

**Reflective Piece****Professional psychology training in the COVID-19 era: Reflections on Challenges, Actions, and Lessons**

<b>Sibulelo Qhogwana</b> ORCID: 0000-0002-0341-209X	Psychology, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa	sibuleloq@uj.ac.za
<b>Nokulunga Shabalala</b> ORCID: 0000-0003-4524-2831	Psychology, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa	lungas@uj.ac.za
<b>Sarah Uren</b> ORCID: 0000-0003-1768-0156	Psychology, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa	sarahu@uj.ac.za

**ABSTRACT**

Professional training programmes were, and continue to be, challenged by the implications of Covid-19. Psychology training programmes in South Africa rely on experiential learning as a cornerstone for developing minimum competencies. Covid-19 restrictions meant that teaching and learning, supervision, and work-integrated learning required reconsideration, shifts and upskilling of trainees and trainers. This was particularly important given the emphasis and value of Experiential Learning Theory in training psychologists. This paper uses collaborative autoethnography to reflect on the challenges, lessons, and future recommendations for the navigation of professional training in psychology in the Covid-19 era and beyond. The key reflections highlight the necessity for hybrid learning contexts in circumstances such as Covid-19. Leadership guidance and students' voices are invaluable assets that could facilitate a comprehensive and inclusive training programme during unprecedented times.

## Introduction

In response to the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, the South African government implemented lockdown protocols with restricted movement of people. Such restrictions limited in-person activities as a measure to mitigate the spread of Covid-19. This meant that tertiary education institutions also had to shift and reimagine teaching and training spaces to ensure continuity of quality education, whilst adhering to the restrictions resulting from the lockdown protocols. As a result, several challenges emerged. The first was the shift to online teaching which brought with it concerns about accessibility, technology, and support for online learning (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020). This shift highlighted the need for continued training and education and the inequitable effects of the pandemic on students (Pillay & Barnes, 2021).

The Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) also released several communications, firstly directly to institutions and then in documents highlighting the response due to these shifts to guide these processes where possible (HPCSA, 2020a; 2020b). The HPCSA (2020b:2) highlighted that “institutions accredited for internship and postgraduate training are encouraged to ensure that they provide the trainees with reasonable training and clinical exposure, as well as support during this difficult and challenging time that is likely to affect their training”. This was mirrored in policies from universities providing guidance on flexibility, with continued consideration for the minimum specified requirements for professional training programmes. As a result, there was a demand for continued teaching and training, whilst being cognisant of the restraints of working in a pandemic.

## Background and Context

The first year of the professional training programme in psychology comprises of small classes and is resource intensive (number of lecturers/psychologists, therapy supervision, assessment supervision, and practical placements) (Pillay, Ahmed & Bawa, 2013). Consistent with Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which emphasises contact and practical learning experiences, prior to Covid-19, teaching and learning and other activities (work-integrated learning (WIL) and supervision) in the psychology professional programmes have been offered through contact sessions. The emergence of Covid-19 presented significant challenges to professional programmes operating within an ELT framework.

With the above context in mind, this paper provides a collaborative autoethnographic reflection on the process of psychology professional training programmes during the pandemic. These highlight considerations for WIL, therapy supervision, as well as teaching and learning in professional programmes located within an ELT framework.

### **Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)**

ELT proposes that effective teaching and learning encourages integration of observations into logically sound theories (abstract conceptualisation) and uses these theories to make decisions and solve problems (active experimentation) (Morris, 2019). Professional programmes in psychology reflect the premise of this theory, which argues for situated learning and practice. Students are involved, active, engaged participants who learn through engagement in rich contextual learning environments that require physical contact, where there is also space to take the opportunity for collaborative learning (Fúz, 2018; Munge, Thomas & Heck, 2018; Pipitone, 2018). With this in mind, it was important that this continued exposure (even during the height of the pandemic) was one of the aspects of training that we cautiously preserved.

