ERRCDF

Exploring Postgraduate Student's Experiences on Values of Humanness During COVID-19: An Inquiry for Supportive Online Learning and Assessment

Cias Thapelo Tsotetsi[1*] iD

Masetshaba A. Tsosane[2] iD

AFFILIATIONS

[1&2]Department of Education, Management, Policy and Comparative Education, University of the Free State, Phuthaditjhaba, South Africa.

CORRESPONDENCE

Email: tsotetsict@ufs.ac.za*

Abstract: Previous research highlights significant disruptions to teaching and assessment time in universities due to strikes and the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic, which began in late 2019, forced institutions worldwide to close, prompting a shift to online teaching, learning, and assessment. In Africa, additional closures occurred due to student unrest. While the transition to online learning sought to maintain academic continuity, limited research exists on how postgraduate students experienced the values of humanness (*botho*) during this period. This qualitative study explores how postgraduate students perceived the values of *botho* in online learning and assessment during the lockdown. Fifty honours students participated in an assignment completed in groups of up to four, with 15 submissions received, including group and individual efforts. Students reflected on their experiences, highlighting positive outcomes such as knowledge sharing within groups. However, challenges emerged, including group members leaving unexpectedly due to non-cooperative peers, which left others to complete tasks individually with increased effort. The findings suggest that the principles of *botho* should be integrated into online assessment designs to address the challenges faced by students. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of bridging the digital divide to promote equitable online learning. Further research is needed to explore strategies that incorporate the values of *botho* while addressing technological and collaborative barriers in online education.

Keywords: Online teaching, online learning, *botho,* digital divide, online assessment.

1. Introduction

The use of technology in teaching and learning intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to an increase in the popularity of online education. According to Barr and Miller (2013), online learning involves reciprocal interaction between instructor and student, aimed at enhancing learning through technology and the Internet. Additionally, Gumede and Badriparsad (2022) define it as instruction delivered through digital devices to support learning. Similarly, Mishra et al. (2020) describes it as a shift from traditional to modern teaching methods, transitioning from physical classrooms to virtual settings. Provenzano (2023) highlights that this shift employs various technologies to enhance student participation and learning. Hence, Sadiku et al. (2018) emphasise that the internet has been a catalyst for online learning, significantly impacting how we live, socialise, teach, and learn.

The online space offers diverse ways for students and instructors to communicate, which is essential for successful teaching and learning. As pointed out by Barr et.al (2013), online learning involves various technological platforms and methods, and modern tools such as the internet, computers, smartphones, Blackboard Learn (Bb), Google classroom, and other smart tools are now vital. Consequently, social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp, have become prominent for seamless communication (Skhephe, 2022). Van den Berg and Mudau (2021) affirm that these technologies

helped students and instructors stay connected during the lockdowns at the peak of COVID-19. Thus, ensuring a sense of humanity (*botho*) in communication is crucial for students to support one another and achieve learning outcomes in online learning.

While there is a significant body of literature on online learning, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when institutions had to abruptly shift from traditional learning to online learning, there is a lack of studies examining the experiences of postgraduate students regarding the values of *botho* during online learning and assessment. A recent study reported that postgraduate students face unique stressors and expectations in their journey, resulting in isolation and mental health issues (Hassem et al., 2024). This highlights the importance of interactions in an online space anchored in the values of *botho* to ensure a supportive and effective learning environment.

According to Ndwambi et al. (2022), certain skills become even more important when students can only meet in an online space. In addition to cognitive and academic skills, Ndwambi et al. (2022) emphasise that other skills, such as social, affective, metacognitive, and technical skills, become more prominent, with social skills being the focal point of this study. To underscore the importance of social skills in an online environment, Ndwambi et al. (2022) identify essential elements for successful online teaching and learning, namely teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence. Underpinned by the *Botho* Theoretical Framework, the prominent element through the lens of this study is social presence, which relates to the emotional presence revealed through self-efficacy, openness, and expanded self-awareness (Ndwambi et al., 2022). Hence, from the above explanation, it is understood that being socially present, which alludes to the traits of humaneness (*botho*) philosophy, is important for functioning in an online society and succeeding. In the context of this study, this manifested in how the students mitigated the challenges they faced while completing the online assessment. The following questions guided the study:

- How did postgraduate students experience the values of humanness (*Botho*) in online learning and assessment during the lockdown?

The secondary research questions are:

- What challenges did individuals and/or group members face in completing the online assessment?
- How did individuals and/or group members work to mitigate those challenges?

1.2 Benefits of online teaching and learning

The apparent advantage of online teaching and learning is its convenience and access to updated digital libraries (Yuhanna et al., 2020). This provides students and instructors with control over their learning, allowing access to materials anytime and anywhere while offering convenient support. Drexel University School of Education (n.d.) states that technology's swift access to information is vital in classrooms, engaging students whether they work independently or collaboratively. Popular platforms like BB and Google Classroom, especially post-COVID-19, have transformed education (Mishra et al., 2020). BB is particularly prevalent for its ability to foster rich interaction and engagement, creating actively engaged students (Drexel University's School of Education, n.d.; Skhephe, 2022). Anthology Inc. & Affiliates (2022) note that BB supports student achievement with its flexible and open design. It enables both synchronous ("real-time" interaction) and asynchronous (self-paced interaction) learning through features like session recordings, discussion groups, and emails. In this study, the sessions prior to the assessment were conducted on Blackboard, and the participants had to submit their group assessments on BB for grading.

