was established that none of them enjoyed the experience. When we probed further, we learned that two of them took a tough decision to stay with friends for the duration of the CBL placement in the inner city of Durban. Some students found it upsetting to risk their lives at the height of COVID-19. All participants indicated that the placements that were undertaken in the second phase (September to November 2020) were the preferred option since the Department of Community Development was involved in planning. As Participant 4 lamented, “Unfortunately, the first placement happened when everyone in the country was still trying to make sense of COVID-19. We were all overwhelmed by fear.”

Participant 7, echoing similar sentiments, said,

It was not a perfect time. Some of us were not in a good place mentally, financially, and emotionally. Our families and communities were affected by this COVID-19 thing. Amidst all that, you visit a local organisation that was not active in the community due to COVID-19 regulations. Days were spent listening to oral presentations [but] there were no communities to work with.

These assertions suggest that there was not much happening in community-based organisations during this period (April to August 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic invoked restrictions on social distancing and limited face-to-face contact. Community gatherings were prohibited, and the participants were not exposed to community workshop facilitation because of social distancing protocols.

Participant 2 is one of the four students who mentioned the advantages of working with development agencies rooted in their local values, traditions, and cultures. Yet, like the rest of

her peers, she prefers university-led placements. Having been in a school in Verulam where her mother works as a teacher, she found several development programmes intended for pupils from low-income homes relevant. Still, she was among those who assured us that her main interest was to be placed in a university-led learning site. When asked to comment on the reasons, she explained, “The work was tedious. It was boring to be stuck in a school type of work environment even though I found their development programmes relevant.”

Participant 9 explained,

I felt that University-led placements are reputable and reliable. Hosts in those organisations respect us as students because they value the university. Working in local development agencies is not valued where I come from. I also liked the fact that we worked in groups. Walking into the first placement alone, without the support of your peers and academic staff, was a daunting task.

Participant 10 built on Participant 9’s observations in saying,

We tend to be ashamed to go and visit our local organisations because of the nature of being a university student. Community members expect university students to contribute to the upliftment of their communities once they are done with their studies. To be seen in donor-funded community organisations, instead of working in corporate South Africa, is not what many students aspire to.

Participant 7 also touched on similar sentiments in stating, “Universities approach community engagement activities from the point of privilege. When you are poor, all you need is completing your studies and getting a job to assist your family.”

In our attempt to make sense of these narratives, we sought to gather the perceptions of the academic CBL coordinator. He was aware of the students’ experiences since this was brought to his attention during the course delivery in 2020.

He said,

It cannot be denied that the devastation in 2020 was unprecedented, and everyone was affected. While the situation of students who lacked travel funds is understandable, the case of those who spent the entire period (April to August 2020) without any practical involvement is concerning.

He continued,

Our students are not part and parcel of their home communities. The prevailing mentality is that when you have made it, you should distance yourself from your community that is still finding it hard to make ends meet and this needs to change.

These observations reiterate Participants 9’s and 10’s assertions cited earlier. Similar sentiments were shared when one of the participants mentioned that community engagement

is attractive to people of a particular class. The student's epistemological experience is that people in her community prioritise assisting their families and neighbourhoods and going beyond those parameters is associated with privilege.

The participants' social presence was also characterised by pain and suffering because of pandemic-related deaths. Among the ten participants who were interviewed, five cases of members of the family who succumbed to COVID-19 were reported. While dealing with loss, pain, and suffering in their personal lives, the participants had to deal with the untimely passing of one of the academic CBL coordinators on August 8, 2020.² Moreover, some participants experienced further loss during their placements in community organisations. The loss that made provincial headlines was that of the founder member of the Emseni Community Project, a Christian-based organisation in Durban. The organisation works in partnership with eThekweni Municipality and the provincial Departments of Education, Health and Social Development. Their main purpose is to provide development in schools and communities through their HIV and AIDS programmes as well as food security programmes and access initiatives to the basic education sector.

The social presence of the participants demonstrates that COVID-19 impacted learning and the social ills witnessed in placement sites are not isolated issues but are consistent with their lived experiences. As participant 2 insisted, "All households are affected by unemployment in my community." Moreover, two participants had to stay with friends in order to access education. These findings demonstrate that the epistemologies that the participants promulgate are born out of their identities and contexts. Thus, their social presence reveals that while the university has a growing number of non-traditional students from previously disadvantaged communities, the knowledge that is produced lacks relevance and alignment with their epistemological experiences. As Goulet (2014) observed, traditionally, universities were home mainly to students from privileged backgrounds who were placed for community engagement activities, not in their privileged communities, but in communities of the Other. In such environments, poor communities were not regarded as co-creators of knowledge but as anthropological subjects. This influenced the kind of knowledge that was produced. COVID-19 blurred the boundaries between the university and the community since students were studying from home. While the participants concur that both theory and practice are essential for knowledge production, there is currently a mismatch between the two since the university's teaching presence is unable to integrate the students' epistemological experiences for the advancement of knowledge. Thus, students bring epistemic value to the university that is not affirmed in knowledge production. This reiterates Apple's (2000) perspectives on epistemology relating to the sociocultural context in which knowledge is produced. In cases of students who could not participate in CBL because of socio-economic challenges, the findings portray how social inequalities are reproduced in education, making ERTL in such learning environments a non-starter. Understanding the interface between the university and the contexts in which students operate becomes critical for the facilitation of learning.

