

Blended learning in challenging circumstances – the case of UCT

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Background

- Increase in blended learning globally with growing linked research
- In 2016 and 2017, blended learning part of the landscape nationally and at UCT during disruptions
- No other research of this kind exists
- Background research at UCT
 - Perceptions and experiences of heads of depts related to the role of online learning (2015)
 - Students' personal mobile devices project 2015-2017

UCT context

- In October 2016 complete university **shutdown of two weeks**
- Changes to teaching delivery included
 - Shortened curriculum for 2016
 - Deferments of 2016 examination
 - Mini-semester at the beginning of 2017
- On 14 October 2016 VC included a **move to blended** teaching and learning as a strategy to ensure completion of academic year
- In 2017, VC suggested planning for possible use of blended learning in case of need
- 2017 saw shutdowns in October

Research questions

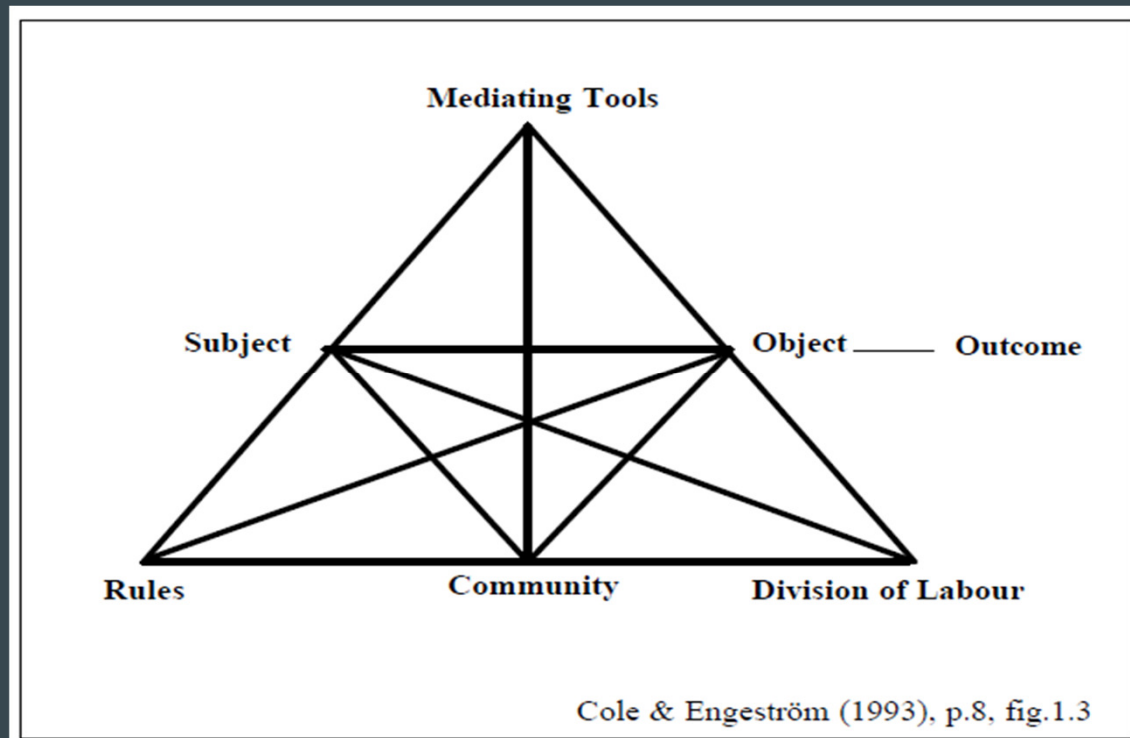
How have students and academics negotiated the opportunities and challenges of blended learning in challenging circumstances in South African Higher Education in 2016 and 2017?

- Why did academics and students **use** blended learning?
- Which **forms** of blended learning did academics and students use?
- How did academics and students **feel** about using blended learning?
- How did academics and students **perceive the protest** and what role **did this play** in their use of blended learning?
- What **shaped** academics' and students' use of blended learning?
- What **tensions** did academics and students experience?
- Who was **involved** in academic and student use of blended learning?
- What happened as a **result** of academic and student use of blended learning during the protests?

