

Title: Transforming the *illiteracy of the Imagination*: Covid 19 instability and its impact on the traditional face-to-face classroom in the Caribbean region.

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Abstract

Wilson Harris (1999) the Guyanese/British fictional writer and theorist, claims that many competent individuals experience an “illiteracy of the imagination” since they tend to operate within a “uniform function” (p.77). Harris further contends that individuals who are locked within a “uniform kind of frame” conceive that it is “unnecessary to extend themselves outside of that kind of function” (p. 78). Subsequently, their inability to break with such rigid paradigm serves only to eclipse a conception of themselves as “agents within a world which needed to be revised fundamentally” (Harris, 1999, p 78). Secondary school teachers in the Caribbean region may have experienced such *illiteracy of the imagination* at the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic. Such educators had previously operated within a ‘uniform function’ of face -to-face teaching and may have felt a “degree of uneasiness to extend themselves outside of that kind of function” (Harris, 1999, p.78) as they transitioned to online teaching. This research argues that a teacher must possess the capacity to harness the hidden potential of a school’s human resources in order to generate a sustainable online learning environment for diverse learners during the Covid 19 crisis. This presentation will be guided by Wilson Harris’s notion of the *illiteracy of the imagination* and Graham Gibbs’ view of strategic planning. The findings of this paper reveal that the implementation of continuous online teacher training to promote the acquisition of mastery online-teaching skills is central to a transformation of the *illiteracy of the imagination to the literacy of the imagination*.

Key words: *illiteracy of the imagination*, *literacy of the imagination*, uniform function, face-to-face teaching, online teaching, Covid 19 pandemic, Wilson Harris, Graham Gibbs.

Wilson Harris (1999), the Guyanese/British fictional writer and theorist, claims that many competent individuals experience an “illiteracy of the imagination” since they tend to operate within a “uniform function” (p. 77). Harris (1999) further contends that individuals who are locked within a “uniform kind of frame” conceive that it is “unnecessary to extend themselves outside of that kind of function” (p. 78). Subsequently, their inability to break with such rigid paradigm serves only to eclipse a conception of themselves as “agents within a world which needed to be revised fundamentally” (Harris, 1999, p.78). Secondary school teachers in the Caribbean region may have experienced such *illiteracy of the imagination* at the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic. Such educators had previously operated within a ‘uniform function’ of face -to-face teaching and may have felt a “degree of uneasiness to extend themselves outside of that kind of function” (Harris, 1999, p.78) as they transitioned to online heterogenous classrooms. The issue of accommodating diverse learning styles in the online secondary school classroom in Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean during the Covid 19 pandemic is a matter which must engage the reflective practice of educators. Such introspective self-confession and self-judgement of one’s pedagogy will ultimately result in a transformation of the *illiteracy of the imagination*.

This essay will begin by quoting from the 2008 final report “Inclusive Education Component of Seamless Education Project.” This report indicated that 45% teachers in Trinidad and Tobago had minimum knowledge of teaching in a diverse or inclusive classroom. The report further indicated that teachers also “lack other skills of inclusive education pedagogy” (p.37).

The lack of such pedagogical skills was translated into significant proportions in 2020¹ as teachers in Trinidad and Tobago not only had to abruptly change their complacent face- to- face teaching methods but also accommodate students’ existing diverse learning styles in synchronous

¹ The Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education closed all schools on the 13th March 2020 as a measure to curb the spread of Covid 19. Many other Countries in the Caribbean region had also taken this decision.

and asynchronous online modes of learning. It does seem, that when a teacher dwells on the substantial quantity of students with diverse learning styles in Trinidad and Tobago, he or she could either approach it as a technical problem and implement an unreliable approach to resolve this issue or choose to look more deeply into the potential of the school's human resources.

A solution to such a problem may appear at first sight to be a complex one. However, in this research paper, I will argue that a teacher must possess the capacity to illuminate and harness the hidden potential of a school's human resources in order to generate a sustainable online learning environment for diverse learners.

The major objectives of this essay are: This paper will demonstrate that a teacher's successful engagement with diverse learners in an online classroom depends on the implementation of various types of technology that must be aligned to equitable learning strategies and assessments. Secondly, this essay will further reveal that the input of the Curriculum Officer, the Vice-Principal (Curriculum), Head of Department (HOD), and the Information Technology technician is required to assist the teacher to implement technological solutions that are in rapport with equitable learning strategies and assessments for an online classroom that consists of diverse learners.

