

Reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic

Edited by Ken Holmes and Peter Hogg



ISRRT
INTERNATIONAL
SOCIETY OF
RADIOGRAPHERS
& RADIOLOGICAL
TECHNOLOGISTS

Front cover and artist



I created the artwork for the book cover after reading a number of research papers about radiographer experiences of working during the pandemic.

My overarching impression was that radiographers were exhausted and I tried to reflect this in the radiographer's body language on the image. The mobile x-ray machine shines a spotlight on her plight and the exposure button has been cast aside in exhaustion.

Radiographers have reported feeling unprepared and unprotected, lacking in Personal Protective Equipment. The figure is therefore bare-footed to represent this vulnerability.

To illustrate the impact the pandemic has had on the world community of radiographers this solitary, vulnerable and exhausted radiographer sits on the top of the 'earth' as a symbol of radiographers across the globe.

Leslie Robinson

Editors

Peter Hogg

Emeritus Professor
University of Salford
Salford
UK

Honorary Adjunct Professor
University College Cork
Cork
Ireland

Honorary Visiting Professor
Hanze University
Groningen
Netherlands

Honorary Visiting Researcher
Karolinska Institute
Stockholm
Sweden

Ken Holmes

Honorary Senior Lecturer
University of Cumbria
UK

Published by the International Society of Radiographers and Radiological Technologists

ISBN: 9781912337583

2022

The rise of the isolation society and the loss of human interaction: South African educators' perspective.

Kathleen Naidoo and Gerhardus George Visser Koch

Lost in the midst of a pandemic, I started up my computer and the keyboard was as cold as ice. No truer description of how I felt inside. I want to say it was a normal winter's morning, but something felt amiss. Looking at me square in the eyes, was a lifeless computer screen with a black background. White blocks filled the screen and a prolonged, deafening silence filled the room. I took a deep breath in, unmuted myself, and so began another day of online teaching.

It was the dawn of a brand-new academic year. A proactive tone was set for 2020. Learner guides, lecture schedules and assessment guidelines were distributed at the beginning of the academic year. Feelings of excitement and innovation circled the air. We remember sitting in the tearoom discussing the news about the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak overseas and being completely shocked by what was happening in other countries. Little did we know that on Thursday, 26 March 2020, South Africa (SA) would enter into a national, hard lockdown, in the hope to contain the spread of COVID-19. What does this even mean and what do we do now? Before we knew it, we lost the power of touch. Most of our teaching philosophies and learning plans were forced out the window. With only a moment's notice, teaching and learning, as we once knew it, dissolved into an era of the unknown. This was not like a fire drill whereby we knew what steps we needed to take. It was like nothing we had ever experienced before: complete online learning. No time for planning, no time for supporting students with the transition, no time for acquiring resources and absolutely no time at all for comprehending what was happening to the world at large. Feelings of uncertainty and anxiety began to take over, leaving both ourselves and our students' mental health exposed and at risk.

As a country, being in a hard lockdown, we were subjected to many unknown factors in our lives. We were restricted with our movement and were only allowed out of our homes for essentials. The news was filled with death and tragedy and we were forced into isolation. On

the one hand we had the pandemic which was disrupting our personal lives and on the other hand we were faced with extraordinary academic challenges. All of which took place within a moment's notice. There were times when our "to-do-lists" just overflowed and we just sat there numb, unable to think or move, just simply glaring into space. The shift of our current programme from face-to-face teaching and learning to being completely online, seemed impossible. We had numerous virtual discussions with colleagues about the uneasiness we felt and very real panic attacks we suffered. We literally just focused on taking it one day at a time.

While the academic year started off in what we would refer to as pretty "normal", that feeling was very short-lived. The start and rise of the COVID-19 pandemic in SA forced both the radiography educators and students into isolation, losing that interactive, human connection. The rise of the isolation society had begun. Universities were completely shut down and residences were closed. This meant that students needed to vacate the university residence and travel back home. Our student population includes representation from different walks of life and provinces within SA. A direct implication for students of the lockdown regulations was the inaccessibility of resources such as on-campus WIFI and computer laboratories. From the very onset of online teaching and learning, the great divide within our country became dreadfully obvious.

Major challenges we encountered were, a lack of active involvement from our students, not knowing if they were on the other side of the computer screen and whether they understood the teaching content adequately. It was also especially difficult for our students, in the Diagnostic Radiography programme, who have a work-integrated-learning component embedded in their curriculum. This component requires placement in the clinical environment, on a two-week rotation. This practice, however, was short-lived, and in the midst of these unprecedented times, alternative teaching and learning methods were necessary to combat and cater for their practical and clinical skills. Due to a lack of funding, we did not have the luxury of using virtual reality tools to aid in the simulation of the clinical environment. We were at the disposal of the government and the regulations they imposed on higher education and training. The massive implication of this was us extending our 2020 academic year into 2021 to make up for lost time.