1.3 Different styles of learning

Technology is said to assist students with different learning styles, as not all students learn and retain information in the same way or at the same speed. Jimola and Ofudu (2021) highlight Reid's six perceptual learning styles: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, group, and individual. Visual learners

prefer visual aids like diagrams and videos, which BB provides. Auditory learners excel with oral input, such as lectures and discussions, and can benefit from recorded audio on BB. "Group learners thrive on collaboration and teamwork, while individual learners excel when working alone" (Jimola & Ofudu, 2021, p. 17). Thus, interaction and engagement with learning materials and peers are vital in the online environment.

1.4 Challenges with online teaching and learning

Despite the significant advantages of online learning, challenges such as lack of support, isolation, load shedding, and network issues persist (Davis et al., 2019). The biggest disadvantage, according to Omodan (2020) and Tamm (2023), is isolation, which can lead to mental health issues like stress, anxiety, and negative thoughts, thus affecting academic success. Bergiel et al. (2021) also emphasise that the lack of interaction in online classes hinders the development of personal relationships and collaboration. In the context of this study, students who must work together to complete tasks may face challenges if they have not met physically, potentially hindering collaboration and leading to a lack of commitment (Bergiel et al., 2021).

Lastly, loadshedding can cause network issues, especially in rural areas where consistent, high-speed internet is a challenge (Bergiel et al., 2021). Relevant to this study, as explained in the methodology, the participants were honours students from a rural campus, often from less affluent homes, who are likely to miss classes due to these issues, necessitating collaboration among peers to overcome them. Ndwambi et al. (2022) explain that during the lockdown, beyond cognitive and academic skills, students needed skills linked to *botho* principles for successful task completion. This study aimed to explore how honours students experienced the values of humanness in online learning and assessment during the lockdown, posing the question: How did postgraduate students experience the values of humanness (*Botho*) in online learning and assessment during the lockdown?

1.5 Digital divide

With an understanding of the above challenges, the intense use of online teaching and learning in South African universities has revealed significant socio-economic and technological differences among postgraduate students, highlighting the "digital divide" described by Huang and Russell (2006). This divide refers to the gap between those familiar with digital technology and those who are not (Naidoo & Jaya, 2012). In the competitive academic environment, individualism becomes undeniable. Indeed, as emphasised by Akabor and Phasha (2022), South African education is generally characterised by a competitive value system that encourages students to outperform their peers academically, subsequently rewarding their individualistic efforts to do so. Given this context, the question of "what happens when students are expected to complete tasks in a group", even when they cannot meet physically, begs for an answer. According to Drexel University School of Education (n.d.), smartphones, computers, and tablets are pervasive in the lives of students and instructors. The digital divide, based on computer ownership and internet access, creates *haves* and *have-nots* (Huang & Russell, 2006). Naidoo & Jaya (2012) distinguish between "digital immigrants" (those who adapted to the digital world) and "digital natives" (those who grew up in it). Given this mix, we were interested in exploring the extent to which honours students felt the values of humanness in an online space during assessments. Being postgraduate students, it was understood that they would have had the opportunity to be in the digital space as undergraduate students, both as "digital immigrants" and "digital natives."

1.6 Categories to digital divide

Three categories underlie the digital divide concept: social exclusion, digital exclusion, and accessibility (Khalid & Pedersen, 2016). The first category, social exclusion, refers to factors such as low levels of education, physical or mental disabilities, and low socio-economic status. In the context of this study, most of the students who opt for the Bachelor of Education Honours (B. Ed Hons)

programme are employed, unable to afford to study full-time, and come from low socio-economic backgrounds. While moving online can be seen as a way to reduce costs, it may further widen the gap between those who have resources and those who do not. This is due to the fact that those without resources may continue to struggle to access the available material because of their low socio-economic background (Kater et al., 2016).

Secondly, digital exclusion encompasses a lack of hardware devices and internet services. Students from digitally disadvantaged communities require more time to navigate the digital space, as some may not have had access to technological devices (Naidoo & Jaya, 2012; Khalid & Pedersen, 2016). According to Strom (2021), the second challenge is that the less frequently individuals use new technology, the less likely they are to develop skills in using it.

Lastly, accessibility is the third category, which includes differences in accessing the technological world as it pertains to inhabitants of rural and urban areas. This also encompasses disparities in ICT literacy and information literacy. The digital divide varies between developed and developing countries. In underdeveloped countries, many people do not own computers and lack access to data. Rural and urban areas experience differing internet bandwidths, which can impact individuals when they need to receive large volumes of transferred material, participate in prolonged collaborative sessions requiring data access, and download videos. It takes longer for technologically illiterate individuals to complete tasks that literate individuals can finish easily (Khalid & Pedersen, 2016).