Many teachers in Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean may hold the perspective that there currently exists a lack of resources to implement collaborative online learning programmes for diverse students. This may appear to be a straightforward proposition. However, when one turns to what the educator and theorist, Graham Gibbs has to say, one will discover that teachers must specify the resources and strategies for any action plan. Gibbs notes in *Learning by Doing* (2010) that a teacher should identify individuals who can offer support and guidance in order to generate effective student-centred classrooms. The need to specify stakeholders who can

offer expert assistance is essential to the creation of an online classroom that caters for diverse learning styles. I argue that such a classroom can be creatively sustained in conjunction with the input of the Curriculum Officer, the Vice-Principal (Curriculum), the Head of Department (HOD), and the Information Technology technician.

The success of the online classroom to cater for diverse learners rest solely on two things: a teacher who is both well trained in using the online technology and one who can motivate his/her diverse learners through active engagement and scaffolding.

However, a teacher's initial and stimulating experience of online teaching may be eclipsed by his or her dominant teaching style. Such face-to-face teachers, therefore have a tendency to overlook and misread the urgency to translate their good teaching skills into the online environment. In order to remedy such a situation, such teachers should seek the assistance of the Head of Department, the Vice-Principal, the Curriculum Officer and the Information Technology Technician to develop continuous online teacher training that will promote the acquisition of mastery online-teaching skills. The need for such online teacher training is also noted by the UNESCO Educational Sector (2020). They claim that "the effectiveness of distance learning strategies" during the Covid 19 pandemic depends on "the preparedness of teachers to design and facilitate online learning" (p.3).

The following practical example highlights how the above-mentioned school personnel can offer training to enhance a teacher's real-time online teaching practice. The Curriculum Officer, the Vice Principal, the Head of Department and the school's IT technician can collaborate and develop training sessions on the use of synchronous technologies to foster critical thinking skills among students with different learning styles. The teacher can be trained to use the synchronous audio and visual technologies such as Microsoft Teams and BlackBoard, not only for the visual

and aural learners but also for the read/write, kinesthetic and multimodal learners. For instance, a teacher of a particular subject area at the secondary school level, can acquire the skill to use the visual and aural features of Microsoft Teams to easily guide and demonstrate a particular activity such as the intricate method of drawing a complex diagram to kinesthetic learners.

Most significantly, the teacher can use the text feature of Microsoft Teams to accommodate the read/write learners through collaborative online discussions about the complexity of developing flow charts. This scenario therefore indicates how the visual and audio features of various e-learning tools can accommodate multiple learning styles. Such a perception is noted by Mupinga et al. (2006). Mupinga et al. affirms that the design of online learning activities should thrive to accommodate multiple learning students and could be achieved through a variety of strategies.

The above scenario also indicates the benefits of mentorship to untrained teachers. This issue of mentoring new teachers has been addressed in the research undertaken by Elliot and Calderhead (1994). They contend that a mentor is the most significant influence on the student-teacher's professional development. The type of training that was outlined above may appear as informal and insufficient and one that serves as a quick fix to a problem. A point to note, however, is that this type of collegial mentorship by school personnel can enable the smooth transition from a face- to-face classroom to an online mode. Such training will also motivate many teachers to translate their effective presence in the conventional face-to-face classroom to an online mode of learning. The teacher's collaboration with other school personnel will not only foster team-building but also concretize the teacher's confidence in the school's human resources that was never sensed before. This is a small step, in terms of teamwork, but it is also a major step because

the new and inexperienced teacher is now able to utilize the untapped reserves that exists within each member of staff.

The link between teacher training and diverse learning styles is not limited solely to academic nurturing. It is important to also note that every student will not fit into an absolute mode of learning. Each individual will possess a dominant learning style that also overlaps with the strengths of other learning modes. Some students may also lack experience with online cooperative learning and therefore may experience great difficulty in participating in collaborative activities. Subsequently, the new online teacher will need to engage students' learning with an efficient form of collaborative pedagogy.

The effectiveness of social interaction in successful learning outcomes is noted by Albert Bandura. Bandura (1986) points out that students imitate and model observed positive outcomes in a social context. Initiating and perpetuating student engagement in an equitable manner could be challenging in the synchronous and asynchronous online setting. Above all, this is a significant task that teachers are faced with in the process of creating an online student-centred community that comprises a diverse group of learners. Although there is a lack of continuous virtual communication between student and teacher in such an online environment, there should nevertheless still be an established positive interaction between teachers and students in order to increase overall student commitment towards academic achievement.

