

# The privilege of #pivotonline: A South African perspective

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As the global number of COVID-19 cases increase, lockdowns continue across the world. Reports from UNESCO highlight that nationwide closures are [impacting over 91% of the world's student population](#) who can no longer attend school. With schools closed, there has been a mass shift to online education — from primary to tertiary — in what is known on social media as the #pivotonline. As conversations revolve around synchronous and asynchronous teaching methods, video conferencing platform choices, online assessment, and digital pedagogies, the unspoken underlying assumption is that teachers and learners have access to devices and the Internet. Beyond access, there is a further assumption that if internet access and devices are provided to those that need it, then online and remote learning solutions will be effective.

However, these assumptions do not take into account that students require not only digital literacy and Internet literacy but also the capability of self-directed learning to best benefit from online/remote learning. Furthermore, as [↑Rohs & Ganz \(2015:6\)](#) outline, one's ability to best utilise the resources and opportunities provided through online learning is directly proportional to one's socio-economic status.

*"If users have the same access conditions, the individual capacity for dealing with information, e.g. content search and rating strategies as well as cognitive dispositions, can lead towards differences in the reception of information. These findings can be condensed to the assumption that people with higher socioeconomic status are able to derive a higher benefit from a wide variety of educational possibilities provided by digital media, specifically the internet." (↑Rohs & Ganz, 2015:6)*

In South Africa, a country with one of the highest inequality rates in the world (a [Gini coefficient of 0.63](#)), the impact of the virus has [exacerbated inequalities](#), particularly in [education](#) where poor-quality education in historically-black schools are now further negatively impacted. While the more privileged can stock up food and self-isolate in their homes, many people in densely populated informal settlements do not have the same luxury as they are struggling with basic needs such as [clean water, sanitation](#) and buying food. Additionally, many [informal workers have lost income](#) over the lockdown period and are battling to provide for their dependents. It is within these contexts that many marginalised school and university students are staying/returning home.

Having just completed my doctoral research on the [extent to which online education could support marginalised groups in South Africa](#), I could not think of a more

important time to share some reflections in light of the current pandemic. Although I share these guidelines for marginalised, under-resourced contexts in the Global South, it is important to remember that there are [learners facing access issues in all parts of the world, both in the Global North and the Global South](#), and thus these points are for all involved in supporting learners, particularly educators.

## Care and support

Students are going through a great deal of anxiety right now, because of being in isolation, or the inability to self-isolate. They may be worried about the lack of water and sanitation in their homes and their communities. They may lack proper nutrition. They may have increased family or financial responsibilities. They are likely concerned about the health and safety of their loved ones. Practically this means learners need more emotional support (beyond academic support). Educators need to be aware of the contexts that their learners are in. This means keeping in contact and keeping up to date with the situations of learners. Sending regular updates/check-ups through WhatsApp messages or emails to learners (and parents in the case of those in basic education) can help to ease anxieties and provide socio-emotional support. Doing this routinely and in a structured manner can create some stability. Additionally, creating shared spaces where students [can feel a sense of community](#), e.g., through WhatsApp groups, can help students to feel a bit more informed and less alone. Most importantly, slow down; nobody — neither teachers nor learners — can function at full capacity right now. Overloading people will cause further stress.

## Recovering the curriculum

We need to accept that the curriculum will not be covered by the end of the academic year, even with holidays cut short. South Africa's Department of Basic Education's [2020 Draft Framework for Curriculum Recovery post-COVID-19](#) has outlined that essential pieces of the curriculum — considered basic building blocks for future education — cannot be left out. Thus, any drastic reduction in the curriculum is not an option as it will have further ramifications for learners. The same is true in higher education.

For learners from primary to tertiary education, enforcing tight assignment deadlines, compulsory tasks and summative assessment borders on being unethical, given students' contexts and socio-emotional states. Of course, without some form of evaluation, it is not possible to promote a learner to the next stage. Therefore, if the lost learning time cannot be caught up and assessment cannot take place, a very likely scenario is [that the school/academic year will be lost](#) and the majority of students may need to repeat the year. In fact, this is a likely scenario and needs to be given proper attention. How will schools deal with losing a school year? How will this impact enrollment in the following year? Will parents and learners be able to afford school/college/university fees for another year? What happens to matriculants and is it fair to make them sit exams that will impact their entire life in times of such high instability?

