



Students at Warwick Market in 2019

DELIVERING A VIRTUAL INTERNATIONAL FIELD TRIP TO DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA DURING LOCKDOWN:

REFLECTIONS ON THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF ONLINE TEACHING & LEARNING

Authors: Paula Meth, Philipp Horn, and Gabriel Silvestre (Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Sheffield University).

Fieldtrips & 'Planning for Informality'

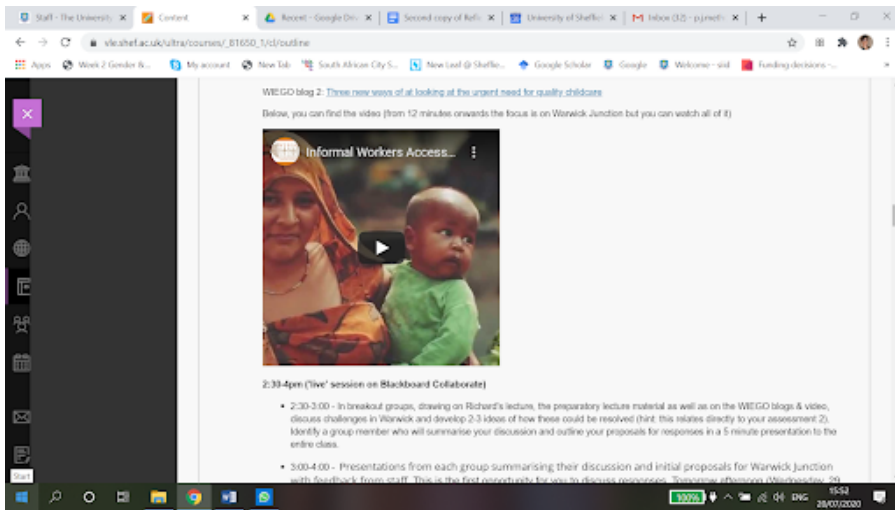
Field Trips are important elements in many academic programmes. They give students the opportunity to confront their training with a real-world scenario. We undertake an international field trip in Spring, tied to the module Planning for Informality which critically examines informality in a global context. Since 2019, the destination has been Durban, South Africa's third largest city. There, challenges of planning for informality are considered in one of the largest marketplaces in Sub Saharan Africa, Warwick Junction. We work in partnership with [Asiye eTafuleni \(AeT\)](#), a NGO supporting informal traders in Warwick Junction, and other academics in Durban at Durban University of Technology (DUT) and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The students develop a spatial and contextual understanding of the area. They consider what makes the Warwick Junction area such a vibrant place, that gives access to economic opportunities while still facing significant social and infrastructural challenges

COVID 19 & travel restrictions:

Travel restrictions were imposed a few weeks before the field trip was due to take place. This, followed by lockdown measures in South Africa, meant that international travel was impossible. We delivered the sad news to our students and partners in South Africa that the trip would not go ahead. More positively, the situation meant that the teaching team had to get creative! We had to rapidly produce an alternative plan, where we used digital tools available through the Blackboard platform to deliver an effective virtual learning experience.

Nuts and bolts of the virtual field class:

The virtual 'field trip' ran over 7 working days in a two-week period, with each day structured around specific themes. These related to particular learning aims that we wanted to achieve, including a general introduction to Warwick Junction, a focus on economic informality and responses to it, the impact of COVID 19 on the market and its traders, and supporting social needs of traders, including childcare resources etc. An important early decision was to avoid excessive synchronous online teaching. Instead we provided daily 'outlines' of tasks, resources and expectations for that day. These included a mix of live lectures and discussion sessions, pre-recorded lectures, live online breakout groups, pre-recorded student presentations, [Youtube videos](#), [podcasts](#), and short [articles](#). We have shared some links here to give you a sense of this material.



FEEDBACK FROM STUDENTS SUGGESTS THIS APPROACH WAS EFFECTIVE:

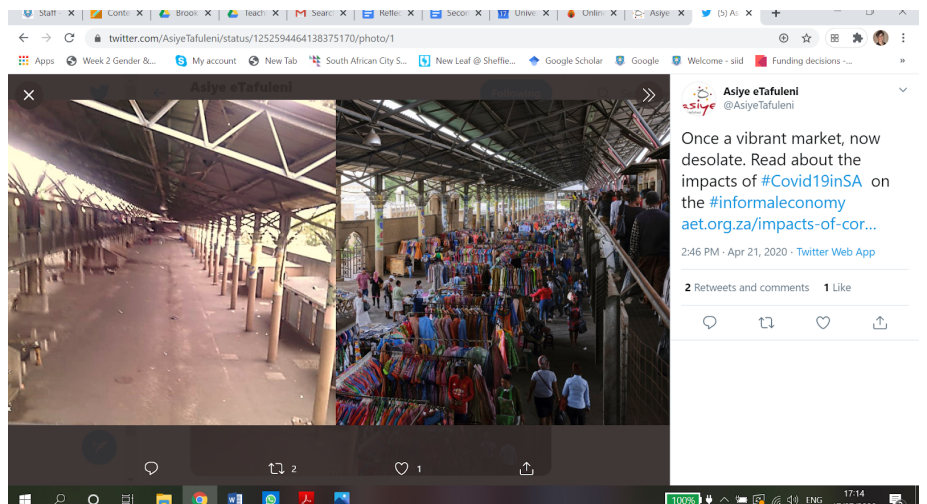
"I REALLY APPRECIATE ALL THE TIME THEY PUT IN TO ENSURE WE HAD ACCESS TO RESOURCES ON BLACKBOARD AND ENJOYED THE ONLINE SESSIONS".

Screenshot of our web-based learning environment - the students' view

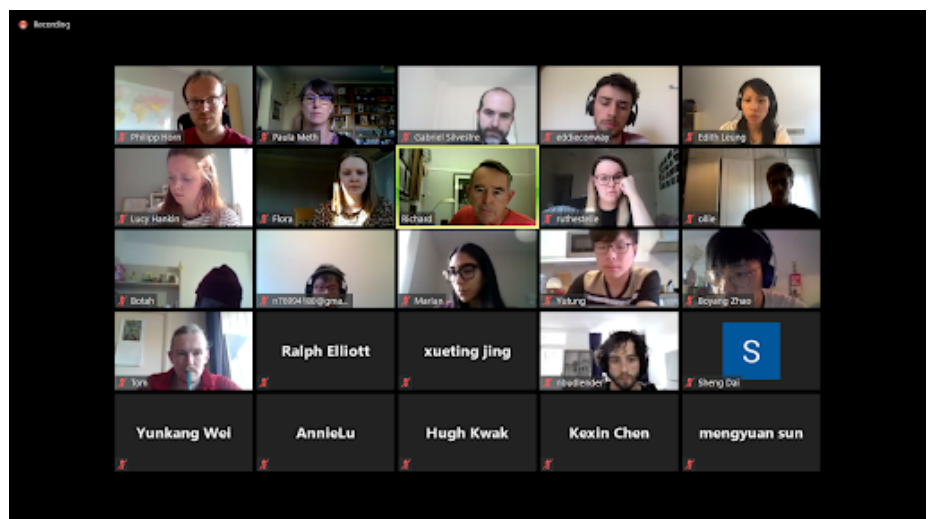
Meaningful engagement with AeT in Durban

In a context where traders lacked stable internet connections, we worked solely with AeT director, Richard Dobson. Despite reducing students' range of contacts, it did foster cohesion of learning. We jointly agreed on lecture content, focus and ordering of sessions with Richard.

Because of internet instability, Richard's lectures were recorded on skype, and loaded online for students to view in their own time. Alongside these recordings, Richard joined our students for live Q&A sessions online. Knowing that they had restricted time with Richard, and mindful of their forthcoming assessment, we supported students to engage in a focused manner, through preparatory tasks. With Richard, students used a mix of microphone discussion or their chat functions to pose questions and comments. From AeT's perspective, fostering meaningful dialogue between their organisation and learners, who are our future urban professionals, is a critical goal.



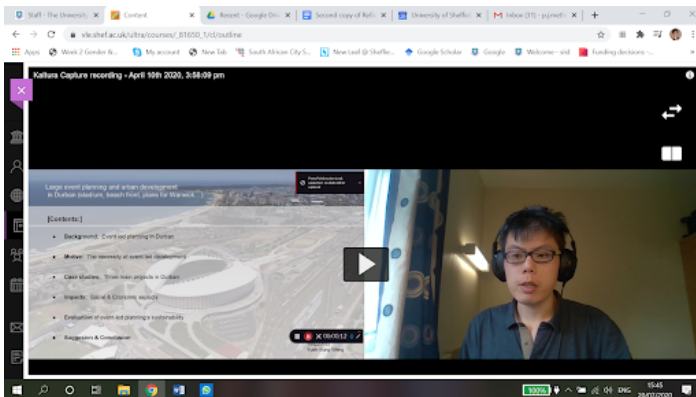
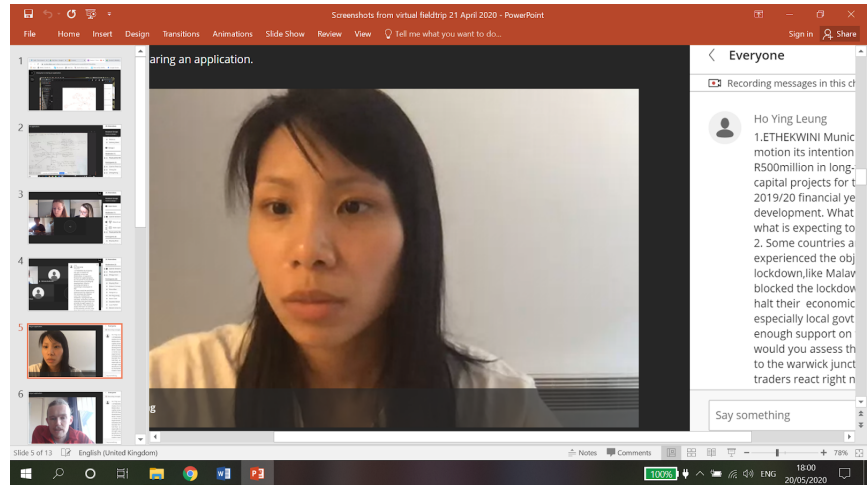
AeT's twitter account showing the abandoned market shortly after lockdown



