

Editorial

We are pleased to present the June 2023 issue of *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning (CriSTaL)*. In this issue, we bring together six thought-provoking papers that explore critical perspectives and different aspects of teaching and learning in higher education.

The first two papers in this issue deal with issues of inequality. The first alludes to the pandemic and the ways in which it has affected students' experiences, while the second looks at the inequalities faced by rural students in higher education as a result of the neglect and undervaluation of their experiences, skills and knowledge within the university environment. The next two papers focus on challenges to teaching and learning in the classroom, the first on learning-centred assessment practices and the second on teachers' reflections on the quality and modes of thinking in writing intensive courses. The final two papers are dedicated to research, with the first focusing on the attributes and dispositions that doctoral students should develop, and the second on the need to rethink reflexivity in the context of medical education research. Let us take a closer look at the key insights offered by each of these papers.

The first paper, entitled 'Problematising the South African higher education inequalities exposed during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Students' perspectives', by Corinne Knowles, Abongile James, Lebogang Khoza, Zikhona Mtwana, Milisa Roboji, and Matimu Shivambu, focuses on the experiences of students in a university in South Africa during the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors present their findings from a knowledge-making project in which they reflected on inequalities in the education sector based on their own university experiences. They argue that these inequalities have been exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic. Using a decolonial theoretical lens, the authors critique university decisions during the pandemic and argue for a reconnection with the concept of the university as a public good. The authors emphasise the need for universities to collaborate with students and develop strategies to deal with crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The paper also emphasises the importance of a smoother transition between school and university, particularly in terms of language skills and cultural practices. The authors discuss the alienating aspects of institutional culture in universities, including a Western bias, which affects the experiences of African students. They emphasise the need for diversity, inclusion, and cultural sensitivity within the university environment. The paper also highlights the importance of teacher training in addressing the complexities of multilingualism and providing effective guidance and mentoring to students.

In the second paper, 'Towards understanding the influence of rurality on students' access to and participation in higher education', by Hellen Agumba, Zach Simpson, and Amasa Ndofirepi, the authors explore the impact of rurality on students' access to and participation in higher education in South Africa. The study adopts an interpretive, qualitative approach, using document analysis, interviews, and focus groups to gather data and explore the experiences of students from rural backgrounds. The findings shed light on the inequalities faced by rural



students in higher education due to the neglect and undervaluation of their experiences, skills, and knowledge within the university environment. The authors argue for a deeper understanding of the historical, social, and spatial dimensions of rurality, drawing on Edward Soja's concept of spatial justice. By considering rurality in a broader context, including socio-economic, cultural, and educational variables, the study highlights the complex interplay of factors that contribute to spatial inequalities in educational outcomes. To address these challenges, the authors propose the creation of a 'third space' that emphasises the inclusion of rural students' spatial experiences in curriculum development and decision-making processes. By creating spaces for dialogue, listening and action, higher education institutions can promote social justice for rural students and their communities.

The third paper, 'Learning-centred assessment validation framework: A theoretical exploration', by Oluwaseun Ijiwade and Dennis Alonzo, explores the concept of validation in the context of learning-centred assessment practices. The authors argue that traditional approaches to validation lack a learning-centred perspective and fail to consider the context of classroom assessment. Emphasising the importance of using assessment to improve learning and teaching activities, the authors propose a practical alternative validation framework based on pragmatic principles and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. The learning-centred assessment framework outlined in the paper consists of five inferences: domain definition, evaluation, explanation, use, and ramification. These inferences guide the evaluation of assessment practices and help teachers gather evidence to support claims about the effectiveness and usefulness of their assessments. Ijiwade and Alonzo emphasise the need for ongoing evaluation and continuous improvement of assessment practices, as well as the involvement of teachers in the design and development of assessments. Implications of the framework include broadening the conceptualisation of validation to include the sociocultural context of assessment, integrating validation into teachers' assessment practices, and addressing the challenges teachers face in making effective use of assessment data. The authors argue that assessment validation should be embedded in everyday classroom practice and contribute to professional development. They emphasise the importance of assessing for learning and promoting a holistic understanding of pupils' progress and development. By considering the context, purpose, and impact of assessment, teachers can increase their assessment literacy and improve the effectiveness of their teaching and learning processes.

The fourth paper, 'Teacher-team reflections on the quality and modes of thinking in Writing Intensive courses in one university in South Africa, during the first year of the global COVID-19 pandemic', by Pamela Nichols, Avril Joffe, Roshini Pillay, and Bontle Tladi, discusses the challenges faced by Writing Intensive (WI) courses during the sudden shift to online learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden shift to online learning presented challenges for these courses, which depend on student engagement and timely feedback. The study focuses on three WI courses in different disciplines: the School of the Arts, Social Work, and Engineering. The research method involves teacher team reflections, following a method developed by John Bean and Barbara Walvoord, applying qualitative research. The findings suggest that there is a need to

develop critical thinking skills in these WI courses in order to meet their specific aims. The article argues that learning discrete thinking skills complements the Writing within the Disciplines (WID) approach, which emphasises situated argument and problem solving. The study identifies three salient modes of reasoning in the courses: analogical reasoning, empathetic reasoning, and inferential reasoning. These modes of reasoning can significantly enhance student learning and problem solving when explicitly taught. The paper suggests strategies for developing these modes of reasoning within and across WI courses. The development of volunteer writing groups and the use of letter responses to student drafts are suggested to encourage scholarly engagement and slow thinking. The focus on teacher-team reflection provides valuable insights for course revision and programme development, especially in the context of a crisis such as the pandemic.

In paper five, 'Doctor Who? Developing a translation device for exploring successful doctoral being and becoming', Sherran Clarence and Martina van Heerden focus on developing a translation device for exploring successful doctoral attributes and dispositions. They argue that while doctoral training emphasises research and thesis writing, the process of becoming a 'Dr' and the identity work and affective dimensions involved are often overlooked. The authors aim to identify and understand these aspects of researcher development. Using Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) and the concept of 'constellations', the authors examine two valued doctoral attributes as exemplars. They analyse published work in the field of doctoral studies to identify and make visible the complex and multifaceted processes involved in becoming independent, confident, resilient, and other successful dispositions. They highlight that these processes are ongoing, non-linear, and contextual. The paper also addresses the increasing diversity within doctoral cohorts. While diversity is commonly understood in terms of race, gender and disability, the authors emphasise that diversity extends to various aspects such as registration status, prior academic learning, language proficiency and personal circumstances. These diverse factors influence how candidates engage with their studies, supervisors, and peers, as well as their access to resources and opportunities for development. The authors argue that affective dispositions should be foregrounded in doctoral education to enable a broader range of candidates to succeed. In addition, the authors discuss disciplinary differences in defining successful attributes and behaviours. They note that while certain attributes, such as independence and resilience, are universally valued, their interpretation may vary across disciplines and fields. The authors call for further empirical research to recognise and promote different versions of doctoral success that are consistent with the goals of equity, diversity, inclusion, and transformation in higher education.

Finally, in paper six, entitled 'Reimagining reflexivity through a critical theoretical framework: Autoethnographic narratives on becoming a (de)colonised researcher', Danica Sims focuses on the need to rethink reflexivity in the context of medical education research. The paper argues that critical perspectives and methodologies are needed for honest, powerful, and equitable reflexivity in an increasingly globalised world. The author highlights the use of autoethnography as a compelling methodological approach to reflexivity. Autoethnography

involves examining oneself and interpersonal interactions within socio-cultural contexts through retrospective autobiographical narratives. In order to frame critical reflections on power inequalities at personal, contextual and epistemological levels, the paper draws on Southern Theory, decoloniality and intersectionality. The paper emphasises the collective responsibility for epistemically and socially just research, which requires challenging normative and hegemonic research and reflexivity practices. It calls for the development of ethical research that does not reproduce inequalities, but rather welcomes and strengthens diverse ways of knowing, doing and being. In terms of reporting research findings, the author acknowledges the need to be cautious and avoid perpetuating colonially constructed divisions such as the North/South binary. The term 'global South' is also critically examined for its potential to homogenise and undermine the diverse perspectives and knowledge of Southern researchers. The paper emphasises the importance of disseminating evidence from the margins and avoiding pressures to reproduce Northern theory and privilege Western lenses. The paper concludes by arguing that autoethnographic narratives can demonstrate reflexivity throughout the qualitative research process, at both personal and epistemological levels.

Overall, the papers presented in this issue of *CriSTaL* provide valuable insights into critical perspectives and different aspects of teaching and learning in higher education. They address the challenges and opportunities associated with assessment practices, teachers' reflections on writing-intensive courses, inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic, the impact of rurality on students' access to and participation in higher education, the attributes and dispositions of doctoral students, and the need to rethink reflexivity in research. By engaging with different theoretical frameworks and employing different research methodologies, these papers contribute to the advancement of critical studies in higher education.

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Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning

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Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning is a peer-reviewed journal that publishes scholarly articles and essays that make marked contributions to the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education. The Journal aims to provide a stimulating and challenging forum for contributors to describe, theorise and reflect on their teaching and learning practice, and is particularly interested in contributions that have relevance to the South African educational context.

Contributions that are critical, well-researched and come at relevant problems and issues from theoretical, practice-based or analytical angles are welcomed, as well as contributions that focus on innovative and reflective approaches to teaching and learning.

All submissions must have a clear issue or problem that is addressing, and must make reference to the relevant literature. Where applicable methodology, results and evaluation of findings must be clearly discussed and related to the wider field or literature. Submissions relating local studies should make clear the applicability to a wider context and readership.

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Focus and Scope

Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning is a peer-reviewed journal that publishes scholarly articles and essays that make marked contributions to the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education. The Journal aims to provide a stimulating and challenging forum for contributors to describe, theorise and reflect on their teaching and learning practice, and is particularly interested in contributions that have relevance to the South African educational context.

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Problematizing the South African Higher Education inequalities exposed during the Covid-19 pandemic: Students' perspectives

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Abstract

Former Rhodes University students, co-authors of this article, were engaged in a knowledge-making project during the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper is a product of that project, where participants deliberated on the inequalities in the education sector based on their experiences in their university. These were exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic. Using a decolonial theoretical lens, they present the experiences of students to critique university decisions at the time. They argue for a reconnection with the idea of the university as a public good, as an antidote to the neoliberal tendencies that perpetuate inequality in the sector. This requires a reconnection with its own students, and to collaborate with them to find strategies to deal with crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, a reconnection between the university and the school sector could lead to greater synergy and an easier transition between school and university.

Keywords: decolonial knowledge, education sector, inequality, students

Introduction

Students come to university in South Africa with experiences and ways of knowing and being that are not necessarily aligned with the university system. This is partly linked to experiences in school settings that fail to anticipate and shape their navigation of university life. But in addition to this, we¹ argue that the university itself has shown a lack of vision and empathy for the lived experiences of young people in the throes of extreme inequality. The Covid-19 pandemic exposed inequalities in the education sector in South Africa that were already present (Madonsela, 2020), and this is our motivation for writing this paper. The severe lockdown restrictions in 2020 and in 2021 meant that universities had to quickly adapt to emergency remote teaching and learning (Mpofu, 2020; Reddy, 2021). Unfortunately, many universities and

¹ We, the authors, use the collective first-person pronouns in this article. Although not all of us are still students, we speak from the perspective of those we have worked with on the project described later (*With Dreams in our Hands*), and the students we know who continue to struggle with the inequalities inherent in schools and universities.



households were unprepared for this, and the inequalities that are deeply entrenched in South African society were exacerbated by the switch (Mudaly & Mudaly, 2021). Despite the mantra by Minister Blade Nzimande that ‘no student be left behind’ (Dlulane, 2020), many are exactly that. They are left behind by political, economic, and educational decisions that were and are taken about them, without them, and which failed to acknowledge the daily struggles of the poor majority, especially during lockdown. These struggles include poor or no internet connections in the homes of many students; crowded homes with no conducive workspace; and food and physical insecurities that were exacerbated during lockdown.

This article exposes the experiences of some students as they were forced to adapt to a situation beyond their control, and without the means to do so. It considers the inequality in the higher education sector from students’ perspectives, using a critical, decolonial theoretical lens through which to explain the challenges, but also the possibilities that these lost years of the pandemic offer us. It is a contribution to ideas about teaching and learning in universities going forward, using the lessons we have learnt during and from the pandemic experiences. We argue that the exacerbated inequalities that were exposed during the pandemic compel us to approach educational transformation from a decolonial perspective, collaborating with students themselves, to find a reconnection to the idea of the university as a public good.

