

A New Approach to Social Sciences, Humanities in a Time of Crisis⁺

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Can use the COVID-19 time to slow down, take stock and develop fresh approaches for the social sciences and humanities?

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In the last month, the uncertainty and disruption that has impacted on the globe has been felt hard in academia, and the social sciences and humanities are no exception. Our job is to analyse and make sense of the world, but most of us do so within the confines of university environments. Our lives are shaped by calendars of teaching, conferences and fieldwork – all of which are now uncertain.

In this uncertainty the need for social sciences and humanities has never been more clear. COVID-19 poses serious questions to our societies that we need to address with the same urgency that our colleagues in the medical sciences are applying to care for the sick. At the heart of our disciplines is the basic question: how do we respond to living in a changed world?

Here, we outline three broad approaches that might help academics in diverse contexts from Cape Town to Caracas, Singapore to Scotland, to re-think and re-imagine the future. We suggest that we use the COVID-19 time to slow down, take stock and develop fresh approaches for the social sciences and humanities.

Compassion as an underlying principle

Many social sciences are underpinned by the notion of ‘do no harm’. At this moment, doing no harm may not be quite enough. Compassion requires more: rather than neutrality or attempts at objectivity, it asks for care, for feeling with (com-*passion*), for empathy. This pertains to colleagues, institutions and, above all, to our students.

Amidst the scrabbling of universities across the world to adjust their pedagogy, examples are emerging of compassionate universities that defy the managerial trends of the past two decades.

In South Africa, North-West University’s faculty of social sciences is allowing students to hand write assignments and submit via photographs if they do not have sufficient data to access the online platform. The University of Cape Town used its

⁺ Mirror posted from *University World News*,

<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200505063831104>

transport fleet to get its students safely home all over the country before the lockdown began.

In the United States, students in many universities now have the option of pass/fail grades to relieve student stress, and for many tenure clocks have been extended by one year.

As scholars, teachers and managers, the humanity of staff and students is now at the forefront of our attention, instead of grades, fees and key performance indicators. We are realising that we are also human and have needs and responsibilities beyond producing peer-reviewed articles.

Post-COVID, this realisation must be treasured and made central in all that we do. Many academics are already exploring ways to put care at the centre of emerging forms of adjusted and online education. This must be supported.

Being inside the body and experience of COVID-19

Whether pacing the apartment for exercise, worrying about whether our cough is a symptom of COVID-19 or doing daily checks of mortality rates, we are all being reminded of our bodies. This is something of a reality check for many scholars, for whom the mind's proclivities are usually the driving force.

With that comes concern and growing awareness of how the virus affects ourself and the people we love differently depending on age, pre-existing medical conditions and where we live.

We could learn from feminist scholars such as Jacqui True, who has emphasised the need to start with the “personal to understand structures and the potential for change”. We are all grappling with what COVID-19 restrictions mean for us personally, our families, our academic institutions and our society.

There are immediate professional questions: How do we conduct our basic academic functions – research, teaching and academic exchange – during a COVID-19 era of social distancing and when many need to balance care at home with professional duties? And what are the benefits, risks and costs of switching to an online world, igniting new projects, suspending others?

If we and our students are sufficiently privileged to be able to conduct our classes online, we need to think carefully about how to protect the virtual classroom. Zoom bombing, privacy concerns and distraction are only the tip of the proverbial (if melting) iceberg that we must carefully navigate.

Even in wealthy countries the digital divide is very real and previous crazes for massive open online courses (MOOCs) quickly passed for reasons that remain relevant today. In countries and contexts where connectivity cannot be taken for granted, online learning runs the risk of exacerbating, rather than ameliorating, existing inequalities and social tensions.

Creating new visions for our communities

Lockdown is being experienced from behind windows in as many different ways as there are homes around the world. It is critical that, while we pack our days with Zoom meetings and tweet our way through virtual conferences, we also look outside and build visions for our communities.

Outside we will find ample examples of the kindness of humanity and the profound care that strangers are showing to one another in conditions of suspended normality.

Affinity communities are reaching across now-closed borders to transfer money, resources and knowledge to support everything from home schooling to business rescues.

Yes, the inherited unequal and often violent systems that have shaped the world to date continue to wound us. Now, more than ever, we confront the importance of embodied, grounded community. We are all part of localised supply chains – not only of food and toilet paper, but of knowledge, skill and insight. Where we put our ‘supplies’ when the lockdowns lift will shape the world to come for many years.

We should be helping create new visions for our communities, nations and the world, post COVID-19. This involves real-time analysis of the likely long-term impact of emergency powers being rapidly passed, of technologically enabled surveillance and of the psychological and emotional consequences of national shutdowns.

It also means helping officials and policy-makers think through difficult decisions, such as: what is the most equitable way to design new economic bailout programmes and should universal standards be developed to ensure the populations of poor countries are not penalised for simple citizenship?

There is a great deal social scientists and humanists can do.

We can amplify the voices of those who propose working together, rather than those who would have us stay apart. We can petition for equitable relief within economic regions and we can participate in the reimagining of everything from the moral economy to food systems and social solidarity.

If we accept that the world will have changed after COVID, we have an urgent responsibility to lay proposals on the table for what it is to become.

Think differently

COVID-19 will pass at some point – although this does seem far away right now. We should be using this time to think differently. We should be driven by both what we can do practically for the people we know, and what we can imagine, based on our wide exposure to global best practice.

As we take time to experience this moment, looking out and imagining beyond the window of the current narrow frame, we may create and offer new visions for our students, institutions and society which will guide us in the times to come.

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