While losing a school/academic year has drastic ramifications, pouring emergency funding into short-term edtech initiatives may not be the best use of funding; in fact, it

may [deplete funding that could be put towards more structural improvements in education](#). These edtech solutions (as discussed below) are unlikely to reach and support the most marginalised and will more likely benefit the already privileged. Furthermore, such funding could rather be directed to efforts that will have a more long-lasting impact such as investments in teacher professional development, improving the infrastructure at schools, and collating better open teaching and learning materials. There are also more pressing needs for funding in other areas such as to support learners who no longer get the nutrition they would have received from school feeding programs or to financially support teachers whose salaries had depended on school fees being paid.

## **Keep light learning happening**

Although losing the school / academic year is the most likely scenario for the poor majority, learning needs to keep happening to keep learners motivated to continue further in their education and not drop out. One of the biggest educational concerns regarding the pandemic is that learners (or their parents) may be less interested in returning to school or have less financial means to do so. The continued learning, however, does not need to be directly focused on the curriculum. Instead, learning can revolve around the education needed in the context of COVID-19, e.g., critical digital literacy to help identify fake news, biology lessons to help understand the impact of the coronavirus on the body, or life orientation lessons to equip learners with life skills that can help them cope during this period.

## **Low-tech approaches for education**

By and large, any high-tech solution such as synchronous lessons through video conferencing will only be accessible to a small privileged minority of the country. Investing in solutions like synchronous remote learning, or promoting them at your institution, will only increase inequality: only those with higher socio-economic levels will benefit from the affordances provided. Those who cannot access high-tech approaches will fall further behind in the curriculum, feel discouraged and overwhelmed, and perhaps even want to drop out. This needs to be prevented. Undoubtedly synchronous online learning will be implemented by private/elite institutions, but public sector and civil society funding efforts should be aimed at low-tech solutions.

Let's look at alternative approaches. Low-tech solutions can be divided into two levels. The first level is aimed at those who have a mobile device and occasional access to data. From my doctoral research with peri-urban marginalised youth in South Africa, 75% of them have access to smartphones and a further 15% are able to access one through friends/family. For this group, [zero-rating educational websites](#) and learning management systems would be beneficial as well as communication through low-data platforms like Whatsapp. It is thus important to ensure that all content and platforms used are mobile-friendly. Here asynchronous learning can happen, where learning material can be downloaded and learning can happen flexibly when the learner is able to. These low-tech approaches are more tailored towards tertiary education students

who may be more familiar with technology and have access to a mobile phone. A major caution with this is the amount of self-directed learning the learner will suddenly need to take on. A key finding from my doctoral research is that marginalised youth have a strong desire to be guided and supported in their online learning experience, especially regarding technical support. There was also a strong need to interact face-to-face with the educator and their peers as opposed to through digital forums only.

The second level is the use of non-Internet-based technology such as [interactive radio instruction and TV broadcasting](#), which is likely to reach a good chunk of the marginalised populations. These low-tech solutions are more tailored towards basic education where learners are less likely to have a mobile phone, email address or sufficient digital literacy. It should be noted, however, that the most marginalised are unlikely to have access to a TV.

## **Calls for solidarity with students**

In order to ensure that no learner is left behind due to the shift to online and remote learning, the South African C-19 People's Coalition has [put out a call](#) to educators, students, administrators, parents, student organisations, unions and concerned members of the public. This call is part of a broad consultative process that will lead to a solid set of proposals and demands and accompanying action for the protection of students. Additionally, The [South African Students Congress \(SASCO\)](#) has [called on its members to boycott e-learning](#) for two weeks until the Department of Higher Education can provide the means for all students to participate. Furthermore, scholar-activists within higher education have drafted an alternative to the pivot online, calling instead for a '[Social Pedagogy](#) guided by four principles:

- Inclusivity and participation
- Equity and Equality
- Transformation and decolonisation
- Academic development and progress with integrity

In summary, it is only the privileged that will benefit from the #pivotonline. Although there remain many difficulties in the shift to online and remote learning, the biggest concern is the majority of the population who cannot access and benefit from it. For this majority of marginalised learners, low-tech approaches may help ameliorate the lack of learning at school and keep learners stimulated and motivated to continue their education. However, a very likely scenario is that the school/academic year will be lost. Instead of investing in short-term edtech solutions that will likely have low (impact on) learning outcomes, funding could be used better if directed towards [rebooting the education system](#) such that when learners return to school, teachers and school environments are better prepared.

## **Links and references**

A complete list of references for this blog post is available in our evidence library: <https://docs.opendeved.net/lib/?ref=CD5C7WBE>

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