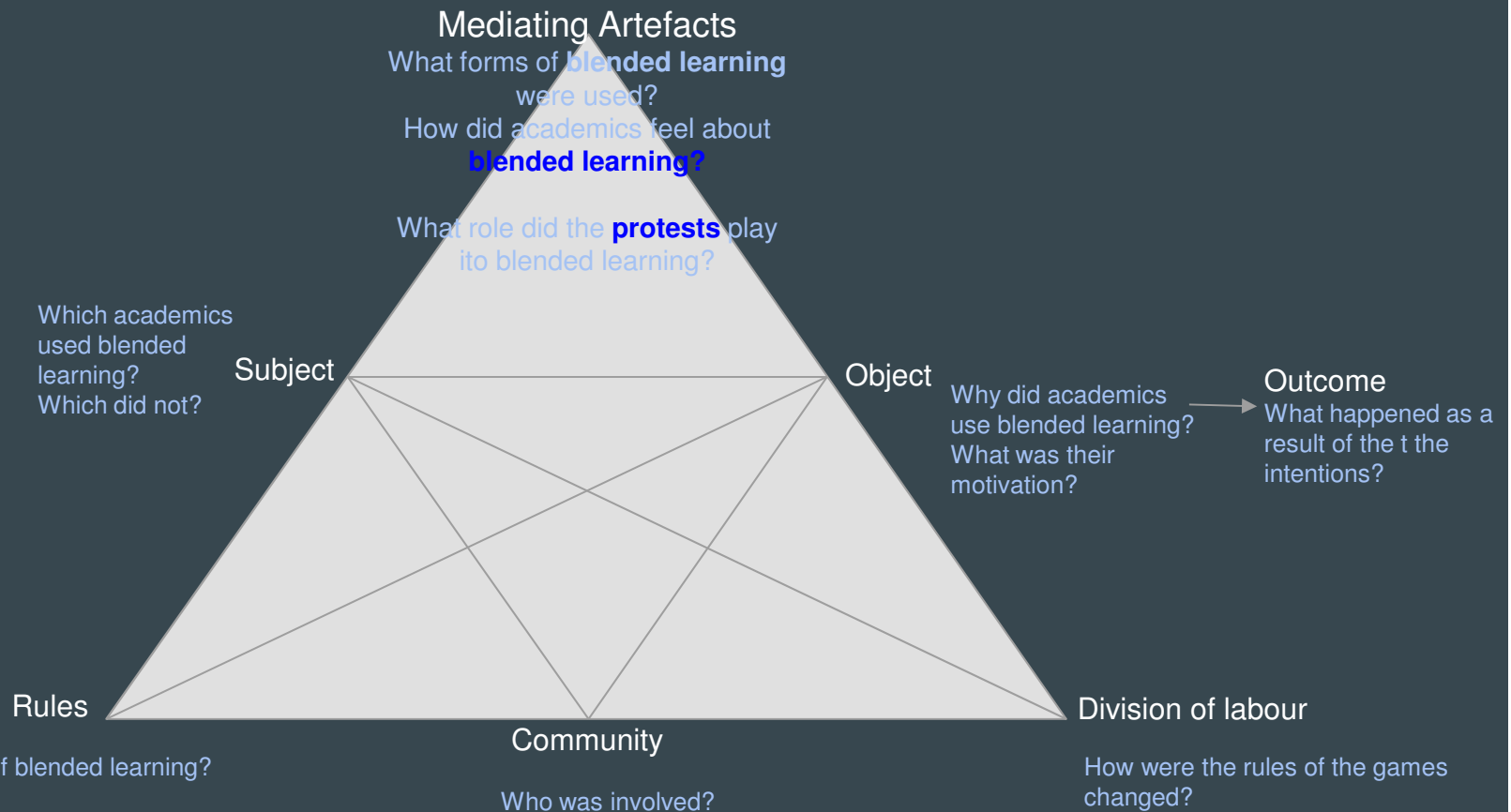
Methodology

- Activity Theory Framework
 - Conceptual framework, and theory led analysis
- Quantitative data
 - Survey data from 7322 (27%) of 26787-Student Access surveys conducted in August 2017
 - Vula and lecture recording statistics
- Qualitative data
 - 16 interviews with academic staff
 - Commerce (7)
 - EBE (5)
 - CFMS Humanities (4)
 - 11 interviews with professional staff (CILT staff incl learning designers, technical support staff)
 - 3 Focus groups discussions with students (17)
 - Transcribed and coded using NVIVO