The data that informs how we approach the issue of inequalities comes from a project that began at the start of the pandemic. The project asked the questions: What do students entering the university bring with them to contribute to knowledge-making? And what would happen if students and former students, working according to African/Black feminist principles, collaborated to produce knowledge together?² So, this article does two things: the topic we address, inequalities in the higher education sector, is one we care about and have experienced; and the writing of it is a collaborative praxis of African feminist principles in a knowledge-making project. We have worked with data from the project to construct knowledge in the form of this article.

Putting the problem in context: The ‘With Dreams in our Hands’ (WDIOH) project

The project, With Dreams in our Hands (WDIOH), began at the start of the pandemic. It was part of a PhD by publication project of our former Extended Studies (ES)³ lecturer, Corinne Knowles, and it used many of the pedagogic principles that we were familiar with in our ES classes over

² See Knowles (2021) for more details on the theory and methodology for the project

³ At the university currently known as Rhodes, the Humanities Extended Studies Programme invites students into the programme based on a number of criteria, including matric marks that fall short of automatic entry into the Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Bachelor of Social Science (BSS) degrees, being the first in their family to go to university, and having received township or rural schooling. They are required to select one of two streams. The authors are part of the group who selected Politics 1 and Sociology 1 as their mainstream subjects. Computer and academic literacies are also taught, and most of our work involved the augmentation and literacies of the mainstream courses. The class size ranges between 30 and 45 students.

the years, including communal knowledge-making (Ntseane, 2011). Twenty-four former humanities ES students from the University Currently Known as Rhodes (UCKAR)⁴ responded to an open Facebook call by our former lecturer. We worked together on the project for five months, and then spent a further eleven months on the writing of this article. We applied African feminist principles of empathy and connection (Nkealah, 2022; Nnaemeka, 2005), recognising the intersectionality of oppressions that affect the potentials of young people in South Africa (Tamale, 2020; Xaba, 2017), and valuing the experiences and ways of knowing that we each brought to the process (Wane, 2008).

The project was forced to operate online because of lockdown stipulations in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and so we experienced some of the frustrations of online work, while critiquing how universities made this adaptation. In a series of online workshops and a dedicated Facebook group where we communicated in between workshops, we chose topics that we believed were current, relevant, and important to us, and then came up with ways to respond to these (Knowles, 2021). Nineteen of the project volunteers responded to the four topics with text pieces, one of which dealt with inequality in the education sector. Each submission was reviewed by three or four other participants. We then volunteered to be part of paper writing teams, using the submissions and workshop transcriptions as data. The team that has worked on this paper has scrutinised seven of the project submissions and their reviews. We have participated in nine online workshops to discuss the topic, work on our writing and to analyse the data, asking questions such as: What claims do the authors make? How does he/she make these? How are they supported? How do we respond to what has been said? What resonates? What themes run through them? Where are the differences? In our online workshops, we practiced empathy, listening and welcoming each other's beliefs, feelings, opinions, and experiences.

In our paper writing teams, we also looked at articles by African feminist, African, and decolonial scholars, to help us to find critical ideas for thinking through the stories and opinions in the topic submissions. Each of us was tasked to write a section of the paper, to review each other's work, and to rework it in response to reviews. Importantly, the way we worked with knowledge, using the principles mentioned, allowed us as students and former students to feel seen and heard, and to bring our dreams and capacities to this task. We believe that South African university students deserve no less.

The article starts by explaining our theoretical choices, arguing that South African academia continues to be heavily influenced by western texts and ideas that are rooted in colonialism and fail to speak to the lived realities of Black young people in Africa. It considers the idea of the university as a public good against the backdrop of a neoliberal university ethos. To undo the epistemic violence of colonial, capitalist influences, we argue for a critical decolonial lens that pays attention to intersectionality and reconnection in the university. We examine the inequalities

⁴ Rhodes University was renamed the University Currently Known as Rhodes (UCKAR) by protesters and allies during the 2015/16 student protests. In 2018, the Rhodes University Council decided to halt any consultative process around renaming, and instead to keep the name. See Daniels (2015) for the argument to change the name.

in universities, emphasised by the pandemic and articulated from students' perspectives. Finally, we offer some ideas about how to use the experience of the pandemic to rethink the education system to be more socially just and sustainable in an uncertain future, through a reconnection with its students.

Constructing the lens and the nature of knowledge

Knowledge-making is an important aspect of university education and is a life skill that can equip us to deal with uncertainty and the stresses of life. In humanities courses, we learn about different theories and how to apply them, which can lead to a deeper understanding of society and ourselves, and the creation of new knowledge. The focus of this section is to critique the colonial legacies in our universities and societies, to show how they contribute to inequalities, and to explore what decolonial knowledge-making would look like. Knowledge-making is always political (Appiah, 2006), and as Tamale (2020: 280) reminds us, 'neutral knowledge does not exist'. In our experience, most of the theories we were exposed to in our undergraduate courses at UCKAR, and the methods that are employed to collect and analyse data, have histories that are loaded with power imbalances (Moletsane, 2015; Tamale, 2020; Wane, 2008). Tamale (2020: 235) notes that colonial Eurocentric thinking has dominated African knowledge production for centuries, and she argues that, 'the African decolonization/decolonial project must pay particular attention to the education sector in order to seize back the minds of its people'. This article is a contribution to this work.

Decolonising our thinking is a way for us to regain our agency amid the epistemic violence of a reliance on Eurocentric ideas and examples in the university courses to which we have been exposed. It is also a way for us to understand and address the inequalities in the sector. Linked to the idea of epistemic violence, is 'symbolic violence', which Moletsane (2015: 40) explains

is similar to the Marxist idea of "false consciousness", and refers to a situation where, without any overt force or coercion, an individual or group accepts, internalises, and plays a role in its own subordination.

Epistemic violence refers to deliberate not only ways in which western knowledge is favoured in academic settings, but also ways in which African or indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing are rendered invisible or worthless (Pillay, 2015). Importantly, Pillay argues that epistemic violence includes the legitimisation of the use of physical violence and prejudice against others (Pillay, 2015). Epistemic violence, then, is linked to the inequalities we find in the education sector, in that when African thought, scholarship, poetry, fiction, history and experience is left out of curricula and syllabi, it is a way of reducing the value of African people. Wane argues that we need to be more inclusive of indigenous knowledge systems, and that we need to consider 'the role of the educational system in producing and reproducing racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, gender, sexual, and class-based inequalities in society' (Wane, 2008: 194).

As a first step towards addressing the issue of inequality in the education sector, the lens we use is a decolonial one. Decolonised /decolonial knowledge can be viewed as providing a forum for African academics to research and write about Africa in an African-centric manner and in a way that fits the interests and needs of their respective communities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Moletsane (2015: 4) explains that

people' s realities are often defined and explained by outsiders and that the interventions that come their way, are likely to be irrelevant to their lives' needs. To address this, what is needed is context-specific knowledge, co-created and co-disseminated with the local people themselves.

We have taken these ideas to heart in our collaborative research and while constructing this article. We have worked with students from the historically and currently disadvantaged communities we come from, to think critically and creatively about recognising and shifting the marginalisation of the poor.

Pillay (2015) is of the view that decolonising teaching and learning – pedagogy as well as content – will play an important role in the production and the rise of decolonial knowledge, which will contribute towards a more inclusive and just university experience for many students. He explains that the decolonisation process should open and create an inclusive academic atmosphere that encourages pluriversal knowledge production, so that the west can learn from Africa. This shifts the purpose and power of higher education away from western methodologies of objectification, extraction, appropriation, and exploitation (Grosfoguel, 2020). And as we go on to argue, it opens the possible return of the idea of the university as a public good (Badat, 2001).

To undo the epistemic violence discussed by Pillay (2015), Moletsane (2015), and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020), we argue that we need critical thinking that employs a process of 'unlearning' and 'conscientisation' (Tamale, 2020: 272). This process of debunking what is familiar and taken for granted, to pay attention to alternative narratives and histories, will allow us to see more clearly from an African perspective how our societies are influenced by oppressive colonial ideas. The South African economy, based on western-inspired capitalism, continues to favour the few, and the country is regarded as one of the most unequal societies in the world (Sguazzin, 2021). How is higher education in South Africa contributing to the necessary critical thinking around the economy, and the process of socio-economic development? How is critical thinking addressing the social and educational inequalities in society? Capitalism emphasises the role of the individual to get ahead by means of a meritocracy. And yet we know that in South Africa, where colonial legacies continue to influence race, gender, and class hierarchies and inequalities, meritocracy is not the only factor that leads to success. As Diale (2019) and Galal (2023) show, Black young people are the least likely to find work, even if they have degrees, and this raced (and gendered) pattern signals that 'meritocracy' is not the whole story. The identity trends of who succeeds

and who fails economically is not about what is deserved, but linked to race, class and gender inequalities that are legacies of our past and were exacerbated by the pandemic.

The focus on the individual so valued in capitalism is repeated in other western institutions and knowledge-making, and runs counter to many African communities and ideas, where the emphasis is on our mutual constitution and responsibility. African knowledge-making emphasises the communal aspect of African societies, where, as Ntseane (2011: 313) explains, research and learning need to be 'responsive to an African worldview which is collective and one in which the community itself will influence and shape the method'. Our understanding, as ES students who were exposed to a more communal approach to teaching and learning, and now as co-authors of this article, is that the academic journey is not an individual one: we think, learn, and write in community. This is in contrast, we believe, to South African higher education, which is arguably captured by neoliberalism with its emphasis on individualism and the economic and market function of the university, rather than on the social function (Baatjes, 2005).

We echo the calls made in the #FeesMustFall protests of 2015/2016, where students, working in solidarity with each other across provinces, were not merely fighting for free education, but also for decolonised education (Mkhize, 2015). For us, education is a chance to improve our lives and that of our families and communities. Education for many of us is not only the way to escape poverty, but importantly, also to contribute to society. We argue strongly that the exposure to African thinkers and theories will resonate more profoundly with us, and expand our critical thinking so that we are able to address the social issues in our communities. This way of thinking about higher education – its communal aspect and its focus on addressing social issues – shifts the neoliberal focus to the university as a public good.

Two ideas emerge from this discussion on decoloniality and contribute to our understanding of the inequalities that continue to oppress young Black students: intersectionality and reconnection. Intersectionality is a theory and methodology used by African feminists, that allows us to see that oppression is multifaceted, in that the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, language, ethnicity and so on, affect the extent and nature of oppression in inseparable ways. Inequality as we experience it in South African universities today, is rooted in the triple and mutually constituted oppressions of colonialism (with its racialised implications), capitalism (and its effects on class) and patriarchy (which enables gender and sexuality advantages and disadvantages) (Tamale, 2020). Tamale (2020: 66) explains that 'for many disadvantaged social groups, discrimination is an inextricably blended experience'. As we have explained above, the dominance and normalising of White, male, elite, western theorists in knowledge-making disadvantages and marginalises many students in ways that overlap and intersect – their race, class, gender, location, language and so on, fall outside of what is regarded as legitimate or authoritative knowledge-making. In tracking how colonialism (interlinked with capitalism and patriarchy) was internalised as authoritative, Tamale (2020: 250) notes that certain knowledges that supported colonialism and justified discrimination, 'were allowed to evolve as "science" while other indigenous knowledges were simply labelled as lore, superstition and quaint fancies'. Other strategies of colonialism involved 'othering' and 'invisibilisation' (Tamale,

2020: 246,247). These strategies created and embedded race, gender and class hierarchies that are profoundly interlinked, along with various other identity markers that articulated colonial preferences. The intersectional lens, according to Tamale (2020: 73,74), 'helps African people understand why our "truths" do not always match with the official "truths" constructed in Eurocentric-capitalist-heteropatriarchal master narratives'. She urges us to 'take into account the complexities involved in issues of inequality and Othering', and also to notice the complexities in identities, to avoid essentialising people based on one or more of these socially constructed categories. As Kulundu argues, intersectionality allows us to examine intragroup differences, and she warns against an analysis that rests on a single axis (Kulundu, 2018). Our understanding of intersectionality has encouraged us, in the WDIOH project and in the process of writing this paper, to listen to young Black people's experiences, and notice ways in which they are similar to, or differ from, official discourses and each other. It has encouraged us to use theoretical ideas of African women and value the opinions of African young people in our quest to unlearn colonial discourses and conscientise ourselves about the longstanding mechanisms of oppression.