### **Collaborative autoethnography (CAE)**

The CAE approach embraces collective agency, providing an opportunity for reflexivity that is multivocal and theoretically informed (Hernandez, Chang & Ngunjiri, 2017; Lapadat, 2017). Our CAE process involved the three of us talking and collaboratively analysing our lived experiences of various aspects of the training programme for which we were and are responsible. This approach seemed best suited, as we had ease of access to one another as three colleagues from the same institution and department with a common interest in autoethnography. As such, CAE offered an opportunity to reflect and learn from the unfamiliar journey travelled together (Hernandez et al, 2017). In addition, CAE allowed us to engage in qualitative research about teaching and learning during a pandemic where traditional qualitative approaches were limited by lockdown regulations (Roy & Uekusa, 2017).

We used retrospective reflective questions (Albertyn & Bennett, 2020) as a process to guide our subjective experiences of coordinating the psychology professional programmes during the pandemic. Our retrospective reflections were guided by the questions outlined below:

1. How is training in the Covid-19 era different, and/or the same?

- a. What do we imagine this experience was like for students, staff, and us as coordinators?
2. What shifts happened, and what were the considerations and processes underlying these shifts?
  - a. What processes were implemented to balance student safety, patient wellbeing, and adequate WIL competencies to prepare student psychologists for their internships?

The creation of a shared Microsoft Teams folder allowed us to individually reflect and write on our experiences of the distinct aspects of the programme. In addition, we scheduled reflective meetings that were crucial in balancing individual reflections with a greater collective experience and strengthening the individual autoethnographies (Roy & Uekusa, 2020).

### **Psychology professional training in the Covid-19 era**

#### *Teaching and learning*

Covid-19 had a significant impact on various aspects of teaching and learning in tertiary institutions (Pillay & Barnes, 2021) resulting in a shift to online teaching and learning (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020; Courtier, Brown, Mundy, Pope, Chivers & Williamson, 2021). This was particularly difficult with the Psychology master's programme, in that the training is both didactic and experiential (Christian, McCarty & Brown, 2021). Modules, such as psychotherapy, went from being face-to-face experiential interactions to online interactions attempting to foster a similar experiential process. This was further complicated by the time constraints and the need to familiarise ourselves with new platforms and means of interaction.

The taken-for-granted aspect of shifting to the online space was the amount of data required for coursework master's seminars, so the provisioned data was not enough to support students with the demands of the programme. Some students were faced with not having access to the seminars due to data demands and would rely on session recordings that took them even further away from the interactive element (this was exacerbated by power cuts). We had to consider student experiences very closely and encourage them to take ownership of the programme and find ways to balance students' voices within the online space. This meant approaching faculty to assist with additional data and then empowering students to put strategies in place to manage the unpredictable.

Teaching and learning online was possible and perhaps successful; however, the question of adequate preparedness for internship in certain modules remained. As the lockdown levels were adjusted, we ensured that we obtained early permission from the faculty to guarantee adequate exposure to teaching and learning requiring practical aspects.

### *Therapy supervision*

Therapeutic supervision is a key component in transmitting skills to future psychologists (Nel & Fouche, 2017; Reese, González, Clements-Hickman, Clemons, Farook & Conoley, 2017) and is a crucial element of training (Benuto, Singer, Newlands & Casas, 2019). It is a space where the culture of the profession is put into practice, skills and competence as a psychologist are developed, professional identity is nurtured, and patients' wellbeing is protected (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). Therapeutic supervision is conducted on a weekly basis and is an ethical requirement in the training of psychologists. The overarching consensus was to continue with psychotherapy supervision online; however, this highlighted concerns over the suitability of the various platforms, particularly concerning privacy and confidentiality.