Teaching during COVID-19 can be described as nothing short of overwhelming and a highly pressurised experience. We had to reinvent the wheel and redesign our individual modules to ensure that quality education was not compromised despite the major constraints we faced. For example, we had to redo the academic timetables as no students were in the clinical environment and this meant that we had to see to all four years of students at once. This was necessary to avoid clashes for individual lecturers who taught across levels 1 to 4. Due to clinical placements being postponed, we had to resort to the use of available online resources without compromising clinical competency. Examples of these resources included the use of preselected YouTube demonstration videos, free image interpretation websites and the World Health Organisation (WHO) Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) donning and doffing online course. We had to attend emergency workshops in order to survive this new environment; learning new skills within a very short space of time. Some examples are creating online content using Blackboard discussion boards, conducting live polls, developing online assessments and engaging in breakaway rooms for interactive discussions. In most cases, self-teaching was necessary. Our curriculum shifted from the traditional method of face-to-face (classroom-based) teaching and learning, to being fully online. Subsequently, we had to re-evaluate our teaching practices. Once we acquired the much needed confidence in our ability to work fully online, we gained momentum.

South African radiography students faced challenges from having no data, poor internet connectivity, to the inaccessibility of technological resources and a major economic crisis. Some students made us aware that they had no money for food let alone money to purchase data to access online lecture notes. The great digital divide in our country became so much clearer and was staring us dead in the face. Educators were tasked to use a multimodal approach to ensure that no student was left behind. In other words, what used to be one simple lecture in a classroom now had to be made available in various formats such as recorded narrated lectures, hardcopy notes, PDF versions and separate audio/visual files. Needless to say, this accounted for anxiety and many sleepless nights. Also, after having been through this, we were faced with dialogues of self-doubt and despondence. At a time when the only access we had to students was online, we had to be very mindful of the data issues students faced. Our file sizes had to be minimised to allow transfer via social media platforms (e.g. WhatsApp) and emails. The university management team worked hard to find ways and

means to assist as many students as possible. Plans were put into place to deliver laptops and internet data to those that were disadvantaged. Workshops were arranged for students to assist them with the use of BlackBoard. This was done as an institutional initiative offered by our Faculty Centre for Innovative Educational Technology. The majority of students were able to adapt to the new learning environment. Online platforms such as Blackboard, proved extremely valuable, especially for larger class sizes. This platform aided in the critical dissemination of lecture notes and the conducting of assessments. While trying to convert all teaching and learning material was challenging, the greatest challenge was not being able to see the students face-to-face.

Online teaching is phenomenal and technology is amazing, but we missed our students. We were able to deliver lectures from the safety of our own homes. This especially enabled us to reach out to those students who had to travel back home to other provinces. There were many challenges encountered along the way from developing content in various formats to learning how to use online resources, and this was a huge learning curve for us. In retrospect, the pandemic forced us out of our comfort zone and made us engage with technology on a level that we might never have explored before.

As educators, we rely on face-to-face interactions to observe students' body language and facial expressions as we teach in order to ascertain whether or not they understand the theories that were explained. With radiography education in particular, there are certain concepts, such as localising anatomical landmarks, which require a more practical, hands-on approach. Such an approach at a time like this, was not possible. When using online platforms, we were confronted with students' becoming more reserved as they switched their cameras off and muted their microphones. Thought provoking realisations such as "if I post a comment on the discussion board or chat box, can everyone see it?" or "I am too shy to ask questions during live lectures". Feelings of shock and confusion filled our minds as these comments were made by students who we considered to be extroverts in the classroom. If they felt this way, then what were the others going through?

Multiple platforms were provided to students to engage with educators. We often found in cases where internet data access was an issue, some students were unable to ask questions immediately as they reviewed the lecture content. This resulted in them forgetting their

queries and not communicating with us at all. If there is no communication, or a break in communication, students are at a disadvantage. This left us not knowing where our students were mentally, physically and emotionally. As educators, we began to experience major feelings related to “fear of missing out” (FOMO). Those around us were getting sick and some of us even lost loved ones. We were confined to the lockdown rules and regulations and we felt helpless. Often we think of a consoling arm around you or a warm hug to know things will be okay, but now those are associated with fears of contracting and spreading the virus. What was once considered a kind gesture, now evoked great anxiety and fear.

Like all other life experiences, with time we make progress and conquer our fears. Innovative technology applications such as breakaway rooms, interactive polls and fun quizzes, have now added life to the computer screens and the students' laughter has warmed up the room. No more do we have that lifeless computer screen with the black background staring back at us. The white blocks are now filled with some familiar faces and also, feelings of hope. While we are far from conquering this pandemic, many lessons have been learnt and immense knowledge has been gained. This pandemic has made us fearful, scared, worried and anxious. However, we find ourselves living in a new era where adaptability is key to survival. We have to constantly reflect on our teaching and critically evaluate our methods of teaching. If something does not work, change it. If something does not feel right, change it. If what you are currently doing does not yield results, change it. Change is inevitable. If we fail to do this, we are failing our students. Overall, we have learnt and grown both personally and professionally. The future of radiography education looks brighter than ever before, now with many more avenues and multimodal teaching opportunities emerging.

“If we teach today’s students as we taught yesterday’s, we rob them of tomorrow”.

John Dewey