2. *Botho* – Theoretical Framework

Ubuntu and *Botho* are terms from different African native languages that refer to humanity and humanness. In this paper, the term '*botho*' will be used as the operational term. According to Lim et al. (2022), *botho* is an African philosophy that emphasises humanism or humanness and is recognised throughout Africa. The practicality of a philosophy is crucial and can be observed through the implementer's attitudes, behaviours, and attributes. This means one can only be considered humane or possessing *botho* if one embodies certain values.

2.1 Values of *Botho*

This study focused on six core values of showing *botho*, as identified by Ngunjiri (2016). Firstly, respecting others' dignity is essential for building a healthy community. According to Mokuku (2016), respect, love for one another, and the advancement of a people, or "ho ikaha ha setjhaba" (Mokuku, 2016, p. 1234), demonstrate *botho*. The second core value of *botho* is group solidarity, which means helping others instead of ridiculing them, highlighting the importance of the third core value, which is teamwork. Teamwork, defined as a collective approach to achieving goals, reflects *botho*. When students work together and value each other's contributions, tasks are completed more effectively. This is rooted in the fourth value, mutual trust (Chiwandire, 2021), which alludes to reliability and the understanding that group members depend on one another. In addition, teamwork involves catering to others' needs to ensure the work is done, emphasising the importance of serving others. Ngubane and Makau (2021) agree that teamwork is a crucial *botho* principle, promoting another value called unity and team spirit among students tackling learning problems. Unity fosters solidarity and oneness among group members (Ngubane & Makau, 2021), creating an environment where students value one another and cease to view each other as competitors but as team members and extensions of each other. Thus, effective teamwork values each member's contribution for a successful learning experience.

Although Van der Walt and Oosthuizen (2021) argue that *botho* may result in oppressive conformity and unfair loyalty to the group, with the underlying understanding that any person deviating from the group's stance can be seen as an enemy, Omodan & Ige (2021) highlight that harmony, the sixth important value of *botho*, can be seen through tolerance among group members. Their ability and willingness to continually use online resources are key to success during online group work.

Therefore, group members must understand and tolerate their differences to promote harmony and achieve the desired goal.

Botho can create a positive teaching and learning environment where students feel respected and heard. Thus, Lim et al. (2022) suggest that incorporating the *botho* philosophy in education can foster unity and community building within and outside institutions. In line with the South African constitution's emphasis on diversity (Republic of South Africa, 1996), *botho* can connect diverse students in online learning, bridging the digital divide caused by socio-economic differences. Hence, Lim et al. (2022) maintain that *botho* is essential for promoting empathy, interconnectedness, and student support in educational institutions. All the discussed values of *botho* are crucial for an effective and supportive online learning environment during assessments. While most studies focus on online learning in general, this study explored how postgraduate students experienced the values of *botho* in an online space when they were expected to complete tasks.

In essence, all these values are important for undertaking this study as the students complete online assessments in groups. This means that for the successful achievement of group work, respecting one another's dignity, not deviating from the group, working together in harmony, and going to great lengths to help each other is essential to ensure the group is effective. The implication is that students need to work together and understand that each contributes to the group's success. This was particularly important when the group had to play their roles in various sections of the task. Sharing resources and mitigating challenges for those who may lack gadgets or Wi-Fi became crucial. However, this does not negate the importance of students being responsible and playing their part to ensure the success of their academic journey.

3. **Methodology**

In this study, we employed a qualitative research approach to generate data. We gathered reflections from second-year Bachelor of Education Honours (B.Ed Hons) students to understand their experiences with completing tasks online during the hard lockdown. Given the unique stressors and pressures faced by postgraduate students, which can lead to an isolated academic journey, conducting this study was essential for contributing to further research on supportive online learning environments. The students' experiences informed the study's contributions. Due to COVID-19, the university also opted for the digitisation of teaching and learning, enabling students to access education without needing to be on campus. We chose to submit PowerPoint presentations with voice-overs for three successive workshops in July 2020.

3.1 Setting

The study took place in the North-Eastern part of the Free State Province, South Africa. The campus of the university predominantly draws students from the Free State and KwaZulu Provinces. The communities from which it draws students are not affluent families. We targeted the second-year B.Ed (Hons) module, which consisted of 50 students. The students were allowed to group themselves with at least four members per group. Due to the pandemic, we permitted individuals to complete the activity independently, as some could not find partners and the COVID-19 regulations made it difficult for individual students to meet. Of the 50 students, we received 15 submissions, ranging from individuals working independently to groups of no more than four members. Of the groups, only one person was required to submit on their behalf.

3.2 Procedure

The students received an overview of the third unit of the module in Education Policy. Each Monday in July for three consecutive weeks, we uploaded PowerPoint presentation (PPT) slides with a voiceover for students to access. Consequently, the students had seven days to listen to the presentation, write various parts of the assignment in a staggered manner, and prepare their

submissions for August 2020. We opened the link on 6 August 2020, allowing students to check for similarities using the Turnitin plagiarism checker. This link closed on 20 August 2020. We communicated these dates at the beginning of July when they were first given an overview of how the unit would unfold. Two links were activated on 6 August 2020: the first for the actual assignment submission and the second for reflections.