This space and relationship were fundamentally changed with the shift to online work, which meant that renegotiations of the frame were common, such as having supervision at a time suitable for data requirements and supervisors and students having to conduct supervision from their own homes. Such a shift in the proximity of the student-supervisor relationship also meant a shift in the nature of the supervision, as supervision, of necessity, provided a space to make sense of pandemic- and course-related anxieties. Supervision sessions began to consider students' anxieties, which centred on eagerness to meet training requirements whilst also being concerned about the implications of Covid-19 for both themselves and their families.

### *Work Integrated Learning (WIL)*

Practical or service-learning placements are an integral part of the masters' professional training programmes in psychology and are considered wise practice in the training of allied health professionals. There are two primary purposes of service-learning; the first is to encourage student learning and ensure readiness, and the other is to ensure that we service the community in which our academic complex finds itself embedded (Salter, Oates, Swanson & Bourke, 2020).

During the lockdown period, attention needed to be given to how students would complete their practicums, as this is both a training and HPCSA requirement (Salter et al, 2020). The Professional Board of Psychology provided guidelines in response to the Covid-19 pandemic (HPCSA, 2020a; 2020b). These guidelines provided recommendations around safety and support for students, flexibility in the calendar, and considerations for telehealth and telemedicine.

Collaboration and guidance from the faculty was important in ensuring safety and support of students when practicums were reinitiated. The university and practical sites clarified their responsibilities in the process (the supervision of cases and managing the testing of students in the face of potential exposure, for example). The sites committed to training students in terms of occupational health and safety and personal protective equipment (PPE) was arranged by the university. As indicated, we cautiously made the call for an early resumption of practicums and ensured students' agency in the process. Although students had anxieties about this, they were also eager to learn and continue with their training, and their anxieties were allayed by a presence of clear protocols on managing Covid-19 in the practical placements. The pandemic, however, highlighted the need to clarify issues of indemnity for students, as well as cover, which remains a contentious issue for programmes that have WIL.

## Conclusion and future recommendations

### *Hybridity during a pandemic*

A hybrid approach in professional psychology programmes during a pandemic comes as highly recommended, as a fully online approach is not viable for training programmes that are situated within ELT. Emphasis on experiential teaching and learning remains crucial in ensuring adequate preparation for internship placements. While there are some aspects of the training which can be successfully offered fully online, we argue that the practical placements of student psychologists is one of the significant aspects that cannot be compromised, as it potentially results in inadequate preparedness for internship. This, however, requires some fundamental shifts in how academic leadership needs to view and understand psychology professional programmes as one of the programmes that offer an essential service through WIL. The first-year master's (M1) students also register with the HPCSA as student psychologists, and this allows them to practice under supervision. With limited resources in mental health care, the role of student psychologists in providing supervised individual, community, and group therapy is one that needs to be revised and

strengthened. The indemnity cover regarding the safety for students who do WIL also needs to be clarified among the different stakeholders.

### *The need for upskilling and flexibility*

The rapid shift to online teaching and learning highlighted an urgent need to update and further develop technological and collaboration skills, with significant impact on budgets (Blankenberger & Williams, 2020). There was an immediate introduction of technology in teaching and learning as well as supervision (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020). Training of students and staff in unconventional methods of teaching and learning, therapeutic supervision, and telepsychology was identified as a pressing need to be implemented for the training programmes. Adjusting the programme to accommodate the change and being open to opinions and suggestions, as well as creating space for innovation and alignment with technological demand, was also important. It has become clear that psychology remains challenged in how it fits in the technological space, but at the same time, it is imperative that we train our students to be relevant in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and in an ever-changing world.

### *Leadership as an invaluable asset*

The role of leadership in efficiently responding to questions and requests is crucial in assisting coordinators in managing professional programmes during the pandemic. This provided a guiding coalition with a clear sense of urgency and open communication, which empowered us to act and create short-term wins, consolidate improvement, and produce more change (Weiss & Su-Ting, 2020). There is, however, a need for leadership understanding of the nuances involved in coordinating and teaching professional psychology programmes.