Theoretical framework: activity theory



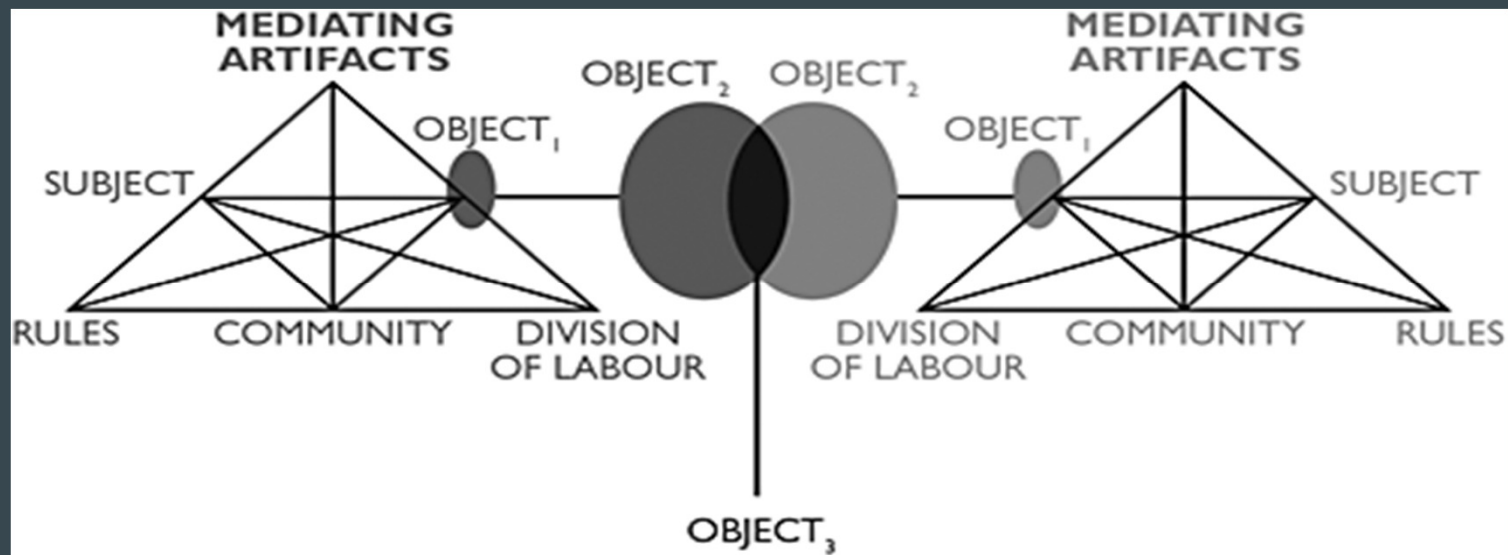
Activity theory framework



Activity theory framework

Contradictions

Where are the **tensions in and across** the systems?
How were they addressed?
What changes happened as a result?