3.3 Data collection and data analysis

Students had the opportunity to submit their responses on Blackboard, the university's teaching and learning platform. While the assignment was a group task, the reflections had to come from individual students who agreed to participate. Students were required to reflect on eight open questions. For this paper, we focused on two specific reflections, such as:

- What did you find difficult about working in a group/alone? Explain.
- What were the typical challenges experienced by your group, and what did you do to address/overcome these challenges? Explain.

Since we had already received Blackboard training during the initial phase of the lockdown, from April 2020 to May 2020, we were able to retrieve students' reflections on the unit when they submitted their responses in August 2020.

In terms of data analysis, we employed thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006 & 2023). They explain that thematic analysis allows the researcher to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) in data, thus organising the data in rich detail. To make sense of student reflections, we followed the six steps of thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), where coding is developed and refined throughout the analysis process.

- Getting familiar with the data - This initial step involved familiarising ourselves with the data by reading the student reflections repeatedly and making notes, which the authors refer to as searching for patterns and meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
- Generating initial codes - Having read the data, this step involved formally generating codes from the notes made while reading the student reflections and identifying words related to the research questions. The codes were then organised into meaningful groups to highlight themes, leading to the next step.
- Searching for themes - After identifying codes across all data, this step included sorting the codes into potential themes by examining coded words that relate to the same idea, thus exploring how these potential themes connect to each other and produce subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
- Reviewing themes - This step allowed the researchers to review and refine themes and cross-examine them with the data to ensure that the themes are supported by the data, ultimately retaining the main themes from the potential themes.
- Defining and naming themes - The researchers further refined the themes as presented and analysed them with accompanying narratives.
- Lastly, through iterative data analysis, the final step was to produce a comprehensive report of findings using the identified themes and organising them.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was sought and obtained. Students were informed that they were not coerced into reflecting on the assignment as the unit unfolded. It was made clear that their reflections would only be used for study purposes and that none of them would be penalised for withdrawing from participation or for not completing the reflections. Furthermore, we communicated that their participation was voluntary and that they would remain anonymous throughout and after the process.

3.5 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in research is established through key criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and authenticity (Alonzo & Teng, 2023; Elo et al., 2014). Credibility was achieved by clearly defining the unit of analysis, which in this study consisted of the reflections of Honours students. To ensure dependability and confirmability, member checking was employed, allowing students to validate their contributions, while peer review was conducted to evaluate the researchers' interpretations. For transferability, sufficient contextual information was provided to enable readers to replicate the study in other settings. However, given the inherent variability of contexts, this also facilitates meaningful comparisons between the findings of this study and those from other contexts. Lastly, authenticity was maintained by presenting diverse perspectives from the participants. Variations in responses to similar questions were included to accurately reflect the students' expressions.

4. Presentation and Analysis of Results

Below are our findings from the students' reflections. This section provided answers to these questions: What did you find difficult about working in a group or alone?; and What were the typical challenges experienced by your group, and what did you do to address or overcome these challenges?

4.1 Difficulties working in group/independently

In the first part, we present findings related to the following question: What did you find difficult about working in a group or alone? The students' reflections revealed four sub-themes: *absence of face-to-face discussion, inability to reach one another, lone rangers, and non-cooperative group members.*

4.1.1 Absence of face-to-face discussion

One of the feelings of loneliness brought about by the release of students to home was the absence of intimate contact where they could raise and defend their issues.

> S6: *The distance between the group members was difficult. We couldn't meet and discuss things face to face to allow group members to present and defend their opinions.*

Further, the absence of face-to-face sessions hindered communication greatly. This claim is confirmed by the two utterances below.

> S12: *I was unable to communicate with them; sometimes, I logged in late after the team members had discussed the assignment. This had a negative impact on me because I didn't get an opportunity to share my views on the discussion.*

> S1: *The only challenge we had was that of communication and the power cuts because sometimes we do not have electricity the whole day and cannot get in contact with each other.*

The utterances presented above allude to instances of communication breakdown, where members attempt to communicate amongst themselves but fail due to electrical issues. This implies that the expected normal debate around standpoints and the interpretation of data is significantly hindered. Working online, coupled with the challenges mentioned above, has impeded the harmonious, face-to-face interactions that students once enjoyed. As highlighted by Barr et al. (2013, p. 5), "online education may not work for every student as some students may experience isolation and a sense of disconnectedness during the learning experience." Similarly, Davis et al. (2019) state that students in online classes may feel less support due to their physical disconnection from the instructor, peers, and faculty, underscoring the significance of the concept of *Botho* in online learning.

4.1.2 Inability to reach one another

Network and electricity issues also hinder students from reaching one another and result in others missing important information regarding the task. This confirms what other scholars highlight:

"students in online classes are responsible for the information provided to them, and those who do not actively engage (due to the mentioned challenges) in the learning management system are likely to miss the provided information that is meant to help them stay on track and successfully complete tasks" (Davis et al., 2019, p. 258). In this case, this meant more work for other group members. However, this also indicates that some group members went the extra mile to ensure that they explained the assignment instructions to those who faced challenges, thereby demonstrating teamwork.