### *Student agency: Prioritising student voices*

The training and transition to a professional practitioner is a challenging journey for most students and this was magnified by the changes and disruptions brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, Covid-19 became an extra challenge in addition to the more fundamental transition to becoming qualified practitioners (Courtier et al, 2021). The impact of the pandemic on student experience was deemed a useful element in shaping our responses to the impact of the pandemic. Students were often asked to indicate which technological applications worked better in terms of

user friendliness and data costs. We often felt the need to ensure their safety and comfort through constant negotiation with and feedback from them, especially after resuming WIL. Therefore, going forward, we regard students' voices as essential in shaping the programme. This highlights the need to encourage students to use available university platforms in providing feedback that may be useful in guiding continual improvement of the programme during and after the pandemic. Real-life data from actual research from students and academic staff who experienced the impact of Covid-19 on the professional training programme will be more useful in guiding our response to these kinds of disruptions in future.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the shifts in professional training programmes following the Covid-19 restrictions. The use of CAE provided the opportunity to ascertain in-depth understanding of our experiences in coordinating professional psychology training programmes during Covid-19. While the emphasis on experiential learning and the nuances of professional training in psychology are important considerations for future recommendations in continual improvement and development of professional training, it is also salient to reiterate the value of upskilling within professional training programmes and the value of reflective practices from both student psychologists and staff involved in the programmes. It is hoped that cross-disciplinary engagement and ongoing engagement beyond the Covid-19 era can provide a richer training ground for competent and reflective psychologists.

## References

- Albertyn, R. & Bennett, K. 2020. Containing and harnessing uncertainty during postgraduate research supervision. *Higher Education Research & Development*. 40(4): 661–675. DOI: [10.1080/07294360.2020.1775559](https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1775559)
- Benuto, L., Singer, J., Newlands, R. & Casas, J. 2019. Training culturally competent psychologists: Where are we and where do we need to go? *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*. 13(1): 56–63. DOI: [10.1037/tep0000214](https://doi.org/10.1037/tep0000214)
- Bernard, J. M. & Goodyear, R. K. 2009. *Fundamentals of Clinical Supervision*. Boston: Pearson.
- Blankenberger, B. & Williams, A. M. 2020. COVID and the impact on higher education: The essential role of integrity and accountability. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*. 42(3): 404–423. hDOI: [10.1080/10841806.2020.1771907](https://doi.org/10.1080/10841806.2020.1771907)
- Christian, D. D., McCarty, D. L. & Brown, C. L. 2021. Experiential education during the COVID-19 pandemic: A reflective process. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*. 34(3): 264–277. DOI: [10.1080/10720537.2020.1813666](https://doi.org/10.1080/10720537.2020.1813666)