The second idea is reconnection. This idea is based on the distinctly African notion of *Ubuntu* which is loosely translated as: I am because you are. This idea that we are mutually constitutive as human beings expands to being connected to everything – Graham (in Tamale, 2020: 21) explains it as 'oneness of mind, body and spirit; and the value of interpersonal relationships' and Ntseane explains the spirit as 'the ultimate oneness with nature and the fundamental interconnectedness of all things' (Ntseane, 2011: 313). The idea of connection runs counter to the Eurocentric ideas of individualism and separation of the mind from the body, which dominate western academia (Collins, 2003). It is an orientation that we find useful in our analyses because it points to ways that we can heal and enable some of the damages of inequality in the education sector in South Africa. We use this idea of reconnection to seek out ways that validate the experiences of young Black people, reconnecting them to each other, and to re-affirm them as legitimate knowledge-makers. We think through ways in which the university can reconnect with students, and with the idea of the public good, as a way towards a decolonial future. For the authors of this paper, the connectedness that we experienced as ES students while in our first year, and the connectedness we felt with each other while working on this project during the pandemic, encouraged us to see how reconnection could be a way to address the inequalities in the sector.

Our research focus: Inequalities in the education sector

We have explained our project, and the lens we used to examine social problems. Many of our discussions and the submissions to topics in the WDIOH project dealt with the frustrations of dealing with inequalities in the university. This was particularly difficult in the shift to online, remote, emergency teaching and learning in response to the pandemic. Our approach to this is to notice that the pandemic exposed inequalities that were already there, and perhaps gives us the opportunity to address these with more energy now.

As was the case with many countries, South Africa adapted its educational provisions in response to pandemic conditions to 'distance learning' and 'remote, emergency learning' (Commonwealth of Learning, 2020). This applied to schools and universities. Online learning can be explained as teaching delivered on a digital device that aims to promote and support learning (Ferri, et al., 2020). South Africa was perhaps doomed to fail in its aim to provide all learners and students with this kind of learning, given the high levels of inequality to start with. A study by Mpungose (2020) revealed that only a few students had access to the online learning platform. This stalled their shift from face-to-face learning to remote learning. So, while South Africa was quick to follow western practices, the ongoing legacies of colonialism and apartheid that have seen the widening divide between the rich and the majority poor, meant that only the elite could embrace the change without being left behind.

Exposing the inequalities in universities

As South Africa went into lockdown to try to contain the spread of Covid-19, the Minister of Higher Education and Training announced the shift to online learning, leaving it up to individual universities to decide how they would implement online learning. While online teaching and learning may appear to offer the advantage of greater accessibility, the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the depth of the digital divide and how complex and multi-layered it is (Gupta, 2020: 1).

Nationally, only 22 per cent of households have computers and 10 per cent of households have an internet connection. In the Limpopo and North West provinces, only 1.6 per cent and 3.6 per cent of households have internet access in their homes respectively (Amnesty International, 2021). Country-wide, school children and students from wealthier communities and homes with computers and internet access were able to continue with remote learning, leaving children of the working class to fend for themselves with limited access to devices, data, and stationery, to make remote learning possible (Amnesty International, 2021; Anciano, et al., 2020). Even though universities attempted to make online learning accessible by providing laptops, data, and printed materials for students, this was not enough to bridge the divide as the majority of the students' challenges were compounded by the lack of a conducive place to study in crowded homes. Some students were prevented from learning because of household chores and family responsibilities (Anciano, et al., 2020; Pillay, et al., 2021).

These difficulties are explained in some depth in Mpungose's study (2020). Firstly, he claims that only a few students had access to the online learning platform and explains the intersectional nature of this exclusion: 'issues such as socio-economic factors, race, social class, gender, age, geographical area and educational background determine the level of the digital divide in a university context' (Mpungose, 2020: 2). Secondly, he argues that learning is essentially interactive, arguing that 'students are not taken as a blank slate or passive recipients of information but are taken as active participants who can nurture, maintain, and traverse network connections to access, share and use information for learning' (Mpungose, 2020: 3). There is an overlap between this kind of thinking and the African feminist ideas of communal

knowledge-making (Ntseane 2011). While group interaction could have been exploited and expanded through different social media platforms, in most cases it was not. Mpungose (2020) explains that very little training was offered to staff, and so the resources provided by teaching staff to students depended on their connectivity. In many cases, because of a lack of exposure and training to different methods, lecturers and teachers failed to encourage the kinds of connected learning that would normally take place in face-to-face lectures, in between lectures, in dining halls and through social media group chats such as Facebook and WhatsApp.

Project participants expressed their frustrations with the move to online learning, supporting some of Mpungose's claims. The first echoes the digital divide based on economic conditions, which is also manifest in the living environment:

I do not have any Wi-Fi, and this made me to depend more on limited data to keep up the output of deliverables. Not only that, but the type of environment we occupy makes it hard to maintain good learning. In a sense, for example, the state of our residences in which we reside is appalling while on the other side we are expected to excel academically (WDIOH Submission 4: 2021).

Another participant commented on the nature of learning that took place in these kinds of conditions:

... the online learning that is happening has put the poor Black child from the location in a really disadvantage. In this online learning there is no learning that is done, it is just submitting and moving on ... You are just reading readings to answer the questions that are asked in the assignments. The universities believe by giving students data that is making the learning equal, but there is nothing that is equal in this learning (WDIOH Submission 5: 2021).

This submission confirms the point that Mpungose (2020) makes regarding the conversational, communal, informal learning that takes place between classes and should have taken place on social media platforms if lecturers and students were better prepared and better connected.

Another comment points to the unseen burdens placed on many students from poorer households, where academic activities were deprioritised, often in gendered ways, as female students were expected to take on caring and household chores:

Being a student under these circumstances has been very difficult for me. Living in a three-roomed house, where I would have to wait for everyone to go to sleep, so that I could have the space to myself, where I would then be able to learn without being disturbed. Secondly, trying to balance everything else with the responsibilities that I have – the chores, cleaning

and cooking and looking after my sibling. It is not easy, but I try to balance everything out (WDIOH Submission 7: 2021).

One of the project participants compared the experiences of online learning between students from different institutions. She contacted friends of hers at different universities to gain a picture of the similarities and differences between universities in the Eastern Cape Province. Her first observation was that even within universities, inequalities flourish:

... even if students are enrolled in the same university, it does not mean they are equal or the same. Different backgrounds or social statuses may have different impact on how students respond or receive [to] institutional measures (WDIOH Submission 9: 2021).

She outlined the different timeframes for starting online teaching and learning, noting that two of the four public universities in the Eastern Cape began soon after lockdown, whereas the others two took months to begin. Furthermore, she noticed a discrepancy in the provision of data:

Students from some universities received little to no data to cover online learning, while some received a lot of data.... However, I do acknowledge that universities differ in their capacities, abilities and sponsorships, but we cannot turn a blind eye to how this negatively impact on students from other universities. I believe that the Department Education needed to fill in the gaps to ensure that all students in universities are provided with all resources needed for online learning and resources that would sustain them throughout the whole process (WDIOH Submission 9: 2021).

Based on the above realities of these students, online learning during the Covid-19 lockdown has been shown as not the most inclusive method of learning for university students from low socio-economic backgrounds. As one of the project participants concluded:

South African universities have also proved to show lack of comprehensive understanding of our unequal societies and its students, and it is the duty of universities to inform decisions that will close this gap, as universities deal with knowledge (WDIOH Submission 16: 2021).

The inequalities in and between universities, established by colonialism and apartheid and exacerbated by the pandemic, failed to recognise, and support the challenges experienced by the majority poor, leading to disastrous consequences. As an academic community, decolonising our thinking in how we approach the emergency shifts during a pandemic and how and what we teach, is, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) and Pillay (2015) claim, a way to bring about epistemic justice and also to find relevant and sustainable solutions to issues of inequality. Our contribution to this

work has been to expose the inequalities that we and others like us have experienced, using the decolonial lens that values embodied knowledge, communal knowledge-making, and finding an African-centred perspective.

Reconnection of university to society as a public good

We argue that because of the pandemic, and how it changed our approach to teaching and learning, we can use our insights into the unequal provision of education to rethink how to go forward. Reconnection is a useful idea when we consider the role of the university in society, and we emphasise its importance in contributing new ideas that can assist our society to reduce the inequalities that marginalise the majority poor.

Higher education has long been considered a public good. Kant (1979) argued that universities played a critical role in holding state bodies and the professions to account. With this understanding of its role, the university could have had a critical role to play as the state responded to the pandemic, often in ways that did not make sense to ordinary people. If university leaders were more connected to who their students were/are, they might have had insight into how many poor Black students would struggle with the switch to online learning.

The definition of public good in relation to higher education has shifted over time. For example, universities have thrived in the modern period as central public institutions and bases for critical thought. At the time of pandemic adjustments, universities were confronted by a variety of social forces and were compelled to undergo changes in their structures and their association with the rest of society. How universities coped with pandemic conditions is important to us as academics because the ongoing transformation of universities will affect (or not) the intensification of social inequality, privatisation of public institutions, and reorganisation of access to knowledge. Losing our way in the understanding of our purpose as a public good fundamentally challenges the nature of higher education. Arendt (1954) suggests that education plays a role in training new groups of students into the knowledge of a pre-existing world for them to make anew; and now, in a different century, post-pandemic, there is even more urgency and reason to facilitate this process.

Giroux (2010) supports Arendt (1954) and adds that higher education could be a space for making alternative futures, whether through study, research and discovery, teaching, professional learning, managing, organising, leading, consulting, and engaging with various communities of practice, the communities we live in and with industry. Giroux (2010) theorised neoliberalism, and foresaw that universities would increasingly be locations of inequality. These inequalities were exacerbated during the lockdowns in South Africa. Only the relatively rich could access the key combination of goods such as data, laptops, and a favourable environment to study. Zheng and Walsham (2021) support this claim, and argued that during times such as the pandemic 'digital inequality operates at the intersection of the multiple fracture lines of differences that mediates the various spaces of inclusion/exclusion' .

As the most unequal society in the world (Sguazzin, 2021), the majority of South African society falls into the category of poor. Who then is the public, and what is the "good" that

universities will recommend and support? If most students also fall into the category of “poor” , then we argue that rigorous attention needs to be paid to the socio-economic arrangements of these students when provisioning educational support, not only during times of a pandemic, but as we plan for sustainable educational systems going forward. There needs to be a reconnection between the university and the public good, and a reconnection with who the students are and how to support their aspirations.

There are three recommendations we make as contributions towards reconnecting the university to its students, as the “public” in public good. None of them are new ideas, but they are emphasised here as a timely reminder. Firstly, universities must lead the fight against injustices and inequalities in our communities through education and through focused research. South African universities already do this, and what we argue for is a greater emphasis on decolonised models of education and research. When students are engaged in thinking critically, and research methodologies are geared towards local issues with community participation, sustainable change can happen. Research could be guided by Mkabela’s principles of collaborative practice, where she argues for research happening *with*, and not merely *in*, a community (Mkabela, 2005). Moletsane (2015) argues that this kind of decolonial re-ordering leads to greater agency and empowerment, and critical thinking amongst participants:

... in recognising the contested nature of local interpretations and knowledge generally, we actively enable participants to confront, critique, and challenge such understandings in order to develop alternative understandings. This means that members of communities must be able to meaningfully participate in all activities meant to achieve this (Moletsane, 2015: 45).

Our research project, WIDOH, was a participatory collaboration between students, former students and a lecturer, where we worked towards mutual agency and responsibility. We believe that these kinds of research approaches can have helpful outcomes for the researchers as well as the communities they work with and are part of.

Secondly, curricula that speak to students’ lived realities are more likely to encourage and inspire solutions for inequalities in society, especially if African and decolonial scholars form the core of curricula (Okech, 2020). Reconnecting with who the students are, means rethinking curricula and theories to make them representative of us. Local examples to illustrate concepts would be a way to connect students to their lived realities. The critical thinking skills we learn in university can be more effectively applied to localised social issues that have been introduced to demonstrate how Afrocentric theories work. We ask for a much greater emphasis on decolonised pedagogy and curricula, to undo the ways that university education has tended towards western ideas and neoliberal notions of economic effectiveness and individualism, resulting in a disconnection from the majority of students.

