

English Studies, Before, In, and Beyond the Time of Covid-19 - Elephant, Chameleon, and Lizard

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Focusing on English Studies in South Africa, this paper considers adaptations to university teaching in a time of Covid-19 and to the potential and limitations of such adaptations, post-Covid-19. The argument is divided into sections, 'English Studies, Yesterday and Today' and 'English Studies Today and Tomorrow', together with a Coda, 'English, the Language of the Modern World'. An African folktale, 'Elephant, Chameleon and Lizard' offers a metaphor of Before, In, and Beyond Covid-19.

Key words: English Studies; Covid-19; teaching; contact; distance

The Covid-19 'pandemic' of 2020 and 2021 disrupted the contact method of teaching at residential universities. Teaching by the Zoom or Teams platform has enforced variations of the distance mode. In consequence, lecturers and students have had to adapt to the demands of digital communication. As a lecturer put it to me:

'I often feel I'm talking into a void. Students' mics remain muted, cameras are turned off. Few of us have the resources, technical and financial, or the knowledge to be digitally savvy. And then we are subjected to frequent power disruptions by the national electricity supply commission (Eskom).'

Attempts to return in 2022 to pre-Covid times, nonetheless, have not been seamless, some lecturers and students preferring off-campus convenience.

Focusing on English Studies in South Africa, this paper considers adaptations to university teaching in a time of Covid-19 and to the potential and limitations of such adaptations, post-Covid-19. The argument is divided into sections, 'English Studies, Yesterday and Today' and 'English Studies, Today and Tomorrow', together with a Coda, 'English, the Language of the Modern World'. An African folktale, 'Elephant, Chameleon and Lizard', offers a metaphor of Before, In, and Beyond Covid-19.

The discipline of English Studies at most universities in South Africa, we should clarify at the outset, could be more accurately designated as Literary Studies. Grammar or syntax, or even the rhetoric of expression does not feature as a distinct component of the syllabus, whether in the 3-year undergraduate degree or in the 1-year, single-subject Honours degree. The primacy that is granted to the literary text probably owes something – however amorphous – to the Leavisian dictum that the English language attains its level of ‘finest discrimination’ in the language of great literary works. There are also at South African universities departments of Afrikaans, where literature in Afrikaans is predominant, and there are departments of African Languages and Literature, which address both the grammar of a specific African language (for example, isiZulu or isiXhosa) and accompanying literary texts. Having said this, let me refer simply to the study of literature in departments of English.

Notwithstanding a nod to ‘cultural studies’ texts (the inclusion perhaps of a rom-com novella), the discipline of English Studies has not changed fundamentally since the late 1970s when I entered university teaching. The syllabus comprised and continues to comprise a list mainly of novels: back then, a selection of (British) English great works; now, a mix of British (English) and African great works: from Conrad to Achebe, as it were. Despite modifications of theory – universal humanism to British neo-Marxism and/or French anti-humanism – the purpose of the discipline continues to evade unambiguous articulation. We assume that we teach students to read, analyse, and interpret complex texts, the procedure of which cultivates the imagination and intellect as key components of an enlightened citizenry. The method of achieving such a purpose at residential universities has been face-to-face contact. Here, the coronavirus has disturbed the picture. How can we respond to the shift from contact to distance as an opportunity to rethink and reframe English Studies both in and beyond the time of Covid-19?

Certainly, the spread of the virus caught everyone off guard; responses and actions have been of necessity piecemeal and desperate. When residential universities switched from face-to-face to online, what was envisaged probably was a stopgap measure to ‘save’ the 2020 academic year, then the 2021 year, and with some muddle now the 2022 academic year. When infection rates subsided, or when the then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared that Covid had ended – he needed a diversion from attacks on his partying during the pandemic – it was assumed that residential universities would return to core business; that online developments would continue in the subsidiary role of on-campus reinforcement of the core, the core being face-to-face instruction. Or did residential universities plan to replicate the distance-learning mode of Unisa (University of South Africa)? Probably not, for

numerous reasons of plant, capital, logistics, and mission. Unisa does not have to maintain an infrastructure of lecture venues, student residences, sports fields, or the organisation and demands of students on campus.