Most significantly, the teacher can implement, with the guidance of the Head of Department and Vice-Principal, strategies to motivate and support effective social interaction among a group of diverse learners. For instance, the teacher can use a variety of collaborative teaching methods coupled with e-learning tools, with the HOD's and VP's support, to equally engage students with different academic strengths. One such learning method could be the use of

a virtual Question and Answer forum coupled with the visual and audio features of Microsoft Teams and Blackboard Collaborate. This strategy can cater for students who are proficient not only at speaking but also at reading and writing aspects of the curriculum. Above all, many secondary school teachers could use this learning experience to establish effective and lively online discussions between students in this discussion forum. Subsequently, the teacher will activate a collaborative learning environment in which students can share experiences, views, knowledge and skills. Finally, because of the isolated nature of both the synchronous and asynchronous online learning, the teacher should establish a sheltered and secure online classroom that can encourage motivation and nurture higher level cognitive skills in students through the use of this synchronous audio and visual content.

Furthermore, this teaching method ensures that all students will be guaranteed a fair and equitable learning opportunity in the online classroom. The lack of implementing effective social interaction activities in the online classroom could result in students' lack of motivation and possible failure as noted by Rovai and Barnum (2003). Rovai and Barnum (2003) claim that international distance learners who encounter social interaction differences in online environments may eventually feel discouraged from succeeding in or even completing the course.

It is important to note that the issue of accommodating diverse learners must also be balanced with equitable assessment strategies. Many new teachers hold the perception that assessments simply reflect a students' knowledge of the subject area. What does an untrained teacher know of assessment? The fact is, such teachers know very little. So, there is a pedagogical deprivation that undermines the effective planning and implementation of assessments among many new teachers at the secondary school level. Without guidance and relevant training, these new teachers tend to use assessments as instruments to make a distinction between high and low

academic achievers. However, if the teacher is instructed and guided by a certified and trained member of staff such as the HOD and the VP, he or she would recognise that there needs to be an explicit correspondence with assessment and equity in schooling, after carefully reflecting on their teaching practice

Most significantly, when untrained teachers reflect on their use of assessments in their previous face-to-face classrooms at first sight, they may assume that such empirical results indicate a student's learning ability without understanding that other students with different learning styles were not given an equal opportunity to be assessed. I argue, in this section of the essay, that teachers must possess the capacity to skilfully and effectively assess a group of diverse online students. Firstly, the teacher needs to ensure that there is equity in education by altering the criteria for assessing all types of learners. Secondly, this must be done in collaboration with the HOD's and VP's continuous guidance and supervision of a teacher's online lesson planning and teaching practice.

This matter of implementing effective and equitable assessments among online diverse learners with the input from the HOD and VP will now be illustrated. The linkage between carefully constructed specific objectives and assessment strategies that will accommodate the visual, aural, read/write and kinesthetic learners within the lesson plan is a significant issue that must be addressed with the constructive guidance of the HOD and VP. If, there exists a dislocation between the formulation of objectives, use of assessment strategies and students' diverse learning styles within the lesson plan, then some students will not be given a fair opportunity to achieve their academic potential. For instance, on careful reflection, some teachers may recognise that most of their specific objectives and types of assessment were developed for the read/write learners. Subsequently, such students produced excellent grades. Unfortunately, the visual, aural and

kinesthetic learners were deprived of a fair chance to excel in these previous formative and summative assessments. Such a recognition, brings into focus Graham Gibb's notion about constructing assessments. In *Using Assessments to Support Student Learning* (2004), Gibbs contends that all assessments should be designed to generate student engagement with learning tasks without generating emphasis on piles of marking.

This disconnection that is observed between the crafting of specific objectives, assessment strategies, and students' diverse learning styles takes on even greater proportions with the teacher's ineffective use collaborative questioning as a form of evaluation in certain lessons. One may only have to glance at such teacher-centred lesson plans and recognize a lack of effective questioning, observation checklists, rubrics, and problem-solving assessment strategies. The ability of the subject teacher to skilfully use the language of Bloom's taxonomy to demonstrate a gradual transition from the lower level to the higher-level learning objectives is something that requires the assistance of the school's HOD and VP. For instance, both the HOD and the VP can guide the teacher to effectively use the language of Bloom's taxonomy such as *Define*, *Distinguish* and *Discuss* to support a student's different learning stages in any lesson.

All secondary school students need to be provided with the experience of a synchronous virtual online classroom that accommodates their different learning styles. Above all, teachers need to discover their hidden potential of online teaching through continuous collaboration with other school personnel. If such a dynamic linkage is not established, their role and function in the online classroom may give way to the recurring and implacable teacher-centred logic. An enshrined and finite logic which would prevent the transformation from the *illiteracy to the literacy of the imagination*.

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