Thirdly, poor students are best placed to understand the complexities and struggles of our lives. We assume that the urgent shifts and plans to cope with pandemic lockdown conditions

are not the last time that the university will be called upon to make urgent changes in response to outside forces. Students are not blank slates; we are not ignorant of how to cope with crises. We ask that all students, especially those whose vulnerabilities are compounded by national or global emergencies, should be consulted on how to manage crises. We believe we have contributions to make and should work collaboratively to strategise on how to adapt teaching and learning during these times. We recommend working collaboratively with students, including those who are rural, and/or poor, to come up with relevant interventions during times of crisis.

Reconnection between universities and schools – teacher training, and the transition between school and tertiary education

We claimed at the beginning of this article that students arrive at university with contributions to make, but they are often unprepared for what is expected of them in the university system. We have argued in the previous section that this is partly to do with the unpreparedness of the university, and a lack of understanding who their students are. We argue that decolonising curricula and pedagogy is a move in the right direction, and that greater consultation and collaboration with students is necessary. In this section, we ask if the university has a greater role to play in the school system. This links to the role of the university as a “public good”, in that schooling is also part of the “good” that requires the attention of higher education. Our experience as learners who were unprepared for university (and one of the authors now as a teacher in a rural school) leads us to the conclusion that there is the need for more attention to the connection between universities and the school system. Jansen (2008) noted that there is substantial evidence that current school preparation is insufficient to ensure a successful transition from high school to higher education. As a group, we discussed and concluded that a key purpose of school is to prepare children for university and/or their career paths. Schools are set to provide for the fullest development of each learner to live morally, creatively, and productively in a democratic society (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). However, we have witnessed learners struggling to adapt to universities due to a lack of career guidance and preparedness for university – and thus we believe that there is not enough relationship between the school system and the tertiary education system.

The economic and social inequalities in schools means that there is an uneven preparation for post-school life. Learners who can afford to go to private or elite schools are given career guidance or relevant preparation for the tertiary level of their studies. As Modiba and Sefotho (2019) point out, career guidance is part of the Life Orientation (LO) offering, but teachers outside of the few elite schools are underprepared. They argue that ‘LO teachers seem to experience confusion, feelings of incompetence, and insufficient training that points to a need for training and professional development’ (Modiba & Sefotho, 2019). These teachers and the learners they teach are faced with challenges that make information about, and preparation for, tertiary education difficult, if not impossible. As a project participant explains:

I went to a public school that never offered career guidance, only top performing learners would be chosen to go to career expos and even those career expos were not as detailed and significant as they needed to be. In high school I thought the only courses I could do when I get to tertiary were law and psychology based on the subjects I did. Little did I know that there were so many career paths that I could follow, as a result I got to understand what I was passionate about when I got to my final year of undergraduate study. Fortunately, for me I had the option to choose from three different subjects I had done through my undergraduate studies. (WDIOH Submission 9: 2021)

Many schoolteachers, including those who teach Life Orientation, are trained in universities, and it seems that there is work to be done to reconnect this provisioning of the university to the teachers who need to feel more equipped and secure about teaching senior learners more rigorously about what to expect at university, or post-school.

Besides the exposure to career guidance, there are other factors that work against an easy transition from school to university. In the WDIOH project the language issue came up. For example, one participant explained the difficulty in engaging with difficult concepts, or of asking the relevant and important questions about content, because of a lack of exposure to English in the schooling years:

All of my life up to that moment I had communicated in vernacular languages. Even the English I encountered, I engaged it in my vernacular language... So before one even engages with Karl Marx, one was confronted with English itself. Reading was much easier than raising a hand to ask a question in Barrat I must confess So, to avoid this seemingly apparent embarrassment on raising a hand to ask, say, why Marx' s 'Historical Materialism' pays no regard to problem of race in society for instance. Not asking at all felt safe (WDIOH Submission 10, 2020)

The transition from school to university means a shift in the kind of language competencies that are expected. More research on the complexities of multilingualism needs to be undertaken in this regard in universities (see for example Mkhize & Balfour, 2017) and in schools (see for instance, Setati, et al., 2008) on how to include and intellectualise indigenous languages (see Kashula & Maseko, 2017; Knowles, et al., 2023). There are many reasons why teachers teach the way they do, including the institutional cultures of their schools, but importantly it would seem that teacher training, undertaken in universities, could and should pay more attention to the potential lived realities of some school communities, to be inclusive of diverse South African contexts. A decolonial approach to teacher training would facilitate a more contextual focus, including the complex issue of language. There needs to be greater synergy and connection between departments in the university that are addressing this issue – for instance the collaborations between the African Languages and the Political and International Studies

departments at UCKAR (see Knowles, et al., 2023), and the Education Faculty who oversee teaching training.

Besides English being the language of choice, there are other alienating aspects of the institutional culture at UCKAR showing a western bias, that affect the day-to-day experiences of African students. These issues are being addressed over time, but a number of the participants shared their experiences of alienation when they first arrived at UCKAR. A project participant explained:

I remember my first day sitting at the dining hall and all I could see was a fork and knife, and I wondered what is going to happen when I chose the option to eat pap. Am I going to use a fork and knife to eat pap? And that was obviously a no because that was not something I was used to. However, as time went by and being in residence leadership the next year we asked for more diversity and inclusion, because we wanted to feel at home and be comfortable. So, these are some of the kinds of factors that makes the transition from school to university difficult for some learners. There needs to be a smoother transition in terms of cultural practices, including language, between a more forgiving school system and the university system. (WDIOH Submission 18: 2021)

Wane speaks of the way in which her schooling and university experience alienated her from her own culture (Wane, 2008). Post-pandemic, this kind of alienation is something that we could address as we consider the transitions between schools and universities. According to Cliff (2020), the sad reality of higher education in South Africa is that only about one third of the students who qualify to gain entry into higher education are actually prepared for the academic literacy demands of a university. Much of this, we argue, can be attributed to South Africa's weak education system, and poor alignment between schools and universities. The transition gap from secondary to tertiary education is a challenge to many first-year students. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) describes this as the articulation gap, a discontinuity in the transition from one educational stage to the next (CHE, 2013). Even the brightest students who get good grades in public schools often experience conspicuously bad grades for the first time when they enter universities (Rogan, 2018), because the articulation gap has not been adequately addressed. Unfortunately, most educational institutions try to solve the problem of poor schooling only after students enrol in higher education (Lombard, 2020). Only a few institutions actively intervene by addressing this issue at the secondary school level (Bangser, 2008). Most students find the transition difficult or simply lack the skills and motivation needed to succeed in higher education.


Any education system depends on the quality of its teaching profession (Wolhuter, 2006). Wolhuter points out that the quality of the teacher is dependent on their training in universities. He goes on to argue that education is regarded as one of the main means to bring about the desired social change (Wolhuter, 2006). As we have argued, many teachers in public schools – especially in the rural areas – are not equipped for providing intense career guidance or mentoring learners into realising their paths and preparing them for university. A study in 2018

pointed out that 'current teachers were less confident about their training, and most university faculty did not believe that they were effectively trained' (Jez & Luneta, 2018), pointing to further work that needs to be done to align the work between universities and schools. More focused research is required, to reduce the inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic in the education sector.

Conclusion

We have argued that the measures undertaken by the education sector in South Africa during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns failed to understand and support students who were most vulnerable during this time. The inequalities that have plagued South African society were exposed, and have provided an opportunity to consider the areas that need work, going forward. Using the data from a project that was run during the pandemic with former ES students at UCKAR, we have argued that the university perpetuates inequalities by relying on Eurocentric curricula and neoliberal ideas. We recommend that a shift to decolonial thinking firstly revives the idea of the university as a public good. Secondly, we recognise students, and particularly poor Black students as part of this public. We argue for a reconnection between the university and its students by offering more representative and decolonised curricula, and by greater collaboration with students in times of crises. We also recommend a reconnection between the university and the school sector, so that a more successful transition between school and university is enabled. This includes paying attention to greater levels of engagement between universities and schools, and adequate and appropriate teacher training that empowers teachers to provide effective career and post-school advice. These measures, we believe, are some of the ways to begin to address the extreme levels of inequality in the higher education sector.

Author biographies

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Abongile James did her undergraduate studies at Rhodes University (BSS) and later obtained PGCE (IP). She is currently a teacher in a small area called Alicedale. Her aspiration is to enrich a black child coming from marginalised backgrounds, and to also develop within her field to bring about transformation in Basic Education.

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Milisa Roboji is a Rhodes University development studies masters graduate who currently works in South Korea as a teacher. Her interests are community engagement and development, and GBV activism. She is an aspiring developmentalist and researcher. She is also very passionate about mentoring young girls especially those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Matimu Shivambu is a young and ambitious man born in the rural villages of Limpopo. He completed his Junior and Honours degree at Rhodes University. He is currently a registered full time Master's student from the institution. Matimu is an active student leader and community engagement advocate.

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Towards understanding the influence of rurality on students' access to and participation in higher education

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Abstract

This study examines the experiences of students from rural backgrounds in higher education in South Africa in order to foster more equitable access and participation. Edward Soja's notion of spatial justice provides a platform for thinking about rurality and its impact on access and success in HE. Soja's trialectical account means understanding rurality historically, spatially, and socially, and enables exploration of spatial inequalities based on the interplay between rurality and HE. Data was collected within an interpretive, qualitative, case study design through document analysis, interviews, and focus groups. The findings reveal the inequalities that students experience in HE due to their rural backgrounds and the fact that their experiences, abilities, and knowledges are neither acknowledged nor valued in the university, often by the students themselves. This study contributes to understandings of the historical, social, and spatial foundations of inequality in HE and charts future directions for policy and practice.

Keywords: higher education, rural students, spatial justice, Thirdspace

Introduction

Universities are considered developmental spaces of becoming. This means that access to university education may provide a step-wise change in circumstances especially for students from rural and less privileged backgrounds (Hall, 2012; Leibowitz, 2012). Sociologists and economists of education have examined a variety of factors related to family background, race, gender, social class, and income as main predictors of university access across developed and developing countries. However, spatial factors have received less attention and are often placed in a residual category with other unexplained factors. Foster (1977) is considered among the first scholars to argue that geographical disparities should be considered among key educational inequalities in developing countries. Other scholars such as Kanbur and Venable (2005) have



provided seminal accounts by compiling empirical evidence on spatial inequalities in more than fifty developing countries. In recent years, a volume of research in South Africa has attempted to understand the complexities of the problems of rural communities and schooling (see Naidoo, et al., 2020; Timmis, et al., 2019; Walker & Mathebula, 2019; Walker, 2019). Given the attention to spatial inequalities in the scholarly literature, rurality may be an important stratifier of educational outcomes that requires further investigation.

Rurality is a complex phenomenon that can be understood as both a demographic and social category that intersects with other categories, such as race, gender, and social class. In the South African context, inequality and rural poverty is exceptional because of the impact of both colonialism and apartheid as characterised by institutionalised racism and brutal exploitation of black people who were denied equal access to educational opportunities, including HE. With the advent of democracy, several policies in government as well as in HEIs were drafted with the aim of redressing educational inequalities and affirming the principle of equity. Despite efforts made by government and HEIs to redress who gets access to academia, many students continue to be disadvantaged by virtue of their identities and economic, social, and geographic backgrounds, as most initiatives fail to address the deeply entrenched and systemic inequalities that affect students from rural communities. This is in part because limited literature exists surrounding the experiences of rural students in accessing and succeeding at university in South Africa.

This paper attempts to contextualise rurality and HE especially in the South African setting where disparities have to do with apartheid and continuing economic and social disparities. Against this backdrop, this study underscores the need to explore rural students' experiences in accessing and participating at university, by answering the following research questions: How does rurality influence students' access to university in South Africa? And how do students from rural areas in South Africa experience learning and participation at university? In this study, we argue that background plays a vital role in influencing student success. Rural students come from backgrounds underpinned by values and socio-cultural systems that are very different from that of urban students and those who come from economically privileged backgrounds. As such, the ways in which students from rural contexts experience HE cannot be the same as those of urban students. Our assumption is affirmed by several studies (see Li, 2010; Yang, 2010), including in Canada, (Lehmann, 2012; Looker & Andres, 2001), in the United States of America (Ast, 2014; Holmes & Dalton, 2008; Jack, 2019), and in Australia (Roberts & Green, 2013). What these studies show is that there are glaring gaps that exist between rural and urban areas in terms of standards of living, and occupational, cultural, and educational opportunities. More specifically, for rural students, these studies show that urban students have an apparent advantage over rural students mainly because of the subtle but significant differences in their formative school achievement, and the psychological support available to support them in accessing and succeeding in HE.