This is not to deny that there are issues in South Africa which are common to both Unisa and residential universities: issues linked to finances and failure rates and manifest in student disruptions to the start of each academic year. The issues feed public opinion as to whether taxpayers' money is being best spent on too many university students. In a society of average or weak economy, the argument goes, is vocational training not a more prudent investment than university education? Such issues have strategic and planning repercussions for government, society, and university leadership. Too little thought has been given to the changing student demographics of a post-apartheid society or, more broadly, to the relationship between mass education and what was conceived originally as an elite institution, that is, the university.

I am reminded of an African folk tale. Elephant is steadfast and has a long memory of stored experience. But steadfastness can have its limitations, a lack of nimbleness. Elephant needs its friends, Chameleon and Lizard, the former able to adapt its colours to immediate circumstances; the latter, swift-footed, and quickly able to communicate new messages to new communities. If the folktale has relevance to the national issue, it also has relevance to my immediate purpose, which is not to pursue the national issue but to focus on the role of English Studies.

I draw on my initial experience as a lecturer at Unisa (1979-1983) and my subsequent experience as Head of English and, later, Dean of Humanities at the then University of Natal, currently the University of KwaZulu-Natal. While my experience lends point to this paper, my observations are meant to apply generally to most English departments at South African universities. Like Elephant, English Studies – even before Covid-19 – could have benefited from the adaptability and nimbleness of both Chameleon and Lizard. Hence, the subsections of my argument: 'English Studies, Yesterday and Today' and 'English Studies Today and Tomorrow'.

English Studies, Yesterday and Today

The English Studies syllabus which, in 1979, I encountered at Unisa was not substantially different from the syllabus that, in 1984, I encountered at Natal. In an English major (years one, two, and three) in either a BA or a BSocSc degree, first-year students were (are?) introduced to – or 'sensitised' by exposure to – selected 'great' novels: great according to

Matthew Arnold's 19th-century 'touchstones' of excellence and endorsed by F. R. Leavis's Great Tradition of the 1920s. Students in the first year encountered a Victorian novel (say, Dickens's *Hard Times*), an early 20th-century English (British) novel (Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*) and an early 20th-century North American novel (Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*). In the application of the prac. crit. method (close reading of the text in isolation of surrounding context) students encountered 30 poems (from the Elizabethan sonnet, through Blake's Romantic lyrics, to 'easier' examples of Eliot or Yeats). A Shakespeare tragedy (*Macbeth*, *Othello*, or *King Lear*) was complemented by a Shakespeare comedy (say, *Much Ado about Nothing* or *Twelfth Night*).

The second and third year – again, to generalise – turned first to the Victorian period and then, in third year, to the study of 20th-century moderns (Yeats or Eliot in poetry; Conrad or Virginia Woolf in fiction). What such periodisation had to do with the South African society of the students' experience did not enter the 'universal humanist' assumption that great works spoke to all mankind (to use the terminology of the time). Literature from South Africa and the rest of Africa hardly featured. Challenges in the 1970s and 1980s to universal humanism (locally, by Black Consciousness; in the West by neo-Marxism and/or French-derived theories of deconstruction) put pressure on English Studies to broaden the canvas, at least a little. When I arrived at Natal as Professor of English, for example, J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* had a slot on the syllabus and, as a gesture to me – my book on Douglas Livingstone had recently been published – I was given Livingstone's *Selected Poems* to teach to 1st-year students. At the same time, a debate in the corridor considered whether an Achebe 'humanist-African' novel or an Ngugi 'Marxist-African' novel should be included as a token work by a black writer. Text selection, then as now, bore the mark of this or that lecturer's preference.

Who were the students who were expected to read thousands of pages of quite intricate prose (*Sons and Lovers* alone exceeds 500 pages)? In 1984 the students were white, first-language speakers of English from middle-class homes, most of whom had attended what would come to be called Model C (white suburban) schools. Who were the lecturers? White English-speakers whose own English Studies degree had introduced them to the assumptions and text selection that I have sketched above.