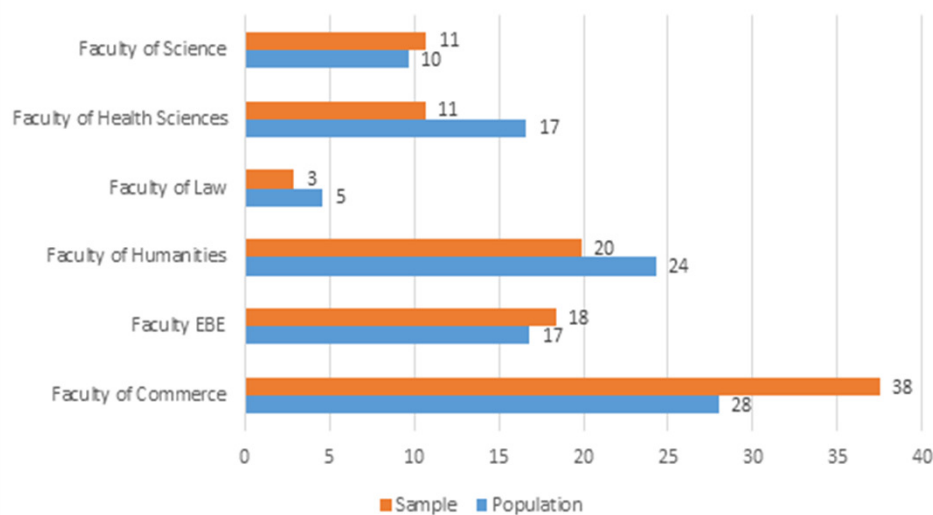


Preliminary findings

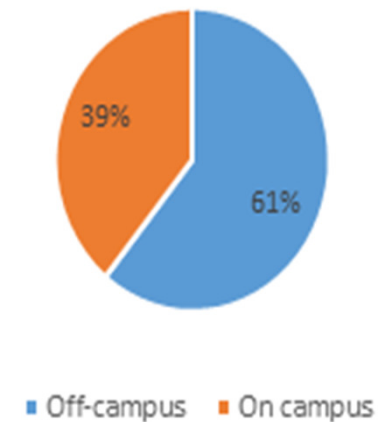
Quantitative trends

Student access to technology at UCT

Registered student population versus Survey sample



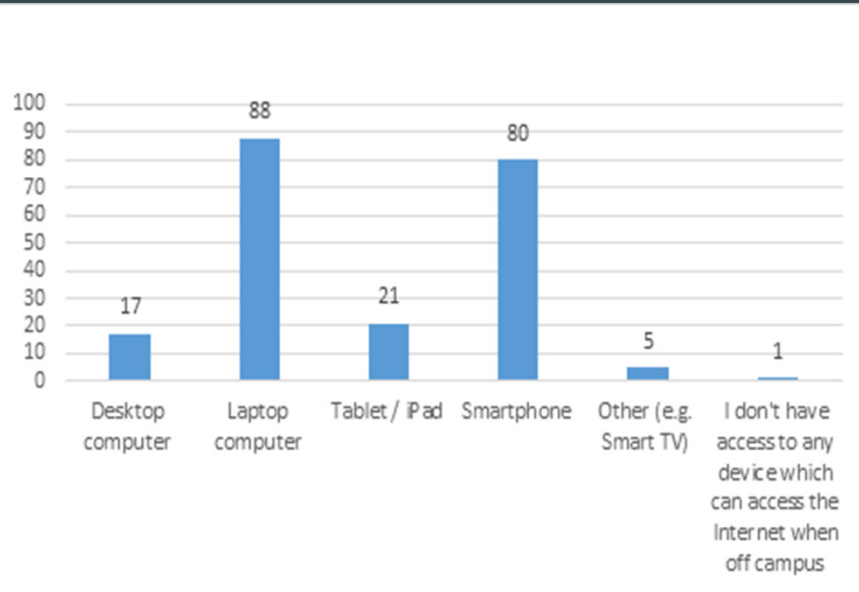
Where students reside?



7322 (27%) of 26787 students responded to the online survey across the 6 Faculties at UCT

61% of students reside off campus

Student access to technology at UCT



Personal Device ownership off campus

How do you access the Internet when you are <i>off campus</i> ? (Please tick all that apply.)	7,322 responses
UCT eduroam wifi (in residence)	2622 (36%)
ADSL or Fibre broadband connection	3292 (45%)
3G/4G/LTE (e.g. cellphone data)	4133 (56%)
Public wifi hotspots	1405 (19%)
Other (please add details in a comment)	196 (3%)
Don't have access to Internet off campus	243 (3%)

Internet connectivity off campus

Accessing Vula site between September 2016 and November 2016



UCT's blended learning activities through VULA 2014-2017

Activity	2014	2015	2016	% change 2015 to 2016	2017	% change 2016 to 2017
Vula course sites	2,305	2,435	2,481	1.8%	2514	1.3%
Vula peak sessions	5,185	6,169	6,707	8.7%	6929	3.3%
Vula active users	34,628	37,592	38,001	1%	44,155	16.2%
Online course evaluations	1,734	1,847	1,703	7.8%	2048	20.3%
Turnitin submissions	159,634	175,376	174,672	-0.4%	207,856	19.0%
Lectures recorded	3,286	5,193	7,197	38.6%	12,096	68.0%
Support issues	5,235	5,790	5,529	-4.5%	5869	6.1%

Preliminary findings

Qualitative findings

Why did academics use blended learning?

- To finish the **academic year** and/or complete their **course** as much as possible
- To assist students with **exam preparation**
- Directive from **university or faculty management**
- Already engaging in a **blended approach**

Why did **academics** use blended learning?

To finish the academic year and/or complete their course as much as possible

*“If you have to sacrifice a couple of workshops, you know, people would be finding other ways to make sure that students still achieve those, so ja, my sense from last year is that although staff were very tired that on the whole **we manage to achieve all the course outcomes that we needed to do and so on, in the online space...**” Academic Interview 12*

Why did academics use blended learning?

To assist students with their examination preparation

*I think that because we didn't have the face to face lectures I think there was a **lot of emphasis on preparing them for the exam through Vula** and giving **tips** and saying – read this and don't read that or you know, focus on this content and you can leave this out or this is examinable and this isn't, so probably a little bit more, pushing them a little bit more towards the parameters of the content of the exam because of all of that, just all of those factors, the anxiety and the stress from students side and the lack of face-to-face time.*

Academic Interview, 24

Why did academics use blended learning?