> S9: *Poor network connection; sometimes we were unable to reach each other to do group meetings. Sometimes, my partner won't be able to access the video (PP with a voice-over) by the Dr and the worksheets that were posted on the Blackboard due to what I was supposed to explain to her.*

> S3: *Communication of group members. Sometimes it is very difficult to get ahold of each other; it could be due to electricity problems or the network.*

> S5: *I had problems communicating with my team members because of network coverage problems, which resulted from the electricity turning off in the early hours and returning in the evening.*
> S4: *The issue of network coverage was the major challenge faced by teammates.*

In addition to network coverage challenges, loadshedding was another obstacle to students' ability to submit their work.

> S2: *It was difficult to connect as we are apart from each other, and some members failed to submit their work in time due to loadshedding, which occurred frequently.*

Based on the above, frequent loadshedding and network coverage were among the main sources of impediments, making it difficult for students to continue collaborating in an online space. Group members felt the absence of others within their normal proximity. The lockdown had a negative effect on students' interactions and their ability to work as a group. In essence, although group solidarity was affected by the situation, there was still evidence of teamwork to ensure that the work got done.

4.1.3 I had to go and do it alone – Lone rangers

Some students resorted to doing the work alone, and such an arrangement was made known to the students.

> S12: *Since I worked as an individual, the difficult thing for me was deciding on which contemporary issues to focus on. I had several issues that I was interested in, and deciding on one was not easy.*
> S11: *The difficulty of working individually is that after deciding on the issue I wanted to work on, working on those different parts individually seemed to be a lot of work. At some point, I didn't understand how to answer the questions, and I had no one to ask, so I had to do extra work on my own so that I could understand what was required of me to do on that part.*

Teamwork, rather than individualism, is paramount for the group's success. As Chiwandire (2021) contends, *botho* values are rooted in collectivism, which stands in contrast to individualism. When students complete group assignments alone, it indicates individualism in online learning and a lack of solidarity. Some members resorted to working as lone rangers, which meant they missed the benefits of teamwork that enable members to complement one another. The results indicate that there is still evidence of a lack of *botho* when completing group work online.

4.1.4 Non-corporative group members

As emphasised in the literature, cooperation and teamwork are the core values of *botho* that ensure group members work together to achieve their set goals (Mokuku, 2016; Chiwandire, 2021). Clear communication and agreement among group members are essential, and each member should

contribute to the bigger picture, which, as indicated by the responses below, was primarily to submit the work on time.

> S3: *a member who does not engage and delays in submitting the necessary information; other members take their time to submit and want to be pushed to complete their part in the work.*
>
> S8: *The group experience was bad as most of my group members did not prefer starting to write or brainstorming ideas from the 7th of August till a week before the submission date.*
>
> S1: *Some would just do copy and paste from the Internet and not reference their work.*
>
> S9: *In our group, we had to beg some members to complete their tasks 5 days before the closing date.*
>
> S13: *It has been exceptionally challenging to blend in with people who seem to have been study partners throughout their years of studies.*
>
> S5: *Some seem not interested to knowing or showing willingness to welcome other people.*
>
> S4: *group members did not write their parts on time, which inadvertently led to us submitting the assignment via email. What I did was try and convince the group members to rectify the inappropriate work they wrote, which made the assignment have +-36% plagiarism, but they did not comply.*

Group solidarity seemed missing in some groups, as indicated above. Inadvertently, this meant that some members did not respect the group's decision to submit on the specified dates. A further not-so-caring attitude was the submission of work that had just been copied and pasted. Group members need to work in solidarity to understand each other and work towards achieving the desired goal. If the opposite is true, as reported by the participants in this study, the feeling of belonging to a group is crucial to ensuring the success of the group. Hence, this, to some extent, indicated the absence of *botho* during online teaching and learning. As highlighted by Mokuku (2016), *botho* can be evident when people come together and discuss matters that affect the community, unlike when they do not solve issues that affect the community. Hence, in some cases, students just opted to do the task individually. This can also be seen in the expression that when people need assistance (to be part of the group), they should be supported instead of being excluded or not having their opinions respected and being made to feel alone.

Also, it is evident that some students who studied together throughout the year automatically work together during group work, while others do not welcome additional members. Therefore, some group members do not stand up to accommodate new members because they do not want to deviate from the group or be seen as disloyal to the group they have always been working with. This is confirmed by Van der Walt & Oosthuizen (2021), who highlighted that *botho* may result in oppressive conformity and unfair loyalty to the group, with the underlying understanding that any person deviating from where the group stands can be seen as now an enemy. Again, group members must understand and tolerate the differences among themselves to promote harmony and achieve the desired goal.

4.2 Navigating the challenges

The final reflections probed the following question: What were the typical challenges experienced by your group, and what did you do to address or overcome these challenges? The responses included *exiting a particular group, resorting to other communication platforms, and planning.*

4.2.1 Exiting a particular group

Group challenges led some members to exit their groups to ensure they successfully completed their degrees. This relates to the earlier mentioned challenge of lone rangers, which, in this case, was seen as a solution. This indicates that some students lack an understanding of the values of *botho*, where collaborative effort is essential for success. In contrast, other students feel it necessary to leave groups and work alone. Mokuku (2016) confirms this tendency as individualism. However, as explained by

Mokuku (2016), it is important to understand that *botho* does not exclude individualism, which refers to the complete independence of a person.