The scene, in retrospect, was somewhat bizarre. Very few students read the prescribed books. Nevertheless, most had a reasonable school foundation together with English home-language facility, both of which enabled most to extract a reply to assignments from the available 'Idiot's Guides'. A problem began to present itself when local texts entered the

booklist. No *Cole's Notes* or *Maskew Miller College of Careers*, back then, on Coetzee or the New Black Poets of the 1970s. That the texts remained largely unread, however, did not seem to bother lecturers, unduly. Essays did not have to be too specific in responding to the set topic; a fluent commentary on good human values clinched a pass.

Remarks in the margin of essays offered admonition such as, 'weak sentence structure'; 'faulty concord'; or, from the rules of grammar to modes of address: 'Swift is being satirical here'; 'Really! Note Shakespeare's deliberate use of the pun'. Students were assumed to 'know' their grammar while entering by a kind of osmosis into the spirit of different ages. A certain arrogance characterised English Studies in South Africa: 'Don't say, "Ja" in reply to my question!' An assumption, never articulated, was that we were exposing unformed, untutored students to sophisticated interchange. Most interchange – witty, ironical – occurred not between lecturer and student, however, but between lecturer and lecturer at tea break in the staff room. Most conversations were not transferred to published accounts. If many lecturers back then did not have a doctoral degree, very few had a record of publication. 'We are not US-type snake-oil salesmen who must publish or perish,' proclaimed the professor of English whose 30-year tenure had preceded my appointment.

If much has changed since yesterday, certain issues, as I have suggested, have not changed to any effect. Most Humanities students at universities in South Africa are now black African, many from under-resourced rural or township schools. The staff demographic at universities is changing from white to black. More books by African writers feature on the booklist. An unspoken assumption of 'greatness', nonetheless, continues to define syllabus content. Just as novels dominated text selection yesterday, the novel continues, today, to dominate text selection. The students, back then, were expected to respond to the text within the universal humanist paradigm; students today are expected to be ideologically suspicious 'critique-ers' of texts. Back then Othello, beneath his black skin, was 'one of us'; now, Othello – as Derrida or Foucault might have put it – is an 'Other' who is despised by a hypocritical Venetian Christian society. Paradoxically, a suspicious reading (as in anti-humanist or postcolonial deconstruction) is more challenging to the student than an earlier willingness to valorise the text. The Shakespeare of the school classroom, after all, continues to be about good and evil, or appearance and reality, not about whether Shakespeare was an apologist for Tudor monarchy!

What has changed little is that most students still do not read the texts. As of yesterday, they seek reference to questions via the latest *Idiot's Guides* or now in online searches. Having less facility in English than yesterday's home-language speakers, most

students today encounter an alien experience, especially when chastised for faulty expression, or when accused of plagiarism. Often less cheating more a desperate attempt to acquire academic discourse, plagiarism may be a case less for the university proctor more for an in-depth study of the difficulties of academic vocabulary and syntax as components of interpretation and commentary. That is, interpretation of and commentary on any text, not just on a great literary work. As Terry Eagleton points out, even the nursery rhyme, 'Three Blind Mice', has complexities in its 'baffling aporias and ambiguities' (2007, 162).

Language acquisition and development should be nurtured throughout the school years. Certainly, English is not nurtured in the school years of many students. One must bear in mind, also, that conversational competence is not the same as academic-language competence while, a further hurdle, we have discipline-specific vocabularies that are integral to any higher-level argument in any specific field of study. As a student in a pre-computer age, I developed my own academic discourse by summarising the articles of relevant critics. What I was practising, unconsciously, was what Rebecca Howard calls 'patchwriting': a 'non-transgressive form of text appropriation', in which one copies from a source-text, deletes some words, alters grammatical structures, and 'plugs in one-for-one synonym substitutes' (1992, 223).¹

If there is no quick fix to language deprivation, how might English Studies seek to accomplish tomorrow what it did not accomplish yesterday, or does not accomplish today? That is, the inclusion as integral to the teaching and learning experience of a systematic approach to the enhancement of academic expression together with a systematic approach to the interpretation of the text. How, further and in clear steps, might we demonstrate to students how interpretation unfolds in the structure of an academic essay, the essay retaining its authority as the vehicle of examination assessment?