2 As authors of this article, we can attest to the magnitude of grief and sadness that overwhelmed us as a result of this sudden passing of our colleague who was also our friend. The impact of his untimely passing shook the entire UKZN's College of Humanities as it was evident in the tributes shared during his virtual memorial service held on August 28, 2020.

We turn, now, to the theme of teaching presence.

Students' perspectives on merging theory and practice (teaching presence)

It was established that the participants valued ERTL more after returning to campus in September 2020. Like all courses offered in the 2020 academic year at UKZN's College of Humanities, the teaching presence of CBL was instituted fully online. However, placements of students necessitated physical presence in host organisations throughout the year. Among the host organisations was the Virtual State, a brainchild of the provincial government office situated in Pietermaritzburg. It functions primarily to promote participatory youth development in various communities. Students who were placed in this programme were eager and excited to have been afforded the opportunity since the government had arranged five-day accommodation for them during the week of placement. Some of the students were placed at the Gugu Dlamini Foundation in Durban. This organisation tackles gender-based violence and HIV and AIDS awareness to address discrimination in the community. It is named after Gugu Dlamini who was stoned to death after publicly declaring her HIV-positive status on December 6, 1998. Other students were placed in various offices of the Department of Social Development, and at Sheilla House, a shelter for abused women in Durban. As indicated earlier, the Emseni Community Project was also one of the placement sites.

Consequently, weekly online lectures served to facilitate learning and identify problem areas for the attention of the academic coordinator. As indicated under the course description, there is no room for teaching new theories in the CBL course since it acts as a capstone that brings together the learning from preceding modules. The course offers students an opportunity to merge theory and practice in a community environment. To facilitate reflection on their practical experiences, students are asked: What surprised you? What dilemmas did that raise for you? What confirmed what you already knew? What could you or your peers have done differently? What are the most important things you realised from this experience? What were your previous assumptions? Has this changed your ideas about community development issues in general? If so, in what way? Similar questions informed the interview guide while encouraging students to consider the realities of learning in the time of COVID-19. All ten participants indicated that remote learning worked better in the latter part of the second semester following the return to university residences. Participant 9 stated, "We quickly had access to data, reliable internet connectivity, study space, library, travel funds, and we could work in peer groups with the support of our lecturers." While reflecting on what worked and what did not during ERTL, Participant 6 indicated that "the university should ensure that ERTL works optimally on off-campus platforms." In addition, Participant 8 proposed that "the university should switch 10GB (day) and 20GB (evening) data provision to ensure that students do not run out of data in the middle of virtual classes. There is high demand for data usage during the day." Participant 3 is among those who found the Virtual Private Network (VPN) beneficial in reducing data costs. She is happy to have it installed on her computer.

It also emerged that some students performed better during ERTL in the time of COVID-19, while others struggled with stress when working in isolation. Eight of the ten students emphasised the importance of working in groups for peer support. They also highlighted the

significance of the role played by the academic coordinator. There was also a general sense among the participants that the course is significant in advancing their knowledge. Central to this observation was the recognition of the underlying principles in community development that prioritise and foreground collective learning and social justice education.

Reiterating the value of a group methodology, the academic coordinator maintained that “African people’s way of life is communal. They are always about helping the next person. They embrace and take care of one another.” He added,

I benefitted immensely from the online instruction since Moodle³ keeps all relevant student records, including attendance. This afforded me an opportunity to follow-up on students who were not active in online classes.

It was further revealed that host organisations were visited during the second semester. He had to bring on board another academic to assist with the assessment of students. This freed him and created room to facilitate learning in the classroom and follow-up sessions with students in development agencies. While the participants had survived a trying time during the first semester, they were all appreciative of the supportive and conducive learning environment that the academic leader created during the second semester. This corroborates the Col framework’s assertion that while the social presence and course content interactions among learners are essential in virtual learning, such interactions by themselves cannot provide students with an effective online learning experience. This re-affirms the consensus that teaching presence is a significant determinant of student satisfaction, perceived learning, and sense of community (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). This was clearly demonstrated in the delivery of CBL since students’ frustrations during the first semester were based largely on the lack of a supportive learning environment. During the second semester, the participants were united through the common purpose of achieving the course objectives. This is consistent with Garrison’s (2009) argument that the technology-mediated teaching presence in the community of inquiry is not centred around student identities (personal identity). Rather, the priority for most students is shared social identity (i.e., the purpose of the course), which is what unites students and gives them a sense of common purpose. This is consistent with the findings and is perceived as a major gap in remote learning since the participants were discussing communities as members of the Other. The narratives show that while eight of the ten participants come from poverty-stricken rural communities, they still view their communities as Other. It can be deduced that online learning does not create sufficient room for students to reflect critically on their epistemological experiences. As shown earlier, students’ lived experiences are characterised by data shortages and poor connectivity, and this acts as a barrier to critical thinking. The transmission of knowledge is neither neutral nor apolitical. Rather, it is embedded in a socio-cultural context characterised by the structural inequalities that organise society (Apple, 2000). In that way, we acknowledge that students’ lived experiences influence what they know since knowledge does not “exist in a social and personal vacuum” (Boud & Miller, 1996, p. 18). This understanding is critical to the CBL course since what students learn in the community influences their critical thinking skills