Directive from university or faculty management

*...exploring online vehicles for delivering teaching or amplifying distant teaching is a good thing and I think everybody, we already use Vula a lot and everybody would be keen to explore those if it wasn't with a sort of **gun against your head** and if it wasn't to supplant or, this is not so supplement your teaching but **this really to supplant it**. If it were just used as a supplement I think there is a lot of work that should be done and we should be using much more of this, but now because that is the only alternative and it is meant to stand in for face to face teaching, **that is part of the problem, I think...***

Academic interview 23

Why did academics use blended learning?

Already engaging in a blended approach

*I don't, ja, I mean I suppose there is a place where my course is sufficiently blended that moving to online **wasn't a big step** and for me or for the students
Academic Interview 21*

*I started in 2014, I bought a Dictaphone and I recorded the audio and with a I-pad I have been taking photos of my lecture boards because at that stage the video just wasn't good enough to be able to pick up anything on a black board and it also didn't limit me to needing to be in what in 2014 were the few high tech venues
Academic Interview 21*

Why did some **academics** not use blended learning?

- They had **timeously completed** course/curriculum
- It **didn't work** in 2016 (so didn't try it in 2017)
- They **felt conflicted**
 - did not want to undermine the intentions of the protestors

Why did some **academics** not use blended learning?

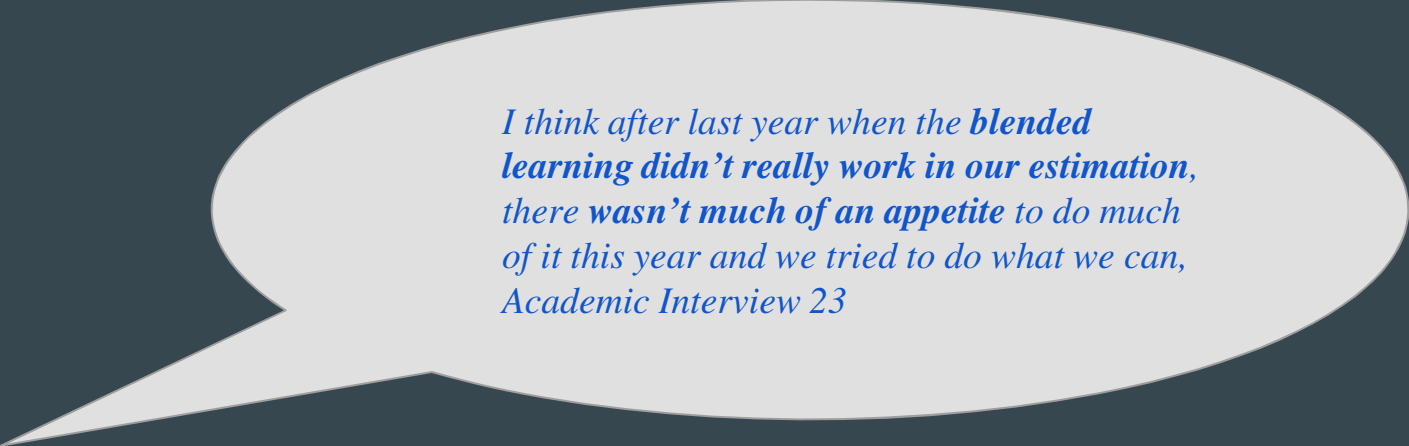
Completed courses/curriculum timeously

I think the disruption was the day after our last test, so the test was written but then there was no more class.

Academic Interview 16

Why did some **academics** not use blended learning?

It did not work in 2016. so they did not try it in 2017



*I think after last year when the **blended learning** didn't really work in our estimation, there **wasn't much of an appetite** to do much of it this year and we tried to do what we can,
Academic Interview 23*

Why did some **academics** not use blended learning?

Because they felt conflicted

*...People don't like what is happening with the students or things like that but actually you have to find some way, whatever way is least offensive to you to find out what you need
Academic Interview 1*

Why did **students** use blended learning?

- To complete the academic year or funding repercussions
- To assist with exam preparation
- To be in contact with academics and tutors
- Because they had to

Why did **students** use blended learning?

