

**Blended Learning and the Global South. Virtual Exchanges  
in Higher Education**

edited by Giovanna Carloni, Christopher Fotheringham,  
Anita Virga, Brian Zuccala

## Foreword

Ruksana Osman

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

It is an honour to be writing this foreword to *Blended Learning and the Global South: Virtual Exchanges in Higher Education*. The seeds for this edited volume were sown back in March 2019, 12 months to the day before the world officially marked the onset of a global pandemic caused by the novel Coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, now known as COVID-19.

On the 25 March 2019, the Blended Symposium on blended learning in the field of languages, literature, and media was held at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. The symposium was also the inaugural event of an exciting, blended learning platform called BLOSA (Blended and Online South Africa), a South African platform for blended learning. The objective of the conference was to explore the theory and application of hybrid and blended learning for languages, literature, and media pedagogy in the context of developing economies. Little did we know that, a year after the symposium, much of our academic and scholarly exchanges and our teaching would be virtual. Owing to social distancing needs, the COVID-19 outbreak forced all levels of formal education to make use of digital learning and teaching methods, making this edited volume on virtual exchanges most timely.

This book also makes its appearance at a point in global history when the COVID-19 pandemic is reshaping all dimensions of life as we know it, including higher education. Its impact is dictating how we interact with others, transforming how we socialise and care about one another, restructuring business and the economy, and altering how we think about sustaining our world. The pandemic has forced

the global academy to question what it means to be a university, to reconsider its role in society and its relationship with other social actors. Concomitantly, it has provided the academy with a moment to pause, to reflect, and to propose new knowledge architectures that enable its reconfiguration in ways that advance flexible futures for all. The traditional role of higher education institutions centres on the creation of new knowledge, the development of high-level and scarce skills, and the advancement of the public good. Against the backdrop of a rapidly changing technological landscape and in a world where new challenges, such as the Coronavirus, emerge daily, the need for change is leading us into uncharted waters. The publication of this volume on virtual exchanges in higher education from the global south, at this time of pandemic, provides us with an opportunity to revitalise our way of thinking about teaching and learning in higher education and to enable the knowledge project of the academy to prosper post COVID-19.

In addition, COVID-19 has paved the way for universities from the global south to lead from the front on many issues, including teaching and learning in local contexts, while being globally anchored. The book project has enabled a multiplicity of voices, methods and framings to come to the fore, forging an inclusive community of scholars from across the world who write compellingly about virtual exchanges in higher education.

*Blended Learning and the Global South* brings together a thought-provoking collection of chapters focused on new efforts and experiences in digital learning and the opportunities these have provided for advancing the learning experiences of teachers and students in Education and Higher Education Collectively the chapters provide insights on empirical and theoretical explorations of the widespread use of digital learning, and how we are deriving new insights into the theory and practice of formal learning. The chapters explore the advances in digital modes of learning and teaching alongside the conceptual and methodical developments in a number of specific areas such as the struggles associated with the uptake of blended and online learning (1), how such learning works with knowledge dissemination (2), the use of digital portfolios for formative assessment(3), testing the effectiveness of an online platform for language learning (4), the use of the digital story as an instructional tool in a French foreign language course (5), a peer-centred cycle for teaching in an English literature class (6), using eTandem to promote student-centred language learning in a two-country case study (7), the effectiveness of teleconferencing and telecollaboration for foreign language teaching and learning (8), questioning what really works in telecollaborative pedagogy(9), a transnational model looking at virtual exchanges to advance gender equality and global citizenship (10), and finally a case study of digital gaming in a foreign language courses (11).

These thought-provoking explorations address many questions, among them the following:

- Can online learning be better than site-based co-located learning? If so, what are the conditions for success?
- What are the inequalities that characterise the digital sphere and digital learning?
- What tools and methods are most appropriate for digital language learning?
- How can blended pedagogies be drawn on for the acquisition of high-level foreign language literacy?
- What is lost (and gained) when peer learning and telecollaborative knowledge building go fully online?
- What is gained (or lost) when classrooms are flipped and what do we need to know?
- How are the transformative effects of the digital realised in foreign language courses?

The contributing authors write from multiple national contexts and geographies, covering several knowledge fields and subjects, and their biographies and those of the editors lend the book a cosmopolitan flavour. This cosmopolitanism draws attention to the tensions and possibilities associated with teaching and learning in a complex global context. The chapters make explicit the relationship between learning and teaching and the intervening or enabling ever-present role of the digital. Collectively, the portrayal of digital learning and teaching in different formats combines the realms of ideas and inspiration with pedagogic action, foregrounding the ground-breaking intent of the book to imagine and shape alternative futures for education and teaching and learning in the global south.

Moving across and between South Africa, Brazil, Mexico and Algeria and then Italy, Spain, Australia, and the USA, the chapters reflect the many ways in which the global south encounters the world. They breathe new life into ways of being and seeing from the global south, giving shape and form to ideas about learning, e-collaboration and peer learning.

The contributions drawn from different geographies clearly show that these geographies are connected and coupled in so many ways and that collaboration – tele or in person – is the focus and centre of the knowledge project of learning to teach and teaching to learn. Each of the chapters reveals the authors' formidable power as teachers and their deep commitment to teaching and student learning. The reader is left with a clear sense that the digital future of learning and teaching advanced here, while focussing on on-line approaches and methodologies, represents a future of being human, that the future of teaching and learning is human and that virtual exchanges in higher education will always be, in the first instance, human. As

such educational relationships are central to the book's story and provide insights into the nature of education and its complex trajectory in fraught and complex times.

Although universities will need more time to explore the implications of virtual exchanges, while remaining cognisant of the limits and potential of screen-based reasoning and thoughtfulness, this book has developed a new educative focus which fundamentally reshapes the relationship between teacher, student and content, and the academy and society more broadly.

The book demonstrates that groups of researchers exchanging their research, integrating their experiences, and imagining different and flexible futures could be the basis for truly innovative thinking when sparked by creative experimentation. It is my hope that the compelling accounts in each of the chapters will draw readers into the world of teaching and learning in the global south.

## **Bibliography**

- Osman, R. (2020). "Higher Education Reconsidered: Beyond the Pandemic and Possibilities for New Knowledge Architectures". *Wits Journal of Clinical Medicine*, 2(3) 223-6.