Contextualising South African HE

In the South African context, social inequalities are entrenched in all aspects of social life, as a product of the systemic exclusion of black people under colonialism and apartheid (Badat, 2010).

Colonialism and apartheid are racially based systems of inequality in which black people were denied equal access to educational opportunities including HE. With the advent of democracy, a higher education White Paper was drafted that set out the task of transforming a racially segregated system into one that responds to the demands of the new democracy in a new global era (Department of Education (DoE), 1997). The policy directed the state to ‘redress educational inequalities among those sections of our people who have suffered particular disadvantages’ and affirm the principle of equity so that all citizens have ‘the same quality of learning opportunities’ (DoE, 1995: 16–17). However, the advent of democracy was not sufficient for the elimination of historic and structural inequalities.

While institutions of higher learning are reimagining and reframing their structures and practices to address these deeply embedded inequalities, several concerns have been raised about the preparedness of South African students to undertake university studies. Lecturers and university systems continue to frame students and their background as “lacking” essential academic and cultural resources; this denotes a deficit view which fails to address inadequacies and unpreparedness on the part of HEIs to meet the needs of students from rural backgrounds (Agumba, 2022).

It is worth noting that the origin of inequalities in HE access and success often lies outside the HE sector itself, namely in the earlier stages of education (McCowan, 2007). A study by Leibowitz (2012) on students’ prior learning experiences revealed that for a majority of students, rurality (in combination with race) co-produces the repertoires, in terms of practices, literacies, and values, that the students use as they transition into and through HE. After 1994, the South African government eliminated explicit policies that were aimed at keeping black students out of certain universities, and sought to expand access and establish a socially just and equitable HE system. While an increase in the number of black students in the university may signify inclusion of those previously excluded, physical access alone does not guarantee epistemological access, inclusion and success especially for black students from rural provinces in South Africa (Morrow, 2009).

Despite these efforts, some barriers, such as unfair admission processes, unequal funding arrangements, and financial constraints provide inequitable university opportunities for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (especially those from poor-rural areas). For example, even though the South African government adopted “fee-free” HE in 2018 to lessen the access burden, students from rural areas and those from low-income families still have to find funds for general upkeep including accommodation, food, transport, books and so on. Therefore, for these students, accessing and succeeding in the South African HE context becomes even more challenging (Martinez-Vargas, et al., 2020).

The need for transformation in South African universities was foregrounded by student protests, beginning with the #RhodesMustFall movement in 2015–2016, which led to major upheaval in the university system. These protests called for decolonisation of curricula that they argued were framed with reference to race and social class (Naidoo, et al., 2020). Research conducted by the University of Cape Town working group set up in 2016 after the protests

revealed that curriculum content at the University of Cape Town was still imbued with colonialism. This is because black, working-class students felt that their knowledges and practices were not acknowledged and/or valued. For example, music students claimed that certain subjects and repertoires were more highly valued in that western classics and jazz (American genres) enjoyed more prestige than African music. The report also indicated that English, which is not the first language of most students, was seen as a measure of intelligence and ability to communicate, in that certain English accents were deemed “not professional enough” in oral examination (Macupe, 2018). While acknowledging current interventions and policy directives to make universities inclusive, such interventions have not responded adequately to the intersections and complexities of rurality and access to HE.

Barriers to and support for university enrolment and persistence

To understand the challenges experienced by students from rural backgrounds in accessing and succeeding in HE, we first need to unpack the complexities of rurality and how this affects access and success in HEIs. According to Sauvageot and da Graça (2007), rurality continues to be a highly contested concept, and no universal definition has been adopted as yet. In the South African context, the complexity of defining the construct of rurality includes a powerful historical element (Gwanya, 2010; Halfacree, 2006). In this study, rurality is defined as a real and imagined geographical space and human condition which is characterised by marginalisation but also encompassing unrecognised and unacknowledged potential that can contribute to the development of humanity. This definition attempts to understand rurality as a composite construct with many interrelated dimensions and not just as limited to a geographical location. This understanding brings together educational, socio-economic, and cultural particularities of different types of localities and the cumulative rural disadvantage and opportunities that it affords (Ndofirepi & Maringe, 2020).

The spatial nature of the education sector continues to exacerbate and perpetuate inequalities as policies that have been formulated continue to mask the deeply entrenched patterns of spatial inequalities including the influence of rurality in education provision and achievement (Christie, 2013). For example, even though students from rural backgrounds may have high educational aspiration, they are academically disadvantaged in matriculation¹ examinations due to the sometimes-lower quality of their secondary education characterised by under-resourced schools and under-qualified teachers. As a result, particular competencies related to academic practice, are often not sufficiently addressed in schools (Jones, et al., 2008). Although studies reveal that rural students can negotiate their way to success at university (Mgqwashu, et al., 2020; Walker, 2020; Walker & Mathebula, 2019), they face considerable challenges, since there is a gap between their sociocultural practices and those of the institution.

¹ At the end of secondary or high school, learners write a final set of examinations which are known by the term matric – and learners who pass are said to have matriculated.

Even though students from rural background show remarkable resilience, affordability lies at the heart of rural disadvantage in HE access. In South Africa, there are extreme rural-urban disparities in wealth and income (World Bank, 2022), which exacerbate inequalities in accessing and meaningfully participating in HEIs. The World Bank report (2022) shows that people living in rural areas in South Africa experience significantly higher levels of poverty, lower levels of income and wealth and higher levels of socio-economic deprivation than urban residents. Given that most universities are in urban areas, students from rural areas need to make special transport and living arrangements away from their family home to pursue their studies. This means their living cost will be significantly higher for students from rural communities than their urban counterparts who may easily commute from their family home.

Access to information about university admission as well as financial aid processes remains a challenge for students from rural communities (Li & Qiu, 2018). The scarcity of information and advice about university access opportunities and financial aid knowledge often results in these students being excluded from this benefit. In addition, access to HEI in South Africa is directly linked to the family's ability to afford the tuition fees and other related costs. In choosing a HEI, families have to consider application costs, registration costs, tuition costs, accommodation costs, travelling costs etc. For some, even though the tuition, registration and accommodation cost may be covered by some financial aid schemes, these students still encounter other financial constraints such as travelling costs, accommodation costs, upkeep costs etc. (Jones, et al., 2008). These challenges can be overwhelming and may potentially result in poor performance; more often than not, lecturers are unaware that students from rural areas experience these challenges that may affect their optimal participation in teaching and learning.

Educational inequality is also associated with cumulative generational effects of overall lower levels of educational attainment in the family (Li & Qui, 2018). Students who have parents with HE credentials and who are in high-status occupations, tend to have more information about the HE system and are better able to decode this information and can make informed choices about the fields of study and institutions to apply to (Ayalon, 2007; Pfeffer, 2008). This means that more selective disciplines such as law and medicine are mainly composed of students from backgrounds with high socioeconomic status while many students from disadvantaged groups tend to choose less selective disciplines such as education and the social sciences (Reimer & Pollak, 2005).

Theoretical framework: spatial justice

While many studies have examined a variety of factors related to family background and how these impact on university access and success, spatial factors have received less attention as they are usually placed within other unexplained residual categories. By using Edward Soja's (1996) notion of re/landimagined spaces, this study hopes to confront issues of social, historical, and spatial disparities and their impact on educational opportunity and access in relation to each other. Isolating, ignoring, omitting, or suppressing one element may lead to distorted and systemically flawed understandings of social practices. Inspired by Foucault's (1997) notion of

heterotopia and Lefebvre's monumentality, Soja extended their views to include alternative spatiality (Soja, 1989, 1993, 1996). Drawing heavily on Lefebvre as well as studies of marginalised groupings, Soja attempts to embrace the unvoiced whose spatiality is persistently ignored.

To understand how social spatiality is produced through social practice, Soja proposes a trialectic of spatiality each with its own epistemology. The Firstspace epistemologies represent the perceived space. It is the space that privileges literal physical perception of spatial, social, and historical awareness of objectivity and materiality that can be empirically tested. Firstspace epistemologies are concerned with description of the physical, material, and other social conditions of the world (Soja, 1996). Nevertheless, Soja (1996) argues that this space alone is incomplete and partial with a blurred boundary separating it from the Secondspace.

Secondspace epistemologies are conceived rather than perceived. Spatial knowledge is thus produced and reproduced through imagination and conceptual thinking, of the mind, metaphor, and belief. Knowledge of this material reality is essentially ideational, reflexive, and individualised (Soja, 1996: 78-81). Soja (1996) suggests that if representations of Secondspaces are to be seriously considered, then Firstspace would collapse into the Secondspace.

The Thirdspace domain represents a strategic place of political choice, of rethinking new possibilities and resistance. The Thirdspace is labelled "realandimagined" (all as one word), indicating that the binaries that structure conceptions and perceptions are mutually informing and if separated would destroy the lived connections between the two. For Soja, this is the space where people's conceptions, perceptions and lived experiences are often contested and continuously constructed and reconstructed. It is the place where the real and imagined intertwine with other social indicators of capitalism, race, patriarchy and other material-spatial practices of reproduction, exploitation, and domination. Therefore, according to Soja (1996), these are the spaces of the marginalised. However, as Soja (1996) notes, the Thirdspaces have been lost or suppressed and they need to be restored. The Thirdspace represents a site for struggle, liberation, and emancipation; as such, its spatiality needs to be examined in relation to the historical and social dimension of a social practice.

Methodology

As noted earlier, the aim of this research was to explore situated personal experiences and, in particular, to investigate the trajectories of students from rural areas in accessing and transitioning through university. As such, an interpretivist perspective was deemed useful as it enables researchers to explore the personal experiences and perceptions of students from rural background and to understand how they interpret their access to and success in university. The philosophical underpinnings of interpretivism were used to foreground the explanatory as well as analytical tools for the study; thus, an inductive approach was followed to ensure that individuals' experiential accounts are understood (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). The study adopted a qualitative design. This approach enables us to adopt different lenses, filters, and angles of viewing rurality to discover new perceptions and cognitions about students from rural areas and their experiences in HE.

A case study was found to be suitable as it facilitated the collection of detailed, in-depth information through document analysis, interviews, and focus groups of the meanings (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) that rural students assign to their experiences as they transition through university. In this study, a holistic single case study with embedded units was undertaken. Figure 1 illustrates this case study design. Using purposive sampling techniques, 24 participants from the University of Johannesburg undergraduate degree programs were selected. Sixteen participants from the faculty of education, and eight from the faculties of science and engineering. A matrix was used with the following criteria: race/ethnicity, gender, geographical origin and first generation at university.

Only 18 participants agreed to be interviewed. Semi-structured interviews afforded participants the opportunity to reflect on their learning trajectories through university and how their rural background impacted on their academic journey at university. In addition, homogenous focus group interviews were conducted. Participants from each faculty were interviewed separately in order to encourage the participants as a group to reflect and share their views and experiences of their rural backgrounds and the impact this has on their university experience and, more specifically, on the courses that they pursued. Both one-on-one and focus groups interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Interview and focus group schedules were used to facilitate the discussion.