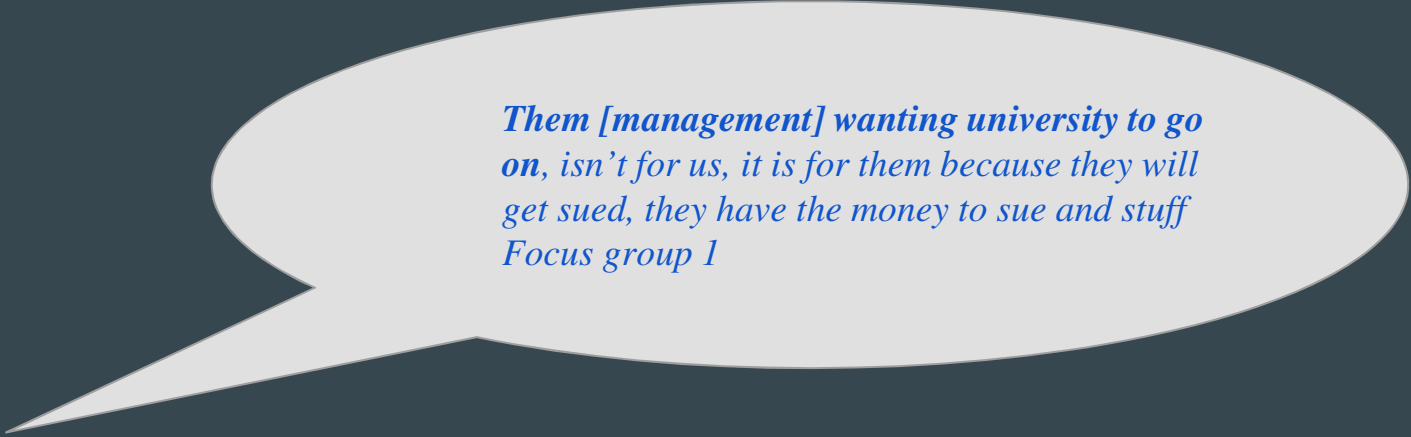
Funding repercussions

But then like with the tests that sucks, because now we are getting average marks for some of our courses when I could have gotten like an 80 instead of a 50, so like that is like, now I can't, what if my bursary wants this amount and then should have gotten an 80 and then getting the 50...

Student Interview 1

Why did **students** use blended learning?

Because they felt forced into it



*Them [management] wanting university to go on, isn't for us, it is for them because they will get sued, they have the money to sue and stuff
Focus group 1*

Why did **students** not use blended learning?

- They had limited or no access - to campus and to technology
- They didn't like it
- The protestors were perceived to be against blended learning

Why did **students** not use blended learning?

Limited or no access - to campus and to technology

*First of all you need **access to something, like campus is shut down, there is not library anything**, so you need a hall or anything like that, which is fine because what people always say and a map book and everything, so they are fine, [laugh]...*

*But then with some of us, we **don't have** those kind of things you understand, so then it becomes, first of all **a challenge, I don't have resources** and then these **people take long to respond** to your questions even if you put them on a chat group and what they teaching maybe like he doesn't stand there for 45 minutes talking like he does like a 10 minute video...*

Focus Group 2

Why did **students** not use blended learning?

They didn't like it

Or they explain something and then you like – Oh that wasn't in the slide...and then you have to go back and then....and it is frustrating, it is like YouTube when it is buffering forever and you like – Oh gosh!

Focus Group 2

Why did **students** not use blended learning?

The protestors were perceived to be against blended learning

*Ja, ja, you know what I think, I think if really we want to push for 'fees must fall' and the management for 'fees must fall', I think firstly students **shouldn't come to class**, white students **shouldn't come to class either**, lecturers **shouldn't come and teach**, people like yourself **shouldn't come to your work or anything like that**, and then say we are for 'fees must fall' – 'no work at the universities*

Focus Group 2

How did **academics** feel about using blended learning?

- They felt forced into it
- They felt it **should not be a first option** to teaching
- They believed it was **inappropriate for a residential university**
- Some of them said they were doing it already, so it was **no big deal**

How did **academics** feel about using blended learning?

They felt forced into it

*“Ja, that is right, it just felt like it was something **forced on us** I think you know, where it was like this is something that you’ve got to do, **business as usual**, so you have now **got to move audio teaching materials to an online space...**” Academic Interview
26*

How did **academics** feel about using blended learning?

They felt it should not be a first option

*I think it's been a **necessary thing**, I am going to phrase it that way, I think it can work and it is possible to make it work, I don't think it is plan A, I think it is a second option, **I don't think it is the ideal, I really don't**
Academic interview 21*

How did **students** feel about using blended learning?

- They thought it didn't work
- They felt that there was a **lack of contact**
- Despite disruptions and shutdowns, **face-to-face is the preferred method of teaching and learning**

How did **students** feel about using blended learning?