Here I turn from the somewhat *laissez-faire* approach of yesterday to a more structured approach: an approach demanded by the distance mode.

English Today and Tomorrow

To introduce teaching skills to English Studies we must reflect, as a first step, on whether there is sufficient consonance between the content of the syllabus and the skills-level of the students in the classroom. As I have said, English text selection, whether of yesterday or today, reflects the preferences of staff before it considers the capabilities of those to whom the texts are to be taught.

Such an issue arose in a conference discussion I had in the early 2000s with a French academic. It was recognised, said the French academic, who taught in an English Department, that students were as likely to arrive from the immigrant banlieue as from the avenues of Paris. Both sets of students, nonetheless, had something in common: despite different levels of English competence, both found attraction in the short-span texts of digital media. Rather than fighting a rear-guard action, the English Department scrapped the novel and focused prescribed reading on shorter forms of texts, whether short stories, comics, newspaper opinion and commentary, or digital material that can now be downloaded to cell phones.

In the light of this, I introduced my class of third-year students to a collection in translation of Franz Kafka's short stories. A text in translation in English Studies, several colleagues back then might have exclaimed. While I have limited possibility of achieving English 'native' fluency and facility among students who are not native speakers of English, I can teach the mechanics of how to approach, organise, and interpret a literary text, whatever the original language of the text. To be somewhat mischievous, we would not question the relevance of The Bible, a text in translation, to the purpose of Religious Studies, a discipline that retains exegesis as key to its teaching!

The issue of language competence notwithstanding, how might Kafka be appropriate to an insistence in South Africa to 'decolonise' the curriculum: to replace works by dead (or living) white men with works by black African writers and oral spokespersons, both men and women? Despite the injunction to decolonise, the Kafka stories elicited a favourable response from the students. The content was arresting, it was said, because it is painfully transferable in the so-called new South Africa to the experience of many students who have been bullied by an uncaring bureaucracy. (A visit to Home Affairs, said one student, is worse than a visit to Hell!) It was the experience of uncaring bureaucracy which Kafka, a Jewish lawyer in the Austro-Hungarian Empire of the early 20th century, anticipated would be characteristic of modern life.

The content – the small person entrapped in the faceless machinations of state power – is conveyed in a style, well captured in translation, that seems simple, but is deceptively simple. From such a 'simple' starting point, one can frame a series of questions that move from surface (describe the situation) to depth (what is the story about?), to effect (how or why do you respond the way you do to the story?). And to an even more advanced reading: how does the arrangement of events serve to capture your emotional and intellectual participation?

Such questions can be organised in a brief, but pointed, worksheet: a worksheet which, without the author of the worksheet requiring high levels of technical skill and knowledge, can be uploaded to an online platform, or even transferred to 'WhatsApp' accessibility.²

from: Kafka's 'Before the Law'

Before the Law stands a doorkeeper. To the doorkeeper there comes a Man from the country and prays for admittance to the Law. But the doorkeeper says he cannot grant admittance at the moment.

...

Since the gate stands open, as usual, the doorkeeper steps to one side. [But] 'Just try to go in despite my veto.'

...

The doorkeeper gives him a stool and lets him sit down on one side of the door. There he sits for days and years.

...

'Everyone strives to reach the Law,' says the Man, 'so how does it happen that for all these many years no one but myself has ever begged for admittance?'

[The doorkeeper roars in his ear.] 'No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it.'

(Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir)

Exercise 1

**Read the story slowly, carefully.*

**Find a word, or a group of words, or an idea that jumps out at you.*

**Think about your own thoughts. Are they thoughts that you could share with others? What might be the response of others to your thoughts?*

**Write down your response to the choice of word, group of words, or idea. [10 lines]*

Exercise 2

This is an extract from a student's essay on Kafka:

[Extract quoted]

- *Cross through portions that are irrelevant or repetitious.*
- *Cross through words that add nothing to the meaning (words that are redundant).*
- *The extract is 20 lines long. Summarise the extract in 10 lines.*