- Courtier, N., Brown, P., Mundy, L., Pope, E., Chivers, E. & Williamson, K. 2021. Expectations of therapeutic radiography students in Wales about transitioning to practice during the Covid-19 pandemic as registrants on the HCPC temporary register. *Radiography*. 27: 316–321. DOI: [10.1016/j.radi.2020.09.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.radi.2020.09.001)
- Fűz, N. 2018. Out-of-school learning in Hungarian primary education: Practice and barriers. *Journal of Experiential Education*. 41(3): 277–294. DOI: [10.1177/1053825918758342](https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825918758342)
- Health Professionals Council of South Africa [HPCSA]. 2020a. *Alternative measures to be considered for education and training of psychology students and interns - Covid-19*. Available: [https://www.hpcsa.co.za/Uploads/PSB\\_2019/Announcements/To\\_Heads\\_of\\_Departments\\_Board\\_communication\\_re\\_COVID\\_19.pdf](https://www.hpcsa.co.za/Uploads/PSB_2019/Announcements/To_Heads_of_Departments_Board_communication_re_COVID_19.pdf). Accessed 22 April 2021.
- Health Professionals Council of South Africa [HPCSA]. 2020b. *The Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) Response to Covid-19 pandemic*. Available: [https://www.hpcsa.co.za/Uploads/PSB\\_2019/Announcements/HPCSA\\_RESPONSE\\_TO\\_THE\\_COVID-19\\_PANDEMIC\\_7\\_April\\_2020\\_Final.pdf](https://www.hpcsa.co.za/Uploads/PSB_2019/Announcements/HPCSA_RESPONSE_TO_THE_COVID-19_PANDEMIC_7_April_2020_Final.pdf). Accessed 22 April 2021.
- Hernandez, K. A. C., Chang, H. & Ngunjiri, F. W. 2017. Collaborative autoethnography as multivocal, relational, and democratic research: Opportunities, challenges, and aspirations. *Auto/Biography Studies*. 32(2): 251–254. DOI: [10.1080/08989575.2017.1288892](https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2017.1288892)
- Lapadat, J. C. 2017. Ethics in autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry*. 23(8): 589–603. DOI: [10.1177/1077800417704462](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417704462)
- Morris, T. H. 2019. Experiential learning – A systematic review and revision of Kolb’s model. *Interactive Learning Environments*. 28(8): 1064–1077. DOI: [10.1080/10494820.2019.1570279](https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2019.1570279)
- Munge, B., Thomas, G. & Heck, D. 2018. Outdoor fieldwork in higher education: Learning from multidisciplinary experience. *Journal of Experiential Education*. 41(1): 39–53. DOI: [10.1177/1053825917742165](https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825917742165)
- Naidoo, P. & Cartwright, D. 2020. Where to from here? Contemplating the impact of COVID-19 on South African students and student counseling services in higher education. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*. 36(4): 355-369. DOI: [10.1080/87568225.2020.1842279](https://doi.org/10.1080/87568225.2020.1842279)
- Nel, L. & Fouche, P. 2017. Experiences of master’s students regarding clinical supervision in an applied psychology programme in South Africa. *Teaching in Higher Education*. 22(1): 30–43. DOI: [10.1080/13562517.2016.1213230](https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1213230)
- Pillay, A. L., Ahmed, R. & Bawa, U. 2013. Clinical psychology training in South Africa: A call to action. *South African Journal of Psychology*. 43(1): 46–58. DOI: [10.1177/0081246312474411](https://doi.org/10.1177/0081246312474411)
- Pillay, A. L. & Barnes, B. 2021. Psychology and COVID-19: Impacts, themes and way forward. *South African Journal of Psychology*. 50(2): 148–153. DOI: [10.1177/0081246320937684](https://doi.org/10.1177/0081246320937684)
- Pipitone, J. M. 2018. Place as pedagogy: Toward study abroad for social change. *Journal of Experiential Education*. 41(1): 54–74. DOI: [10.1177/1053825917751509](https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825917751509)

Reese, R. J., González, E. G., Clements-Hickman, A. L., Clemons, J. M., Farook, M. W. & Conoley, C. W. 2017. The psychotherapy researcher–practice relationship: Through a clinical supervision lens. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*. 30(3): 290–307. [DOI: 10.1080/09515070.2017.1285270](https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070.2017.1285270)

Roy, R. & Uekusa, S. 2020. Collaborative autoethnography: “Self-reflection” as a timely alternative research approach during the global pandemic. *Qualitative Research Journal*. 20(4): 383–392. [DOI: 10.1108/QRJ-06-2020-0054](https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-06-2020-0054)

Salter, C., Oates, R. K, Swanson, C. & Bourke, L. 2020. Working remotely: Innovative allied health placements in response to COVID-19. *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*. 21(5): 587–600. Available: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1271186.pdf>.

Weiss, P.G. & Su-Ting, T. L. 2020. Leading change to address the needs and well-being of trainees during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Academic Paediatrics*. 20(6): 735–742. [DOI: 10.1016/j.acap.2020.06.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2020.06.001)



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>