It didn't work

*It really doesn't work, I mean, so another problem is you know lectures set up, they say today I'm going to teach this, I'll do that and so on, so they make those videos saying like today's lecture is about this but it is to **for 45 minutes, it is like 10 or 15 minutes and then they cover everything** that is supposed to be covered in 45 minutes in 10 minutes so meaning **they missing a lot of stuff** and you kind of ask questions like you are watching YouTube and all those things, so it really **doesn't work for a student** who is only, I don't know, sort of hope it is you tutor, then you don't have a tutor and you only have to listen to this guy who is talking things, basically **you don't understand what he is saying** you know, so it really doesn't work.*

Focus Group 2

How did **students** feel about using blended learning?

There was a lack of contact-**purely online**

*“They don’t like post like maybe a lecture video where someone would be talking and some notes and all that and we **have to access that using your computer and they don’t send question papers** and everything like that and if you have a question you send maybe on the chatroom on Vula or you send them an email, or that kind of thing so there is no face to face, **just online stuff and for me I feel like...**”*

Focus Group 1

How did **students** feel about using blended learning?

Face-to-face is the preferred method of teaching and learning

*Especially if you **are used to**, like for me, like I always used to study and that is understood that he can, for me **I didn't care what it would have taken me**, I will go and sit there in my lecture and I am going to listen to you and I am going to ask you questions and you are going to give me an answer right there, come exams I will remember exactly that same question I asked you in that class and the answer you gave me and it will back, that is how I learn....*

Focus Group 1

How did **academics** perceive the protests and what role did this play in their use of blended learning?

- Some were **explicitly against the protests**, and **resented having to use blended learning**
- Some were **in favour of the intentions of the protests**, and **resented having to use blended learning**
- Many felt that what was being promoted was not **really** blended learning
- They were concerned that the **students who benefited** from blended learning were the **privileged students** (in terms of access, cultural capital etc)

How did **academics** perceive the protests and what role did this play in their use of blended learning?

It was not really blended learning

*I mean, I think you made the point at the beginning that the **context is very different**, so that **ideal blended learning** structure that I have just talked about relies on **certain capacities** that are in place, so it relies for example, a **university infrastructure** that can support it, it relies on a **social infrastructure** that can support it, whether it is about data and access to resources and things like the **library, online resources, staffing, support...***

Academic Interview 24

How did **academics** perceive the protests and what role did this play in their use of blended learning?

They were concerned that the students who benefited from blended learning were the privileged students (in terms of access, cultural capital etc)

*The thing about it is that all these electronic things, which are great and they are marvellous, they **benefit the wealthy students**, they **don't** benefit the students who are struggling anyway*

Academic Interview 25

How did **students** perceive the protests and what role did this play in their use of blended learning?

- They were concerned that engaging with blended learning would be seen to undermine the intentions of the protests
- Some students agreed with the protests but wanted to complete the academic year
- Some students disagreed with methods of the protests and wanted to complete the academic year

How did **students** perceive the protests and what role did this play in their use of blended learning?

Some students disagreed with methods of the protests and wanted to complete the academic year

*but then it is also a **selfish agenda** with this who protesting, there is like students that **failed during the year, they do not want to write exams**, so now they are like, OK let's protest*

Student Interview 1

*“So like, at first it was like OK it is actually happening, you know what I mean like I have never experienced this thing, **it was exciting** but then afterwards, my tests were disrupted, like when I want to be in the library and then I actually have to do work and then that **being disrupted is so irritating** because you are like just about to finish and then they come and they are like you need to exit*

Focus Group 1

What shaped academics use of blended learning?

- The role of “the university” / senior decision makers’ plans and decisions (a them and us mentality)
- Lack of experience with blended learning methodology
- Their disciplines (disciplinary requirements)
- Affordances of blended learning (i.e. what the technology made possible)
- The nature of pedagogy/ teaching and learning practices
- Peers and champions making use of blended learning

What shaped **academics** use of blended learning?

The role of “the university” / senior decision makers’ plans and decisions (a them and us mentality)

.....so I think people’s frustration and confusion was just about that situation that academics are used to having a lot of control over their own teaching environment and suddenly it was removed for all sorts of reason and you know, they were told to do something different which they didn’t know how to do or want to do

Professional Staff Interview 2.

What shaped **students** use of blended learning?

- The way that **academics** approached blended learning (i.e. attitudes and approaches)
- **Access**
- **Affective dimension - how they were feeling** (anxiety, stress etc)
- **Disciplines**

What shaped students use of blended learning?