More Advanced

- *Read the Kafka story.*
- *A paragraph usually makes one key point. The opening (topic) sentence often signals the point of the paragraph.*
- *Write down the point of paragraph 1.*
- *Do the same for paragraph 2.*
- *To bind the argument, a writer needs to make a connection between paragraph 1 and paragraph 2.*
- *We call the opening sentence of paragraph 2 a transitional sentence. Sometimes the sentence will include a connecting word or phrase such as, 'however', or 'on the other hand'. Keeping this in mind, let us look at each of the paragraphs in the short story.*

What I have described here is what, at Unisa and in hardcopy, constituted the distance teaching and learning method. For a little 'personalisation' and interpretative expansion, the author of the worksheet can add her/his guiding voice via an inbuilt Recorder. You can avoid the other stuff so beloved of techies, such as pics, talking heads, or dancing bozos, none of which will add much to the fundamental learning experience. Follow up later with a similarly concise Note in which you have considered an answer to your own questions.

Beneath the interpretation of and commentary on the text reside the more foundational skills to which I have alluded: the conventions of academic writing, communication, and the structure of an academic essay. Here is a 'taster' of the integration of skills in the discussion of the literary text:

Read the following extract from the critical article on the short story that you are studying.

**Identify the main point of each paragraph. Note the progression of paragraph 1 to paragraph 2. Why has the writer used the word, 'however', in the first sentence of paragraph 2?*

**'Kafka plays upon an ironical discrepancy between the normal (the everyday) and the absurd.'*

**Look up the meaning of the words ironical, discrepancy, and absurd.*

**See whether in 5 lines you can explain the meaning of the above sentence in relation to your reading of the story.*

**Why does the writer of the article say that in the above sentence we encounter the ‘crux of Kafka’s purpose as a storyteller’?*

**Let us turn to our response (to our interpretation). At school you might have been told that an essay has a beginning, middle, and an end. Well, in an academic essay we often try to summarise the argument in the opening paragraph. We then elaborate on, or explore, the statement of the opening paragraph.*

**The purpose is not just to praise the story or to condemn the story. Rather, we might – in paragraph 2 – refer to what we think are the limitations of the story. We might, in paragraph 3, go on to refer to what we think are the strengths.*

**We cannot, however, hover between limitations and strengths. In the final paragraph, you should try to justify your opinion of the story in relation to what you said in paragraph 2 and paragraph 3.*

Here I have given you a somewhat mechanical response to the art of interpretation and structure. But keep this simple guide in mind in a reply to a question on a literary text. I shall elaborate on my approach in my accompanying voice commentary. [Or, if face-to-face, in an on-campus workshop session.]

The idea is to apply the skills component to the discussion of the text. Instead of the usual practice in English Studies of spending the full allocation of lectures on dissemination (that is, on lectures in which you tell students about Kafka’s stories), you might devote 3 of the 6 lectures to a workshop format, in which the story is dissected for interpretation, in which you explicitly take students through the stages of the interpretative act and how the interpretation can unfold in a coherent essay structure.

Such a practice is equally applicable to face-to-face or distance delivery. In face-to-face, the workshop format could be described as a tutorial: a tutorial offered by permanent members of staff and focused on specific skills. Such a practice should have greater value to students than the somewhat haphazard nature of tutorials delivered by student buddies, the practice at many universities. The greater the constraints imposed by the distance mode, the greater the need for efficient planning.

Despite my reference to the ‘relevance’ of Kafka’s stories in relation to the students’ experience, a skills-based approach, whether practical or innovative, may not satisfy demands to decolonise the curriculum, to return to an earlier point. Not, at any rate, as espoused in the

two 'theme' issues of the journal *Alternation* (edited by Maart 2020) and entitled 'Decoloniality and Decolonial Education: South Africa and the World'. The contributors grant little attention to skills acquisition and a great deal of attention to ideological pronouncement. We are told that there are more intuitive, life-experiential ways of *knowing* than the rational, analytical 'Western' way; we are not given illustration, however, of how intuitive knowing can lead to higher-level thought. Let me turn, in any case and in the spirit of decoloniality, from skills acquisition to ideology critique. Kafka's story 'Jackals and Arabs' provides the kind of meat upon which decoloniality likes to grind its teeth. To summarise:

In a North African country, a 'Man from the North' is approached by a pack of Jackals. The leader of the Jackals gives the Man a pair of rusty scissors and implores him to slit the throats of the nearby Arab oppressors. At that moment, the Arab caravan-leader arrives. Laughing loudly, he tosses the carcass of a camel on the ground. The Jackals forget their solicitations to the Man from the North and, ignoring the Arab leader's whip on their backs, rush to gorge on the carcass of the camel.