S14: *Thus, I decided to do the assignment alone.*

S11: *The group members I was hoping to work with chose to break communication with me and I had to withdraw from the group. I had to draw from my inner strength and became bold to complete it.*

S12: *To avoid the challenges met on the first group assignment and seeing the delay they had with starting with the brainstorming of the second group assignment, I thus decided to do the assignment on my own.*

Based on the above, teamwork does not always benefit every group member, as some members collaborate while excluding others. There are instances where group solidarity may falter, leading to the emergence of subgroups. Under these conditions, and for the sake of survival, members may even leave their original groups to complete tasks necessary for obtaining their qualifications.

4.2.2 Resorting to other communication platforms

Given the hard lockdown, students had to find ways to continue their work even when they could not meet face-to-face. This highlights the importance of teamwork and collaboration.

S2: *Electricity was the problem because we did not meet physically and do the work face to face, but we created a WhatsApp group.*

S15: *we had to incorporate the use of cell phones to communicate with each other. Also, we had to use emails to get the information to other members.*

S10: *The major challenge was the distance between us, but we used technology to try and minimise the challenge*

S7: *Decision-making took time as we were unable to decide who would take which part as we were communicating using WhatsApp*

Students used platforms primarily intended for casual chats as spaces for educational purposes. It is commendable how group members found ways to keep their team intact. This highlights the level of teamwork and collaboration (Mokuku, 2016; Ngubane & Makau, 2021) during task completion. These scholars describe these elements as the pillars of a successful group and *botho*, ensuring that the greater common good is achieved.

4.2.3 Planning

Planning enabled group members to use the cascading approach of peer teaching. Peer teaching among students emerged during COVID-19 to support one another. A sense of belonging is a crucial factor in the success of a group, as it influences the effort individuals invest to achieve the group's goals. Therefore, students helping and accommodating one another amidst their challenges demonstrates this sense of belonging.

S5 *We could not all be online during discussions because of load shedding, but what helped us is that whatever was said in one's absence, others could go through it when they had electricity and feel like part of the discussion.*

S13 *Sometimes my partner won't be able access the video by the Dr and the worksheets that were posted on the blackboard, due to that I was supposed to explain to her what was expected of us to do.*

The implication of the above is that members took what lecturers said and shared it with those who were absent due to electricity and other related challenges. This demonstrated their commitment to

serving others by conveying the message from their lecturers to those unable to attend the lecture. Mokuku (2016) refers to this attribute as having *botho* or unselfishness.

Furthermore, group members worked harder when there were no challenges. The saying "make hay while the sun shines" became evident as group members completed their work ahead of time.

> S7 *As group members, we pushed hard when there was no loadshedding to make up for the lost time.*

> S10 *We overcame that challenge but tried to do things beforehand so that when a day was missed, we would still be far from the assignment's due date.*

Based on the above sentiments, the group opted to do their best when there was no loadshedding or other eventualities. Group solidarity and interdependence became evident when members could create time and complete their work promptly, rather than working when not everyone was present. This highlights the importance of teamwork and cooperation in ensuring that students submit their work on time, thus confirming what Van der Walt & Oosthuizen (2021) referred to as brotherhood or community.

Planning enabled group members to adjust the submission time slots. Students agreed amongst themselves to modify deadlines to accommodate some late submissions, ensuring that there was ample time to correct any mistakes that might arise.

> S9: *The challenge that we experienced was of two members who did not complete their tasks according to the time frame we set for ourselves. We had to wait for them to finish because they complained about having other assignments as well as electricity issues. Thus, we had to give them more time to complete their parts and help them find information.*

Based on the above utterance, students accommodated one another by shifting deadlines for submissions. A complete written task was only achieved when group members fulfilled their responsibilities. The interdependence among group members became evident when those who had completed their tasks waited for those still working on theirs. This confirms what Ngubane and Makau (2021) meant when they explained that the effectiveness of teamwork is evident when each member plays a crucial role in the learning experience, and each member's contribution is valued. Therefore, students understood the need to accommodate their peers in order to finish their parts for submission, as each individual contribution was vital to the group; they could not submit without the work of others.

5. Discussion of Findings

We have divided this section according to the two secondary questions. Our findings revealed several challenges experienced by students during the lockdown period. The shift to online teaching, learning, and assessment resulted in students missing face-to-face interaction, which made it difficult for them to work in groups. This challenge was exacerbated by the lack of internet connectivity and loadshedding, particularly when students were required to discuss and debate assignment content. Furthermore, some students submitted work copied from other platforms, while others delayed submitting their parts, resulting in last-minute submissions that heightened stress for their peers. Conversely, some students ended up doing their assignments alone, which deprived them of the complementary ideas of their peers and hindered teamwork. Authors such as Tammy (2023), Davis (2019), and Bergiel et al. (2021) highlight that isolation, loadshedding, and reduced collaboration were significant challenges encountered by students during the lockdown period. It should, however, be noted that some postgraduate students chose to leave their groups and continue working independently. It can be deduced that there was a lack of harmony in some groups, which contradicts one of the values of *Botho*.