The way that academics approached blended learning (i.e. attitudes and approaches)

"And then she showed us hers and she is like – OK guys follow this way and then do it like this and then we came in today and we did it and because none of us had 9am so we were like – OK like let's just stay and everyone finished today so we didn't have to come in for this again, so that was nice, so she is also very flexible and like if we do out questions she will be on campus in the morning then we can come to her and things. And then our lab tutor, so she is also like very nice because she also gives us her number and then they are quick to respond to emails whereas other lecturers take long to respond, so if you have a, like my USB formatted in my friends computer so like all my stuff is gone, so then it is on my computer at home still and then she was like OK you can email me the essay today when you get home, so that is nice. Student Interview 1.

What shaped **students** use of blended learning?

Affective dimension - how they were feeling

*Like I don't want to study unnecessary but I am not sure, like I don't feel like I can write here either, so like I am going to go and protest – no, I am joking [laugh], **I don't feel like I am ready** but this weekend I'm just going to force myself ja...the protest made me lazy and it made me like not even want to
Focus Group 2*

What tensions did **academics** experience?

- They felt that what they were asked to do **wasn't really blended learning at all**
- **Ambivalence** about the value of what they were doing
- Their **conditions were not enabling** (practices and context were at odds)
- The tension between **wanting to assist students to complete the academic year** and not actually wanting to engage with blended learning
- **Wanting to support the protesters' cause** but also wanting to assist students

What tensions did **academics** experience?

Ambivalence about the value of what they were doing

....so I did not want to go all online because I was unsure whether it could actually help the students...I also had the perception like I don't understand how people are actually going to learn in this way?

Academic Interview 18

What tensions did **academics** experience?

Their conditions were not enabling

*.....but I don't think I was very sensitive to the bigger picture, so I chatted to some other colleagues and someone said he is not very comfortable teaching new material knowing that there are some students who really are intimidated to come to class and they don't have good WiFi and you know all the rest of it.
Academic Interview 19*

What tensions did **students** experience?

- There was a tension between **what they thought blended learning** was and what academics thought it was
- **Environmental constraints** (access to campus and to technology, anxiety) and what they were expected to do
- **Uncertainty** (of time and place etc)

What tensions did **students** experience?

Environmental constraints

*And again and I know it is going to sound like a lazy issue now but it is what it is, ja again for me especially, I don't have a house to go to where I have wifi and I can just go home and I have wifi and I can work from there and I won't be influenced by my surroundings and stuff and having to come to campus and stuff like that so I basically live on campus because everything is here, so yes I have a wifi and stuff but I'm doing it but the space, the environment doesn't allow me to actually get what is going on, you know what I mean
Focus Group 1.*

What tensions did **students** experience?

Uncertainty and shifting goal posts

*You stressing yourself out getting this extension, like I mean getting this assignment done, then they tell you that you have an extension and then you know you have time now already to study, after your submission for your assignment, you literally are ok now I have time to study and **then they tell you ok you have an extension**, so now you are going to stress about that assignment because that is the only thing that is probably going to make your mark, like you will never be really like sure of your exam but your assignment, the work you put in and everything you cover, you know what I mean, so you are going to try to **stress more** on that assignment, so again, I don't know, I don't*

Focus Group 1

What happened as a result of **academic** use of blended learning during the protests?

- The academic year was completed in some form
- **Incorporated new methods** their practices (from 2016 to 2017)
- Blended learning developed **negative associations**

What happened as a result of **academic** use of blended learning during the protests?

Incorporated new methods into practices (from 2016 to 2017)

*Ja, it does because it is a hot topic and people who previously would have I suppose, not got too involved because they just don't know where to start, are now suddenly forced to get involved and this, I must say is actually a good thing about this time...
Academic Interview 17*

What happened as a result of **academic** use of blended learning during the protests?

Blended learning developed **negative associations**

*I have major doubts as to how effective the actual interventions have been in terms of helping students to learn in this time of crisis
– and so I worry that this kind of online thing is a recipe for disaster in terms of actually being able to motivate students, to engage with the material Academic Interview 13*

The last word

Disentangling blended learning during the protests from global trends in general

*“I tend to think that **blended learning should be the beginning of the process rather than the response to an existing crisis** and that is only because I think the, you know for me the underlying processes around the protests and the disruptions since 2015 are partially to do with that but I think there is a move globally that is destabilising what universities actually are and it happens to, those are the symptoms for us in South Africa, fees, accommodation, I think which is often being overlooked.” Academic interview 24*