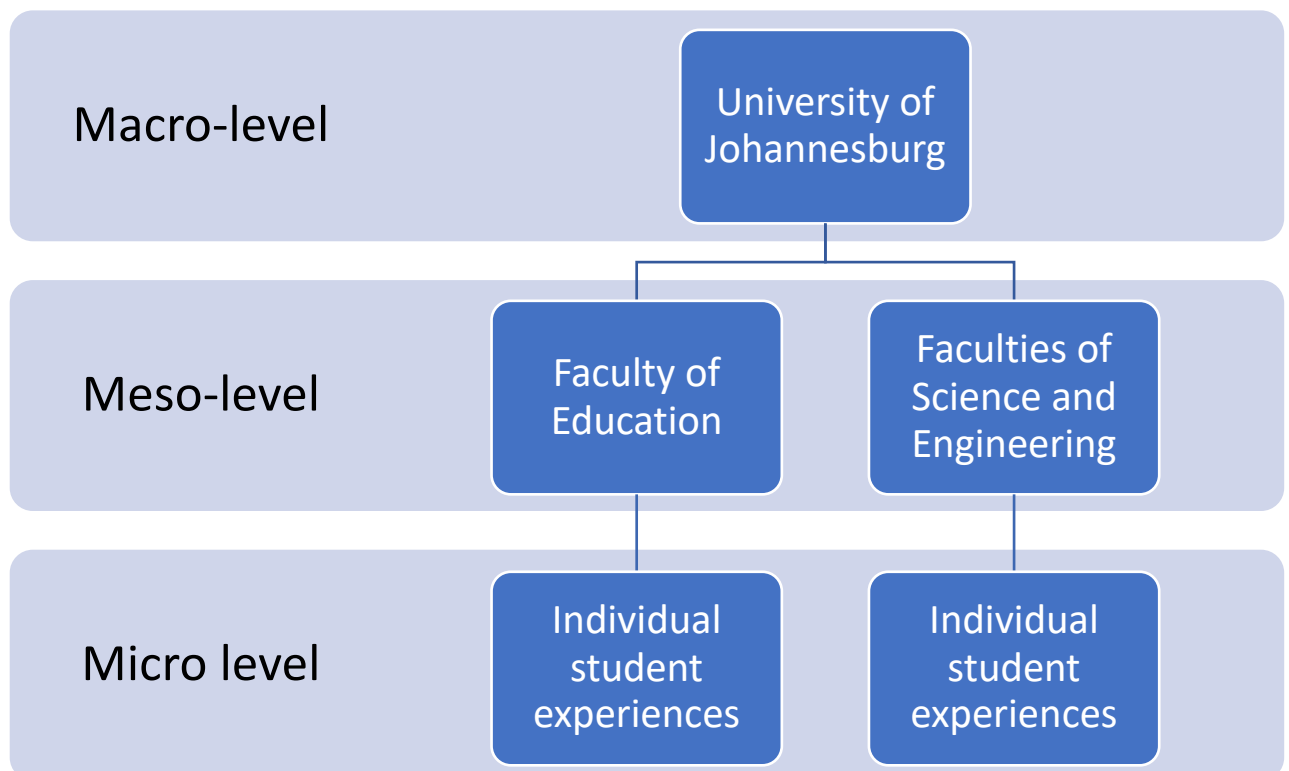


Figure 1: Holistic case study with embedded units (Agumba, 2022)

A computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), ATLAS.ti, was used to help with the management and organisation of data for analysis. ATLAS.ti allows easy access to

quotations upon which codes and themes from a variety of sources are developed. This facilitated continuous, context-based categorisation, grouping, and interlinking. Examining meaning that respondents assigned to concepts at the same time helped to avoid 'reifying concepts not contextually grounded in actual respondent quotations' (Beaulaurier, et al., 2008). Data analysis in this study is based on interpretivism. The underlying assumption in an interpretive approach is that 'reality is socially constructed and that researchers do not find knowledge, they construct it' (Merriam, 2009: 9-10).

The study employs thematic content analysis. Hence the explanations in this study are based on a selection of critical incidents and triangulation across data sources. Excerpts of verbatim expressions from the data are used as a way of offering rich narrative descriptions to present student's life experiences and actions. The overall objective is to identify patterns or themes in the data and to make sense of the data (Patton, 2015). The different data sets used (semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews) function together to address the research questions thus contributing to understanding of the case as a whole. In this way, the researcher's role can be equated to that of an archaeologist piecing together student's trajectories.

Thematic content analysis involved reading each transcript thoroughly to identify provisional categories. After identification of provisional categories, the transcripts were coded. Creswell (2007) defines coding as a process of segmenting data (text or images) obtained during data collection into categories and placing labels on those categories with a term derived from the language of the participants. Patterns are established from the recurrent use of specific words and phrases. The more repetition, the more stable the patterns that serve as meaningful representations of participants' ways of living (Saldaña, 2015). An extended phrase (theme) is derived from a holistic and continuous review of the data corpus. Where no new codes are generated, the data is said to have reached saturation. It is at this point of saturation that the analysis process ceases. Figure 2 demonstrates a typical progression of the data analysis process.

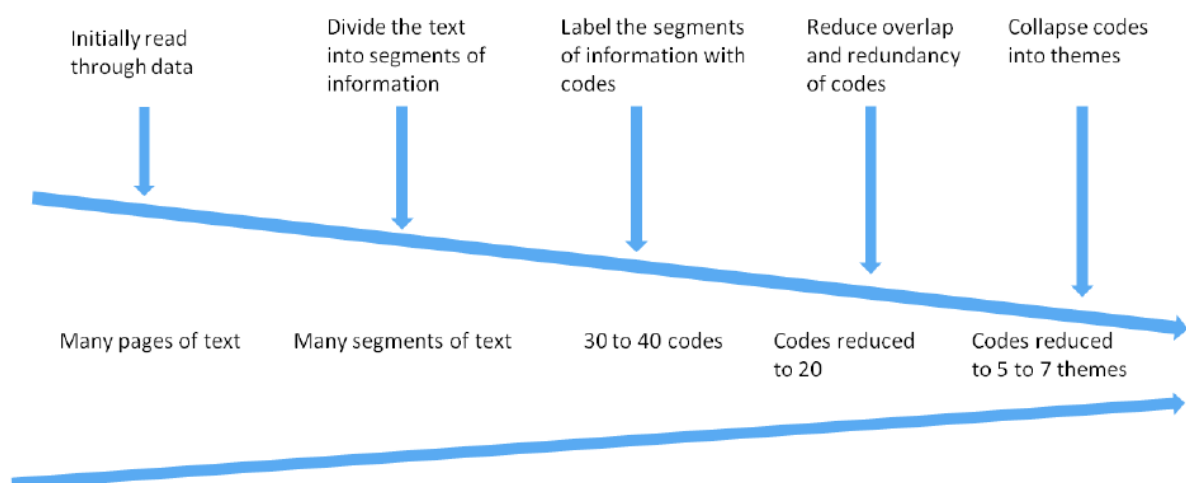


Figure 2: A visual model of the coding process in qualitative research (Creswell, 2005: 238)

The theoretical concepts from Edward Soja's (1989) theory of spatiality were used to analyse how rurality influences students' trajectories in accessing and succeeding at university. Comparing and cross-checking the consistency of the information derived from the different data sets enhanced the credibility of the findings (Patton, 2015). Transferability was embedded in purposive sampling; it ensured that only participants with rich information about the phenomena took part in the study. Dependability was enhanced by providing an extensive description of the research methodology. To achieve confirmability, an in-depth description of the method of research has been provided.

Prior to conducting the research, ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee of the university where the research was conducted (ethical clearance number: 2017-127). Participants gave written informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. This ensured that their participation was voluntary; their right to privacy, anonymity and confidentiality was guaranteed, excised, and respected.

Findings and discussion

Confronting an urban institutional milieu

The findings in this study reveal that students from rural backgrounds experienced difficulty in adapting to the university environment. As most universities are located in big cities, part of accessing HE, for student from rural backgrounds, involves encountering the urban milieu. Most of the participants felt confused, lost, anxious and scared. This is due to having spent most of their lives in rural settings and now being confronted with a strikingly new space. Jabali (an engineering student) felt scared and worried when he found himself in this different environment ' *because now it's no longer home, it's no longer one-story houses, its skyscrapers and all those* '. Ann was surprised and felt isolated. She says:

Nobody cares. So, I think ja ... and even the environment, I grew up in rural areas in Eastern Cape, so the only people that I have always had contact and association with are the people of, Xhosa people my tribe. So, excuse me, getting here higher institution you get to know people from other tribes, people from other races. Get relate to them as much as you are different, some of things they do you don't understand, some of the things you do they don't understand.

The experiences of Jabali and Ann, of living in a rural world, and now faced with a totally different space, created ' a sense of self-consciousness' (Crossley, 2001: 158) of their rural identity, generating "ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty" in addition to ' change and transformation' (Reay, et al., 2009: 1105).

These students experience both geographic as well as cultural alienation. Language barriers also caused some of these students to be too embarrassed to participate in class. Philip stated:

I think if someone from urban area ... you know they have been taught by people from other races, so they would not have a problem with expressing themselves. You know sometimes even now in lectures, I would want to participate in the lesson I would want to say something, or I would want to ask but eish!² English you know I' m not confident enough because what if I say something wrong, you know.

These students struggle to adjust to the university environment. Philip argued:

If you come from a rural village there is a lot, you still have to learn than someone who is always been here. for us we have a lot of things to learn and the route, the transport, the language ... especially English Ja, so that' s some of the things that are hindering people from the villages to adjust here compared to someone who always been here.

Access to information about university

Choosing a university is a critical stage in gaining access to HEI. Few universities from urban settings visit schools in rural areas, and while universities hold open days, rural students often do not hear about them. Even if they do know about university open days, it may be too costly for them to attend these events. The experiences of these students are characterised by lack of information, as reflected in the following example:

If you can see the open days here for grade 12 learners, so they [urban students] can manage to come and see how it like way of learning is. They have different options to choose from for different universities but as for me I just chose UJ ... I didn' t know anything about UJ, I haven' t set my eyes at UJ once but then I chose UJ, so that' s kind of different because they have the experience beforehand, rather than us who are from rural areas.

Terry adds:

During open day for UJ, normally what happens I have seen when high school [students] come, when I look at them it' s mostly model C schools. I have never seen someone from rural background. In those things they are providing access to people who already have access to this machinery, of which those who don' t have access will remain without access which is a problem on its own.

Applicants and families from rural contexts have to consider several factors when making HEI choices including distance from home, affordability and quality of the HEI. With limited access

² An informal South African exclamation used to express a range of emotions, such as surprise, annoyance, or resignation.

to information regarding HE, students from rural contexts struggle to choose which career path to follow. For some, they end up making distorted career choices, as in the case of Kate:

You know back at home ... we are not really exposed to a lot of career choices. The ones that we are exposed to you' d find that you don' t even enjoy them, some of them you don' t even qualify for them ... So, I' m doing Human Physiology and Psychology so those are my majors ... I had to find out about them here once I was doing my research you know during that gap year.

For Sef, lack of information about courses offered at the university affected her so much that she had to drop out of her initial course before settling for Civil Engineering. She describes:

I didn' t know anything about the courses offered at the university. I only know Teaching and these professions that you see in the village like Nursing, Teaching and Doctors. My aunty wanted me to be a doctor. I did general BSC. So, in Biology I saw that I cannot manage like. So, I went to my second year I did Physics and Computer Science, and I was not, ... comfortable in ... Physics and I don' t understand Computer Science. So, I had to drop out and stay at home for a year ... until this other time when she [my aunt] went to her friend ... her son is doing Civil Engineering and [it] involves Maths and all that the calculations which I' m good at ... after a year I went to [do] Civil Engineering course. I think if my sister or my aunty knew about with these other fields that I could have like finished long time ago, ja.

Access to information about funding is also essential but difficult for many students from rural contexts. Lack of information limited their understanding of how and where to apply for funding. Nancy explains:

The funds ... I struggle because especially my grandmother is the supportive one, she couldn' t financially support me so it' s that thing of as much as I wanna go further with my education ... it was a struggle and ... But then the first year ... I didn' t apply for NSFAS I didn' t know about it because I thought I couldn' t get ... I had to take loans which I' m still owing.

Since most of these students are the first generation in their family to access university education, their parents and guardians may have limited knowledge on application processes in order to help and prepare their children for university life.

Funding

In this study, it was observed that financial hardships affected most of the participants, which in turn affected their academic achievement. While funding through scholarships and bursaries can

have positive outcomes for rural students and their families, these are often short-term, ameliorative solutions, as funding is often not sufficient to cover all needs. As Max puts it:

So, my fees were R37/R38 000 so I had a R16 000 difference I remember. So, I couldn't pay the R16 000 because I only had R19 000 in my student account. So, I couldn't afford the R16 000 to pay it off so that's where it affected and then that's why it was my last year in university in 2014. So couldn't pay off I couldn't register the next year ... blocked everything. So, 2015 I stayed home the whole year doing nothing. ... It was hectic; it was very hectic; it was very stressful.