To navigate the challenges mentioned above, students employed various strategies. Some had to leave their groups and work alone to meet deadlines. Others adjusted submission dates internally to accommodate group members facing difficulties. This was in line with the principles of *Botho*, which encourage group solidarity (Ngubane & Makau, 2021). Furthermore, some students resorted to platforms such as WhatsApp and email communications to maintain cohesion within their groups. Lastly, others worked harder when there were no challenges, such as loadshedding. Some utilised peer teaching, where those who missed online classes were taught by their peers who managed to attend. Authors such as Skhephe (2022) support the use of platforms like WhatsApp, noting that new technologies were necessary to align with the acceleration of technological implementation caused by COVID-19. Similarly, Van den Berg and Mudau (2021) highlighted how Master's students were able to overcome the loneliness caused by COVID-19 by keeping in touch through technological tools such as WhatsApp. Finding ways to maintain group cohesion in an online space was consistent with the *Botho* value of fostering teamwork and team spirit amidst the unprecedented conditions brought about by COVID-19 (Ngubane & Makau, 2021).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study sought to explore how postgraduate students experienced the values of humanness (*Botho*) in online learning and assessment during the lockdown. To achieve this aim, we focused on the challenges postgraduate students faced as well as the navigational options they employed. The challenges included a lack of academic integrity, as some students copied and pasted work from other sources, loadshedding, which hindered online connections, the absence of face-to-face interaction, leading to feelings of isolation, and the preference of some students to work independently. On a positive note, students showed resilience by creating spaces to still feel the presence and nearness of others. They demonstrated group solidarity by accommodating others through adjusting submission dates within groups, working harder during times without loadshedding, using peer teaching to share information with those who could not attend live classes, and utilising platforms such as WhatsApp and email for communication. These communication platforms helped to mitigate isolation and upheld teamwork as a core value of *Botho* in action. The values of *Botho* most strongly felt by postgraduate students were group solidarity and teamwork.

The implications of these findings suggest that creating an online space for learning and assessment can bridge the gap left by the absence of face-to-face interaction. Conversely, some students' choice to exit groups and work individually reflected the opposite of *Botho*, indicating disharmony and disunity. This implies that academic staff should be aware that not all students can be patient and remain within groups when doing so jeopardises their academic advancement. While there were struggles among group members, illustrating disunity and disharmony, the use of technology mitigated the isolation caused by COVID-19. It can be concluded that students demonstrated resilience amidst the isolation brought on by the pandemic.

Based on these concluding thoughts, we make the following recommendations:

- The philosophy of *Botho* should be incorporated into instructional content, encouraging more group work to provide students with opportunities to collaborate and foster a supportive learning community. Additionally, students should engage in reflective activities to indicate how they managed or failed to demonstrate the values of *Botho* in their academic work.
- Flexible deadlines for submitting academic work should be provided, including extensions in the event of loadshedding or network challenges.
- Lecturers should create opportunities for collaboration on online platforms to reduce feelings of isolation.
- Updated tools to uphold academic integrity should always be considered to discourage copying and pasting. Workshops on academic integrity should be offered to students.
- Workshops on conflict resolution should be provided for students.

- Strategies for leveraging peer support should be explored, such as pairing students to enhance and capitalise on peer teaching.

Areas for further research include the use of diverse approaches, such as mixed methods or quantitative research. Similar studies could be conducted in different contexts or through a focus on other programmes.

7. Declarations

References

Akabor, S., & Phasha, N. (2022). Where is Ubuntu in competitive South African schools? An inclusive education perspective. *International Journal of Inclusive Education,* 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2022.2127491

Alonzo, D., & Teng, S. (2023). Trustworthiness of teacher assessment and decision-making: Reframing the consistency and accuracy measures. *International Journal of Instruction, 16*(3), 1075–1094. https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2023.16357a

Anthology Inc. & Affiliates. (2022). *What is Blackboard Learn?* Blackboard.

Barr, B. A., & Miller, S. F. (2013). *Higher Education: The online teaching and learning experience.* ERIC Library - Institute of Education Sciences.

Bergiel, B. J., Bergiel, E. B., & Bergiel, J. B. (2021). Covid-19 forced faculty to move from teaching face-to-face to online teaching fast: What are the advantages and disadvantages to faculty and students? *International Journal of Education Research, 16(1)*, 81–96.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2023). Toward good practice in thematic analysis: Avoiding common problems and becoming a knowing researcher. *International Journal of Transgender Health, 24*(1), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597

Chiwandire, D. (2021). *"Munhu wase ihama yako (everyone is your relative)": Ubuntu and social inclusion of students with disabilities in South African universities* [PhD thesis, Rhodes University].

Davis, N. L., Gough, M., & Taylor, L. L. (2019). Online teaching: Advantages, obstacles, and tools for getting it right. *Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism, 19*(3), 256–263. https://doi.org/10.1080/15313220.2019.1612313

Drexel University School of Education. (n.d.). *How to use technology in the classroom: Benefits and effects.* Drexel University Press.