They could not resist it; once more the leader lifted his whip but I [the Man from the North] stayed his arm.

'You are right, sir,' said he [the Arab caravan-leader], 'we'll leave them to their business; besides it's time to break camp. Well, you've seen them. Marvellous creatures, aren't they? And how they hate us!'

(Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir)

As the students have been given basic biographical facts on Kafka, the presumption will be that the Man from the North is European Man, perhaps French Man, if told that France colonised certain North African countries. Why Arabs? Well, Arabs (slave traders, merchants) invaded North Africa as early as the 7th century. To complicate matters, some were Muslim refugees fleeing persecution in the Arab Peninsula. What of the indigenous inhabitants: the Amazigh or Berbers [Berbers = Barbary = Barbarous]? If the Arabs by now are settler colonists, are the Jackals the indigenous Berbers? Uncomfortable 'colonial' parallels? The Man from the North = Western coloniser. Arabs = settlers. Jackals = native Africans. Or a little modification of identifications. Jackals = settlers, who need to be 'levelled down'. What about parallels with the wider world? The Man from the North could

be US Man or Western Man. (The West, if not its accoutrements, continues to raise the hackles of the Third World.) Or Russian Man, or is Russia of the South? (Post-Soviet Russia continues to enjoy liberation nostalgia in the Third World.) From the perspective of the former Eastern Europe including Ukraine, however, Russian Man is a ruthless imperialist, a Man of Empire. But are we not falling into the trap of ‘presentism’: that is, twisting history to suit our present-day perceptions? Kafka had little to do with French colonisation in North Africa. Instead, he had to contend with own colonisation. As a Jewish person, a minority, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he knew the indignity of being treated as an ‘Other’.

Let us pause. Kafka does not assign identities to the actors in his story. Is the only possible response to the story that of identity politics? Rather, let us lower, but not extinguish entirely, the heat of the discussion. Let us return to literature. What kind of story is ‘Jackals and Arabs’? An allegory? An allegory is a specific story that can reveal hidden meanings: that is, more than a single meaning. Could ‘Jackals and Arabs’ be an allegory about Self and Other in the Austro-Hungarian Empire of Kafka’s time? As a member of a despised minority, Kafka could hardly speak too openly about contentious issues, ‘Jackal and Arabs’ in its original German having been first published in 1917 in the ‘minority’ monthly, *Der Jude*. (So, without avoiding controversy, I endeavour to broaden the understanding of literary forms.) Or is the story a parable: a story that can be used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson? What is the ‘meaning’ of Kafka’s story, what is its ‘lesson’? Forms of allegory and parable rely on types, not on individuals. In other words, should all people be grouped together under a generic type: Man from the North, Arabs, or Jackals (the Jackals have human speech, remember)? If so grouped, do we have sufficient room to express our individual personality? What might be the advantages and the disadvantages of a ‘group’ way of understanding experience? What is the effect of the last sentence: ‘And how they hate us!’? If this is a story of colonisation or, indeed, of Empire, is it a story of resentment or victimhood? Given the title of his book *No Future without Forgiveness* (1999) – release yourself from your burden – how might Archbishop Desmond Tutu have responded to the last sentence of ‘Jackals and Arabs’?

Consider your responses to my deliberately provocative questions. Is the meaning of the lesson, whatever might be the lesson, embedded in the text of the story or do we, the readers, contribute our own interpretation? If the latter, is our interpretation influenced by our own ideological/moral/spiritual preferences? (What do you glean to be my preferences?) To sum up, literary texts have the power to test our prejudices or preferences even as they challenge our capacity to respond to testing situations.