However, most of the participants said that they were able to piece together the necessary funds for university through high school scholarships, odd jobs, student loans, family contributions, and financial aid packages offered. Willy recounts:

I finished matric on 2014 then on 2015 I took a gap year and then I was working then like somewhere in Mpumalanga because like I had family in Mpumalanga so I used to stay there I was working as a security (guard) ... Ja, the money helped me in my first year. Then almost like half of the fees from my cash that I made.

This excerpt shows the long path that many rural students have to take, as they are forced to defer their studies in order to raise enough money. This reflects the lack of systemic support that impedes the progress of rural students in accessing and succeeding in HE (Timmis, et al., 2019).

In addition, lack of funding causes anxiety, impedes concentration and, for many, generates shame. Ann (an education student) illustrates:

now the FUNZA [financial aid scheme] is not out yet, so I ... Since January we're still waiting. I'm depending on her my sister, so for transport money I have to call her, for rent. Normally, when I have FUNZA. I move towards closer accommodation but now I stay with my family there, I have to travel. Sometimes I don't have money to come to school I have to miss lectures understand so I'd say it affects me in a negative way.

Accommodation

Residence accommodation, especially for students from rural areas, plays a major role in students' academic and social integration. Given that most universities in South Africa are located in urban settings, students from rural areas are forced to make special accommodation arrangements away from their family home in order to pursue their studies. Jane explains:

Your application form states how much you have to pay for residence and then I think it's also the thing because we don't have it [money] we are relying on the bursary. So, we

will come and look for an accommodation at February because I can't come here [the city] before to look for a place and then go back and then come back again when the university opens. So, when we get there, we find that the residence] it's already full so the only option is off campus accommodation because they still have space.

The university criteria for allocating accommodation does not favour rural students. This is because the allocation first depends on availability of funds. However, since most students depend on bursaries, which often take time to be dispatched, they often miss the first criteria. The second criteria relate to the student's matric performance. Priority is given to students who score highly in matric. This means that those with insufficient grades are forced to stay in private accommodation of varying quality outside the University. Jabali explains:

They accommodate international students first. And then they come to those who pass first, and then they look at the money, the actual deposits first. So, it's hard to get to this thing. I have been trying years and years to get to the residence].

In private accommodation, a majority of rural students often find it difficult to cope with the ensuing challenges such as those related to transport. Travelling is often unsafe and has an impact on one's time and physical and mental health. Kate explains a terrible ordeal that she endured as a first-year student:

I struggled a lot, you know ... I'm gonna cry you know ... So, after registering I stayed with my cousin, I didn't have accommodation, I didn't have books. So, ja, it was very stressful. At one point I even got mugged on my way back from school. So, on my way to the taxi rank because I had practicals in the afternoon [Pause She broke down in tears] ... Ja, so I got mugged around that area, ja so, like that on its own had a setback for me because I was struggling to adjust and now this happened.

This incident affected Kate academically and psychologically. She did not attain the required marks to secure a bursary for the following year, which resulted in her dropping out. She narrates:

so, after that mugging thing I had to go for therapy for about six months because you know it was really difficult and being away from home also contributed. So, at the end of the year, I didn't pass that well and as a result I lost my sponsor.

Like Kate, most rural students live off campus and are forced to commute, which is often dangerous, exhausting, time-consuming and costly. This situation is directly linked to financial accessibility which limits the student's options regarding where they live and how they move.

So, the students are forced to make strategic choices about when to be on campus which affects their studies.

Engaging with the curriculum

Poor proficiency in the language of instruction presented a significant challenge for most students from rural contexts. Most of these students are expected to adopt English as a medium of instruction upon entry into HE. Yet, in their secondary schooling, all subjects, including English, were taught in their mother tongue. For example, Ken explains:

English is the language that is used you know when you go to lecture is English, when you ask a question to ask in English but in high school you know we are from the same area we speak the same language the teacher also speaks the same language. So, you can just ask the question in your home language then the teacher explain in home language ... here [university] we take time to actually get the concept.

Crucial to note is that lack of confidence in one's ability to contribute eventually also hinders one's ability to properly participate in epistemic activities' (Hookaway, 2010: 160). Philip recounts how he felt alienated because he could not take part in classroom engagements because of the language barrier:

The language is a barrier especially English. Sometimes you have ideas, but you can't like put them together and build an essay or express yourself the way you would have expressed yourself in your own language. Ja, so that's some of the things that are hindering people from the villages to adjust here.

It is not only English as a medium of instruction that hinders epistemic access, but also the fact that instructional materials such as textbooks, learning guides and other study materials are in English as well. Max continues to explain:

We were taught Maths in Sepedi and then here everything is English. So, if you don't have a clear English background, the system automatically kicks you out because language as it is a barrier. First you need to know the language before the content, so you have twice the job. You have the language to understand and the content in books, and study material, to understand.

Enhancement of epistemic access to all forms of knowledge is underpinned by language and literacy skills. The examples above show how lack of confidence and competence in the use of English may limit one's ability to meaningfully participate in class. As indicated by the participants, being unable to speak in class prevented them from having a voice. This highlights the challenges faced by rural students because of the dominance of English as a medium of

instruction (Naidoo, et al., 2020). In support of this, Dastile and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) also argue that the continued use of colonial languages perpetuates the marginalisation of subjugated groups.

The value and relevance of rural students' realities is often not connected to formal education (Odora Hoppers, 2009). As a result, as this study reveals, most rural students felt unprepared in terms of content. One way in which students engage with academic discourse in their respective courses is by grappling with key terminologies of the discipline. The extract below denotes the challenge that these students face to acquire academic literacies and disciplinary discourses:

For me science is mostly its derived from Latin ... everything seems foreign. Some of the words you can't even translate them into your own language. So that thing of linking what I know from home and what I am learning here it's not that easy. We constantly have to go and research.

Lack of contextualisation by lecturers made these students feel disengaged and alienated (Wacquant, 2015). Another lucid illustration came from Terry, an engineering student:

Sometimes they teach about some events you have never heard of, they teach you about casinos ... but you have to imagine them. Sometimes they give you examples you do not relate ... in rural areas, we are not exposed to a lot of stuff...and they expect us to have experienced such things. So, when it come to the examples they give, that's where they kill us.

Often, lecturers are unaware that students from rural areas may not necessarily share their knowledge of foreign terms and the examples that they use in their teaching. The possibility of bridging the gap between teaching and the lived experiences of students lies in the opportunities that are created for students to relate to what is being taught while building strong theoretical understandings. Therefore, the curriculum should take into consideration the importance of the lived experiences of students. Rural backgrounds are in fact imbued with powerful sociocultural knowledge systems that are often ignored in HEIs. The role of HE should be to open possibilities for all students to achieve success and become full participants in university learning. Although universities have extended curriculum programs (ECPs), also referred to as foundation programs, that attempt to address under-preparedness for university study, this does not address the key challenges that face rural students.

Discussion and conclusion

Rurality is a spatial issue which should be understood in relation to other factors including its impact on educational access and outcome. Although rurality is not determined by geography alone, geography still remains an important factor to consider in relation to opportunities of

access and outcome. Spatial disparities in educational outcomes emanate from the intricate interplay of various socio-economic, cultural, and educational variables (Chankseliani, et al., 2020). Drawing from Soja's ideas, we draw connections between the material, the social and the peripheral. In this way, we attempt to reinsert geography into the social-historical relations that Soja argues is a process always filled with politics, ideology and other forces that shape our lives (Soja, 2010: 19). Determinants of inequalities in accessing and succeeding at university are multiple, nuanced and context dependent. They include broader economic, political, social, school, family, as well as individual characteristics.

This study used an interpretivist perspective to explore the personal experiences and perceptions of students from rural background and to understand how they interpret their access to and success in university. The qualitative design adopted, and case study with embedded units provided the lens to examine spatial inequalities in the university. Using different data sources and literature, the study demonstrates that rurality creates a serious impediment for university access and success in South Africa. While there is no magic bullet for fixing these challenges, a promising direction lies in the creation of a Thirdspace. In such a space, rural students' spatial experiences can be considered to enhance their access to and success in HE. Creation of a Thirdspace for rural students involves opening spaces for dialogue, listening and acting as they negotiate the curriculum. Placing their understandings, questions, and intentions at the centre of curriculum development enhances social justice for rural students and their communities.

The findings indicate that rural students face barriers when engaging with HE. They find the new environment of academia not only foreign but also hostile in terms of academic language, concepts, work demands, technology and structures. With the realisation that knowledge is socially constructed, this means that what a student knows is directly influenced by the kinds of social practices and social relations that he or she engages in. This means that those who engage in the Thirdspace should continually open spaces for constant review and development in the face of forces of conservation of institutional structure and history. Failing to recognise or value students' ways of knowing and being may lead to marginalisation. To alleviate this challenge, HEIs need to recognise the socially constructed nature of academic literacies and work toward developing student capabilities, competencies as well as their confidence to enhance their educational well-being and allow them to flourish in HE. HEIs need to emphasise the need to mobilise new tools that expose ongoing difficulties as a result of rurality. On the part of academics, they need to be more conscious of who is in their lecture rooms and how Eurocentric supremacy continues to inform what legitimate knowledge is. Such understanding is critical in creating spaces for openness and critical dialogue more especially where existing institutional culture serves to erase or ignore the experiences of students, especially those from working class and rural backgrounds.

Scarcity of information about HE access opportunities continues to be a challenge in rural communities as established in the interviews. It is crucial to provide full and accurate information to applicants from rural areas and marginalised communities. However, improving university preparedness among rural youth is unlikely to be successful in isolation from primary and

secondary schooling levels. Therefore, a major objective for national policy, should be cooperation with schools in rural communities to expand their information campaigns and ensure that they provide information to these communities. Also, most South African universities have adopted a more centralised online admission, with no room for 'walk-in' admissions. Adoption of this kind of admission systems which offers an allegedly level playing field for applicants, is limited only by effort and ability which works to privilege urban students. In contrast, Bennett (2001) suggests consideration of student diversity and promoting different treatment according to relevant differences. This will include for example introduction of a more nuanced selection criteria which includes but is not limited to applicants' geographic background. By adopting this kind of contextual admission approach, it will enable control for educational opportunities by geographic location when selecting successful applicants for university admission.

One major way of promoting equity in access and success at university is in the financial aid schemes that financially assist disadvantaged students to meet their needs while being enrolled at an HEI. The South African government through the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) initiated a financial aid program – the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) – to undergraduate students to help pay for the cost of their tertiary education. However, NSFAS has been marred with irregularities and inconsistencies as regards allocation of funds with students having to wait for over 6 months before funding is allocated to them. This has put immeasurable pressure on the students and their families especially those from rural background with some having to rely on family who are already financially constrained for support. There is need for NSFAS to undergo a significant restructuring and reorganisation, otherwise it will continue to exacerbate the existing patterns of inequalities in HE.

To conclude, this study examined rural students' pathways with reference to their experiences of entering and participating in HE in South Africa. Edward Soja's theory of spatial justice provided a lens for reflecting on the impact of rurality in accessing and succeeding in HE. The findings reveal the barriers that students from rural communities' experience in their quest to access and participate in HE. Nevertheless, being that Thirdspace is utopian work, HEIs should commit to constant action and reflection on how to incorporate students' socio-cultural backgrounds to get close to providing opportunities for authentic learning that are empowering, equitable, diverse, and just.

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Learning-centred assessment validation framework: A theoretical exploration

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Abstract

Classroom-based assessment validation has received considerable critical attention and many conceptualisations have emerged. While these conceptualisations are helpful in advancing our assessment knowledge, there is a need for a more learning-oriented teacher assessment practice validation. This paper builds on previous validation theories and approaches to redefine the validity of classroom-based assessment in terms of practical, useful, and trustworthy interpretation and uses of classroom assessment in enhancing learning and teaching. Further, the paper sets relevant inferences and prioritises teachers as sources of evidence in assessment evaluation based on pragmatic principles and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. This explication is valuable in exploring a learning-centred validation approach for evaluating classroom assessment. The paper suggests practical principles for evaluating learning-oriented, teacher-based assessment. Lastly, the paper concludes by articulating implication of the approach in any contemporary assessment system.