Elo, S., Kääriäinen, M., Kanste, O., Pölkki, T., Utriainen, K., & Kyngäs, H. (2014). Qualitative content analysis: A focus on trustworthiness. *SAGE open*, 4(1), 2158244014522633. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014522633

Gumede, L., & Badriparsad, N. (2022). Online teaching and learning through the students' eyes– Uncertainty through the COVID-19 lockdown: A qualitative case study in Gauteng province, South Africa. *Radiography, 28*(1), 193-198. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.radi.2021.10.018

Hassem, T., de Andrade, V., Laher, S., Bemath, N. N., & Bain, K. (2024). Postgraduate psychology students' mental health and coping during COVID-19: Lessons learnt. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa, 12*(1), 47–67. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1449-0090

Huang, J., & Russell, S. (2006). The digital divide and academic achievement. *The Electronic Library, 24*(2), 160–173. https://doi.org/10.1108/02640470610660350

Jimola, F. E., & Ofodu, G. O. (2021). Sustaining learning during COVID-19 seismic shift: The need to develop flexible pedagogy. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Education Research, 3*(1), 14-26. https://doi.org/10.51986/ijer-2021.vol3.01.02

Kater, S., Soza, R., & Young, L. (2016). E-learning, the digital divide, and student success at community colleges. *EDUCAUSE Review, 51*(5), 58-59.

Kentnor, H. E. (2015). Distance education and the evolution of online learning in the United States. *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue, 17*(1&2), 21-34.

Khalid, M. S., & Pedersen, M. J. L. (2016). Digital exclusion in higher education contexts: A systematic literature review. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 228*, 614-621.

Lim, L., Baez, J. C., Pataky, M. G., Wilder, E., & van Sittert, H. W. (2022). School social workers in the milieu: Ubuntu as a social justice imperative. *International Journal of School Social Work, 6*(2), 2. https://doi.org/10.4148/2161-4148.1074

Mishra, L., Gupta, T., & Shree, A. (2020). Online teaching-learning in higher education during the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Educational Research Open, 1*, 100012. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2020.100012

Mokuku, T. (2016). The connotations of *botho* philosophy and its potential contribution towards environmental conservation: The case of the Tlokoeng community in Lesotho. *Environmental Education Research, 23*(9), 1230–1248. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2016.1160274

Naidoo, S., & Raju, J. (2012). Impact of the digital divide on information literacy training in a higher education context. *South African Journal of Libraries and Information Science, 78*(1), 34–44. https://doi.org/10.7553/78-1-46

Ndwambi, M., Hlabane, S., Motlhabane, D., & Malgas, A. (2022). Incorporating Ubuntu principles in a tutor training programme to promote academic success and wellbeing. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South*, *6*(1), 138-147. https://doi.org/10.36615/sotls.v6i1.206

Ngubane, N., & Makua, M. (2021). Ubuntu pedagogy: Transforming educational practices in South Africa through an African philosophy: From theory to practice. *Inkanyiso: Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 13*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.4102/ink.v13i1.9

Ngunjiri, F. W. (2016). "I am because we are": Exploring women's leadership under the ubuntu worldview. *Advances in Developing Human Resources, 18*(2), 223–242. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1523422316641416

Omodan, B. I. (2020). Managing the psycho-social vacuum of COVID-19 among rural learners through Ubuntu. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, *10*(6), 266-278. https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2020-0125

Omodan, B. I., & Ige, O. A. (2021). Sustaining collaborative learning among university students in the wake of COVID-19: The perspective of an online community project. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research, 20*(1), 356–371. https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.20.1.20

Provenzano, N. (2023). Lifting student engagement through smart tech use. *Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 80*(09), 1-10.

Republic of South Africa. (1996). *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa.* Government Gazette, 378(17678). www.gov.za/sites/default/files/images/a108-96.pdf

Sadiku, M. N., Adebo, P. O., & Musa, S. M. (2018). Online teaching and learning. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Computer Science and Software Engineering, 8*(2), 73–75. http://dx.doi.org/10.23956/ijarcsse.v8i2.549

Sadiku, M. N., Adebo, P. O., & Musa, S. M. (2018). Online teaching and learning. *International Journals of Advanced Research in Computer Science and Software Engineering*, 8(2), 73-75.

Simpson, M., & Anderson, B. (2012). History and heritage in open, flexible and distance education. *Journal of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning, 16(*2), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.61468/jofdl.v16i2.56

Skhephe, M. (2022). The virtual classroom: Challenges of COVID-19 pandemic in accounting subject classrooms in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. *African Perspectives of Research in Teaching and Learning, 6*(2), 112–124.

Strom, A. (2021). *The negative effects of technology for students and educators* [Master's Theses & Capstone Projects, Northwestern College].

Tamm, S. (2023). 10 biggest disadvantages of e-learning. https://e-student.org/disadvantages-of-e-learning/

Van den Berg, G., & Mudau, K. P. (2021). Postgraduate students' views on the use of WhatsApp groups as an online communication tool to support teaching and learning during COVID-19. *Perspectives in Education, 40(*1), 112-128. https://doi.org/10.38140/pie.v40i1.5335

Van der Walt, J. H., & Oosthuizen, I. J. (2021). Ubuntu in South Africa: Hopes and disappointments: A pedagogical perspective. *Perspectives in Education, 39(*4), 89-103. https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v39.i4.7

Yuhanna, I., Alexander, A., & Kachik, A. (2020). Advantages and disadvantages of online learning. *Journal Educational Verkenning, 1*(2), 13-19. https://doi.org/10.48173/jev.v1i2.54