Student Engagement

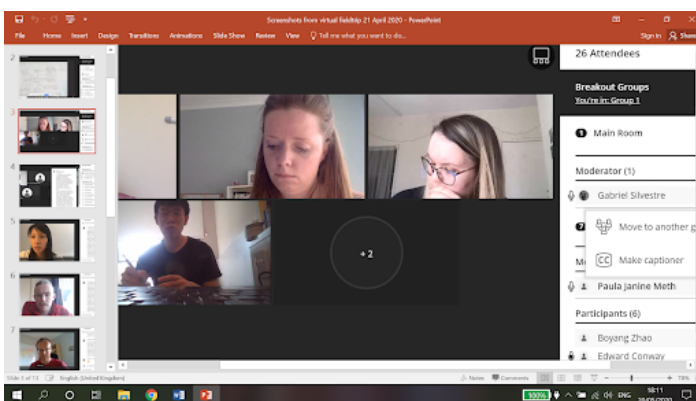
Collaboration and ensuring strong student engagement was a critical element of the learning. We used Blackboard's collaborative tools to host daily discussions targeting specific topics, including preparation for online events outlined above. Breakout groups facilitated small group discussion, and used student-identified rapporteurs to summarise group ideas and questions. This range of teaching worked well.

"I enjoyed all of their teaching styles - even when we got picked on to answer in the discussion! I actually think that technique is very useful and made us engage more with the content so we were prepared to discuss / present our ideas at any time" (Student, 2020).'



For part of the assessment, each student had prepared a 10 minute video focusing on one topic related to Durban. These were made available in themed batches online. Students viewed each other's presentations and then collectively discussed their mutual learning. Online discussions had strong levels of verbal and written chat. Students feedback was very positive:

"I think the break out groups and presenting back was especially useful as it allowed us to develop our thoughts, interact with other students and gain confidence..." (Student, 2020).



"During the group discussions, the teacher will join us and answer our questions. In the learning process, I feel very engaged and learned a lot" (Student, 2020).

Virtual Socialising

Learning in a virtual environment impinged on our capacity for socialising with each other, and immersing ourselves in the cultural and material realities of Durban. We used the shared cooking of Durban cuisine, the 'bunny chow' as a way to enjoy each other's company, sharing our individual cooking efforts on a Whatsapp group chat. For many of us it was the first time we had cooked curries that required so many ingredients, and Paula finally secured her [mum's Durban curry recipe](#) which will now be a firm staple in her own household!

On the final day of our virtual fieldtrip, we moved from a focus on informal economic practices, to looking at spatial informality and the informal settlement of Quarry Road West. Here we benefited from the generous contributions of Durban colleagues from DUT and UKZN, Dr Sogen Moodley, and Sibongile Buthelezi who shared pre-recorded lectures, Whatsapp voice recordings and photos. Students were able to learn about an entirely new environment from researchers with decades of experience and knowledge of the city of Durban.



Image of staff and students' bunny chows shared on Whatsapp

Finally, a former student, now researcher, Neele Wiltgen, joined live online to share the findings of her masters dissertation focusing on sanitation and gender in Quarry Road(see image). Current students also appreciated the chance to ask questions about her career journey and how her research was useful to apply to opportunities. Overall, the experience of running a virtual field trip was both exhilarating and exhausting. We know we overloaded the students at times, and our time management could have been clearer. Some resources were weaker in quality, and there were elements students could not grasp, because they lacked direct observation. We reflect on the limitations of virtual learning and implications for the move to blended learning in another piece. Nonetheless, given the circumstances, and judging by the quality of their final assessments, their learning was significant, and we met the module's aims.

"I feel the teaching staff have dealt amazingly with the number of disruptions to the module and despite not being able to go on the field-class still made the course just as engaging"
(Student, 2020)