Let us turn to the following worksheet:

In the light of our discussion, respond to the following two comments on Kafka's 'Jackals and Arabs'.

**'This is a story – less ambiguous than many of Kafka's – in which Kafka cannot disguise his belief in the superiority of the [presumably, white] Man from the North, who is unmoved by both Arab cruelty and the scavenging character of the Jackals.' OR,*

**'Kafka is a sly writer of allegories and a maker of parables. He inflames the prejudices that he knows will be inflamed, but in a subtle end move ('How they hate us!') he invites his reader to consider the deeply rooted traits of superiority, resentment, and victimhood in the colonial encounter.'*

- 1. Try to sum up your immediate response to the two quotations, above, in a 5- to 8-line opening paragraph: your Introduction.*
- 2. Looking at the first quotation, list in two columns what you agree with (Column A) and what you disagree with (Column B). Do the same with the second quotation.*
- 3. Moving from the negative to the positive, base your second paragraph (that is, the paragraph that follows your Introduction) on the quotation that elicited your most negative response.*
- 4. Your third paragraph will be based on the quotation that elicited the less negative response.*
- 5. Remember my earlier comments on the structure of an essay. Try to begin both your second and your third paragraphs with a transitional (a connecting) sentence.*
- 6. Are you still satisfied with your introductory paragraph, or do you wish to make changes?*
- 7. Write a brief concluding paragraph to your essay (about 7-8 lines).*

Such an exercise in layers of comparative and differential analysis is extremely difficult, particularly when dealing with an emotive issue. The tendency will be to entrench the binary options of 'them' and 'us'. Face-to-face contact, at least, permits the cut-and-thrust of immediate interaction. The online mode of Teams or Zoom, in which quick give-and-take is not possible, is likely to exacerbate the difficulty of teaching 'Jackals and Arabs' or, indeed, any text that raises the temperature of an audience. Nyari Samushanga, the CEO of the tech academy WeThinkCode, observes that '[T]echnology in its present incarnation cannot replace [...] the value of hands-on, collaborative, and face-to-face interactions' (2022, 27). His observation is prompted by a correlation between the distance mode and an increase

in student failure rates. (Unisa has always had a massive failure rate, an issue hardly brought to the fore.) I would contend that Samushanga's observation also raises a philosophical concern: that if technology in its current capabilities of communication is reasonably adaptable to the skills-based approach that I have suggested, it is less adaptable to what is considered to be key to a university education, at least in the Humanities. That is, a stretching of mind and imagination to new considerations, however uncomfortable to received opinion. I would hesitate to teach 'Jackal and Arabs' in distance mode.

Is online delivery in its present incarnation a convenient cousin of 'cancel culture'?

Coda: English, the Language of the Modern World

My modifications to English Studies return me to the Elephant, the Chameleon, and the Lizard (generic types as in 'Jackals and Arabs'). We have a solid base, but we need adaptability; we need new reflection on the purpose of the discipline. Is English Studies the soft discipline that in a time of the economic imperative has diminished its contribution to the society? English Studies, to be honest, has shown little commitment to its own status. Yet English is the language of the modern world, whether in Africa or beyond, and whether one likes it or not.

Those in the vocations – the plumber or the electrician – will be constrained in opening their own businesses should they be unable to communicate in serviceable English. Those in the professions and the higher echelons of business require for advancement and reputation more than serviceable English; they require subtlety of tone, a recognition of irony, and the application of English to their own field of societal, political, and cultural reference. They require the skills of differential analysis to respond to and articulate difficult argument. English Studies should position itself, accordingly, as a principal component of society. For a start, the scattered branches of English that we find on many campuses – for example, English for academic writing; English for lawyers; English for medical students; English as literature – should be combined into a single Centre of strength, albeit a Centre multiple in the scope of its offerings.

What I suggest is that the disruption enforced by the coronavirus can offer us the opportunity to rethink and reframe English Studies, both in and beyond the time of Covid-19.

Notes

1. See Barris (2019) for an extended discussion of the issue of plagiarism among university students.

2. To download the primary text (Kafka's stories in translation) install the free EPUB File Reader, then go to <https://z-lib.org>, where individual downloads do not require copyright permission.

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