3 Moodle is an e-learning platform for teaching and learning.

(cognitive presence), thereby compelling them to question taken-for-granted assumptions in the classroom (Garrison et al. 2000). These observations are central to learning and, hence, become our point of departure in understanding the students' epistemological experiences. This reiterates the interconnectedness of the three tenets (social, cognitive, and teaching presence) as a recurring theme in the CoI framework as we go on to show in the next section.

On becoming a community of inquiry (cognitive presence)

Our findings indicate that students who demonstrated a strong social presence were equally strong in cognitive presence. This was evident when Participant 10 was asked to reflect on his previous assumptions and on how the CBL had influenced his thinking. In his view,

The claim that unemployment only affects mainly graduates from the Humanities and Social Sciences is unfounded. We must accept the structural nature of youth unemployment in South Africa. There are many unemployed graduates with qualifications in engineering and BCom who are sitting at home doing nothing. In the past, education led to success and opportunities, but not anymore.

Participant 7, who pointed out the differences between the knowledge produced between the two knowledge spaces, i.e., university and community, was strong in cognitive presence during the interviews. She said, "Universities approach community engagement activities from the point of privilege. When you are poor, all you need is completing your studies and getting a job to assist your family." In such contexts, the participants were questioning the dominant narratives after reflecting on their practical experiences (cognitive presence).

It is our contention that university education has not yet developed concepts to frame poverty for African students who are subjected to it. Consequently, knowledge produced at the nexus between the university and the community is often not explored and is therefore less understood. This illustrates that students' lived experiences that influence and reconcile divergent epistemological experiences put them in different places in the knowledge spaces in the university and community. The study participants recognised that university education does not always value what they know, resulting in the slow pace of institutional and curriculum transformation that has been on the agenda for the past two decades. The opportunity to engage in CBL, we argue, triggers critical thinking to generate knowledge that contributes to our understanding of the students' epistemological experiences. It should also be acknowledged that the content of the course (teaching presence) that promotes critical thinking, influences cognitive presence.

Conclusion and recommendations

In this article, we interrogated students' epistemological experiences in CBL in the context of community engagement that was undertaken in the COVID-19 period in 2020. We adopted Garrison et al.'s (2000) CoI framework as a theoretical and an analytical tool to examine the students' epistemological experiences. Drawing on Dewey's understanding of the community of inquiry, Garrison et al. (2000) developed a community of inquiry framework that is

relevant for understanding technology-mediated learning and was thus deemed appropriate to underpin this study that focused on ERTL of a CBL module at UKZN. We structured the discussion of the findings around the themes that were informed by the three tenets of the CoI framework (social, teaching, and cognitive presence). CBL in the context of community engagement presents the notion of two worlds, the university and the community, as two powerful knowledge spaces that are in dialectic tension. The students' epistemological experiences were born out of their lived experiences. They are characterised by an ongoing struggle to balance the tensions and contradictions between the university and the community, thereby illustrating a disconnect between the current university system and their epistemological experiences during the CBL. Ultimately, it was conceded that both universities and communities can play a vital role in advancing the objectives of community engagement. Based on the findings presented above, we affirm that a CoI approach to CBL is one of the tools that can be used to foster a shift in knowledge produced in South African HEIs. CoI facilitates an understanding of the CBL course as a portal since its three elements enable researchers to make connections between the community, the university, and the curriculum in a technology-mediated learning space. We maintain that for the portal between the university and the community to be seamless, CBL curricula during COVID-19 and beyond should be used as a platform for knowledge production. If the theory and practice of CBL in community engagement is applied constructively as a pedagogical tool, it will create opportunities for learning and transform teaching practices and methodologies. We argue further that CBL can become a sociocultural antidote to existing inequalities in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is recommended that academics in community engagement embrace the CBL methodology as a valuable pedagogical tool. This will, in turn, contribute to the theoretical framing of community engagement that is still a work-in-progress. We note that further research is needed to advance the understanding of community engagement in the time of COVID-19, with a special focus on how the pandemic is affecting students and the kind of knowledge that this period in history engenders. Although there is now a fair amount of research on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education, there is a paucity of research on how COVID-19 is affecting community engagement initiatives in universities, particularly in academic programmes like the CBL module. Understanding the knowledge that is produced at the nexus between the university and the community requires the SAHE to invest in research that advances the understanding of this field.

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