Keywords: Evaluation, formative assessment practice, learning-centred assessment, validation, validity

Introduction

Classroom-based assessment validation has received critical attention and many conceptualisations have emerged (e.g., Bonner, 2013; Chapelle & Voss, 2013; DeLuca, 2011; Kane, 2016; Kunnan, 2018). While these conceptualisations are helpful in advancing our assessment knowledge, there is a need for a more theoretical conceptualisation of a learning-oriented teacher assessment practice validation. This paper provides a theoretical explication of a classroom-based assessment validation approach as a practical alternative to the traditional validation framework to address how teachers might be engaged to provide context-based evidence for evaluating classroom assessment's practicality, trustworthiness, and usefulness. The current validation approaches have failed to provide learning-oriented evidence for many



reasons, such as the absence of learning-oriented interactions between evaluators, users of assessment data, and students. Also, traditional validation approaches are influenced mainly by positivist thinking, viewing learning as a structural activity, and using the deductive method to provide evidence for the claims about learning, seen as an ordered phenomenon (Kaboub, 2008). Another shortcoming of traditional approaches is the need for more scaffolding for teachers to implement this evaluation in their practice, as teacher education may be insufficient in providing such expertise (Leung, 2015; Pea, 2004).

Based on these limitations, we argue that classroom-based assessment validation should focus on the consequential use of assessment and assessment data based on the conceptual framework of assessment *for* learning (AFL). The classroom-based assessment validation would be the most practical approach, especially when assessment is conceptualised within a broader pedagogical model. Thus, evaluating the effectiveness of assessment should focus on how assessment and assessment data are used to help improve learning and teaching activities. A learning-centred validation approach is needed to account for the various assessment processes that improve learning and teaching. Also, this approach would account for the actual classroom context, with students having individual learning characteristics and needs, and coming from diverse cultural and language backgrounds. This student diversity in the classroom contributes to assessment content and constructs becoming more complex to measure, as these constructs are value-laden with social and cultural implications (DeLuca, 2011).

Given the current understanding of classroom assessment, which entails teachers employing a range of assessments from informal contingent formative assessments to the most formal summative assessment (Davison, 2007; Black & Wiliam, 2018), effective assessment systems should be tailored towards improving learning and teaching. This paper proposes a learning-oriented validation framework to evaluating teacher assessment practices by answering the following questions:

1. What are the limitations of the traditional validation approaches for teacher assessment?
2. How do pragmatic and sociocultural theories address the tensions of balancing accuracy and diversity in validating socio-culturally informed classroom assessment?
3. What evaluation framework could be used to support teachers' assessment evaluation practices and embedding this into teacher professional practices?

Theoretical Framework

The Effective Assessment System

An effective, well-balanced classroom-based assessment system requires a learning-centred validation framework and uses all forms of assessments and multiple sources of evidence (qualitative and quantitative) in supporting learning and teaching activities (Chappuis, et al., 2017; Davison & Michell, 2014). Any form of assessment, from contingent in-class formative

assessment (FA) to the most formal summative assessment (SA), including national and international tests, can be used to support learning and teaching activities and for reporting student outcomes for accountability purposes (Davison, 2007).

The strategic placing of classroom assessment at the centre of instruction and pedagogy is widely noted in an educational system due to its impact on learning and teaching (Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2018). However, this impact seems limited, as the current debate highlights teachers' challenges in using formative and summative assessment data for learning and teaching (Mosher & Heritage, 2017; Yan, et al., 2022). Using assessment *for* learning and teaching is the very essence of postulating a learning-oriented assessment influenced by principles of assessment *for* learning (A \mathcal{L}) (Assessment Reform Group, 2002). The A \mathcal{L} principles are increasingly taken up to underpin teacher assessment practices, including using SA to enhance teaching and learning (Black, 1993: 199; Black, et al., 2011, 2003; Chappuis, et al., 2017; Davison, 2019; Davison & Leung, 2009; Popham, 2017). This A \mathcal{L} concept differs from the traditional outlook on assessment, which is the assessment of learning (AoL), where assessment is used to determine student achievement. Therefore, an effective assessment system, based on A \mathcal{L} principles, discourages teacher assessment practices that centre teachers using assessment data in a summative way to meet the accountability requirements (Brookhart, 2020; Mosher & Heritage, 2017; Shepard, 2020; Willis & Klenowski, 2018).

Consequently, research in assessment suggests that teachers can only fully understand and implement effective assessment when they recognise the social, political, and economic contribution and impact of their assessment practices and how these factors shape their assessment practices (Gipps, 1999). Through this sociocultural lens, teachers should see assessment as a tool that can be used to create a learning community (Hayward, 2015; Lave, 1991) of students and teachers, which then shapes teacher classroom practices and student learning behaviour. From this perspective, learning is not just the individual cognitive processes but also involves the social processes and cultural settings that influence learning. Similarly, others have highlighted the importance of social interactions, cultural contexts, and the belief systems of both students and teachers and how these factors shape students' identity (Black, et al., 2006; Cowie, 2005; Keppell & Carless, 2006; Marshall & Drummond, 2006; Munns & Woodward, 2006), and the nature of control in the classroom shapes learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Although one of the aims of using assessment in the classroom is to guide students to become self-regulated and independent learners, self-regulation is critically dependent on interactions with their teachers and peers to activate and support their learning. The conceptualisation of teacher assessment *for* learning (A \mathcal{L}) literacy from a sociocultural perspective highlights the pivotal place of teachers' beliefs and roles in activating student learning. Irrespective of the types of assessment being used in the classroom, the dynamics of the sociocultural context of learners should be considered when interpreting and using assessment results to improve instruction and promote learning (Gipps, 1999; Nortvedt, et al., 2020).

Given the complexities of an effective classroom-based assessment system, the current validation approaches must provide the framework that accounts for the practicality, usefulness, and trustworthiness of teacher assessment practices. There is a need to reframe it to ensure that teachers can make relevant inferences based on the consequential validity of assessment, where the main aim of using assessment is to improve learning and teaching activities. The following section highlights the limitations of the current validation approaches, arguing their insufficiency in addressing the issues around classroom assessment.

Inadequacy of Traditional Validation Approaches

The current validation approaches are measurement-oriented approaches, which are carried out with psychometric principles by focusing on the consistent measurement of student achievement (Farnsworth, 2013; Kane, 1992, 2001, 2006, 2013; Marion & Pellegrino, 2007; Messick, 1989; Sireci, 2013). Although it started as a systematic process of determining the validity of a test, validation, however, has been approached in different ways since the formal treatise of validity by Frank Freeman, who discussed the 'technique and validity of test methods' in the annual report of the Psychological Bulletin of 1914 and the 1921 call for a consensus meaning of validity by the National Association of Directors of Educational Research (Newton & Shaw, 2014). In this section, we present a snapshot of the theoretical positions underpinning traditional validation, how these apply present-day classroom assessment evaluation and then highlight some of the limitations in applying them to classroom assessment evaluation. Educational assessment validation, therefore, has been influenced by two broad theories – the standard-based validation approach and the argument-based approach.

Standards-based validation theories

Standards are conventions that are usually associated with a formal document developed by an organisation, used for regulating the activities of professionals and as a means of ensuring good practices in a particular profession. Various standards have been promulgated to direct assessment evaluation. The National Association of Directors of Educational Research led the first formal attempt to set standards in the design, development, and implementation of educational measurement. However, the widely used document is the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (henceforth Standards), by the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME), which have gone through different editions (1966, 1974, 1985, 1999, and 2014).

Standards for assessment validation were informed by validity theory, considered as the extent to which a test measures what it was supposed to measure (Newton & Shaw, 2014). This understanding ensures evidence is provided for physical quality and content accuracy to support conclusions from an assessment. This approach limited the potential of using assessment to support teaching and improve learning, while the approach to investigating

validity was inadequate due to how it was conceptualised (Xi & Sawaki, 2017). Evidence to validate assessment was not informed by test users, particularly teachers and learners, but only by undertaking correlational and test item analyses (Xi & Sawaki, 2017).

Secondly, the trinitarian theory of validity directs all measurement-oriented validation by providing evidence for the content validity, criterion validity, and construct validity as determined by the combined effort of the AERA, APA, and NCME. The trinitarian framework involves investigating the 'validity (face validity, validity by content, validation of the conditions required to answer test items, and empirical validation, namely, concurrent and criterion-based validation) and reliability' (Kunnan, 2018: 37). Although the articulation of the trinitarian framework was commendable, yet this approach heavily relied on providing the psychometric properties of the test by using some advanced statistical methods, which were neither within the professional competency of classroom teachers nor ingrained into the teacher education curriculum (Leung, 2015; Xi & Sawaki, 2017).

Another validity theory is the unified construct approach that addresses the multifaceted, trinitarian approach and shifts the focus from test, to test score interpretation and uses, as identified in the subsequent Standards (1985, 1999 and 2014). Thus, validity is seen as 'the appropriateness, meaningfulness, and usefulness of the specific inferences made from test scores' ; at the same time, test validation was taken to be 'the process of accumulating evidence to support such inferences' (AERA, APA, & NCME, 1985: 9). Kunnan (2018: 37) describes it as an 'expanded conceptual framework of validity that included facets of validity of test-score interpretation in terms of values and social consequences of tests and testing' . However, this approach was not without criticism. For instance, the 1985 Standards lacked explicit discussion of 'modern psychometric issues, such as structural equation modelling, function and model fit statistical comparisons of reliability, item response theory, generalizability theory, or computerised testing applications' (Boyle, 1987: 236). There was also the concept of test fairness that could not be fully addressed in situations such as using assessment for teaching and learning and test truthfulness in serving diverse examinees, thereby questioning the fairness of tests in different social situations (Kunnan, 2018).

Moreover, it raises the issue of how a construct should be defined for various learners with different learning needs and ability levels, particularly in a diverse classroom, where examinees come from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds and assessment is tailored to individual student needs. Therefore, there is a need to contextualise the construct and the assessment language, as tests for a particular group may not be suitable in a different context. Thus, specifying the interpretations of the use of a test is somewhat a concern in today' s classroom assessment, as many issues arise around the social and political implications of test use as well as various understandings of language ability informed by the contexts of its uses (Bachman, 2013). Given the need to contextualise proficiency, a validation study of assessment use should be based on the purpose of the assessment. In supporting assessment score interpretation and use, the consequential validity would require triangulation of data sources, as rightly argued by Chan (2014: 12):

... no singular source of evidence sufficient to support a validity claim. Construct validity is the central component in validation work, encompasses the following five sources of evidence germane to the validation of the interpretation and use of the score of an instrument. The five sources include (1) evidence based on test content, (2) evidence based on response processes, (3) evidence based on internal structure, (4) evidence based on relations to other variables, and (5) consequences.

Lastly, these interpretations of test scores are informed by using statistical methods and psychometric evidence of the test items. Due to the very sophisticated process of the Standards, teachers cannot implement the Standards by themselves but rely heavily on external evidence provided by assessment developers. Thus, the Standards need to be clearer on how to evaluate teacher-based assessments. Given this scientific process required in the Standards, some experts have prescribed an argument-based approach, which, however, still needs to fully provide teachers with a fuller understanding of a classroom-based assessment evaluation. The subsequent discussion highlights the works of authors who have prescribed argument-based validity and applied the framework in assessment evaluation.

The argument-based approach

The argument-based approach to evaluating assessment has been widely used for many years since Kane's (1992, 2001, 2006, 2013, 2016) explication of the framework. The argument-based framework is preferred among assessment evaluation researchers (Chapelle & Voss, 2013; Xi & Sawaki, 2017). This approach was first cited by Cronbach (1988), who considers validation an evaluative argument based on five perspectives: functional, political, operationist, economic, and explanatory, and validators as debaters. These views about assessment validation are critical to the present-day evaluation study. For example, a functional perspective to assessment evaluation is instructive – the view about test scores being solely absolute in decision-making should be debunked and a context-based view of test score interpretation is critical in the present-day educational system. Any decision based on the test score only can become dysfunctional in many contexts and, thus, bring about negative consequences (Cronbach, 1988; Messick, 1980). Therefore, validation is considered an evaluative argument that takes into consideration the potentially diverse assessment stakeholders. It 'must link concepts, evidence, social consequences, and values ... an affirmative argument should make clear and, to the extent possible, persuasive the construction of reality and the value weightings implicit in a test and its application' (Cronbach, 1988: 4-5). While the social dimension of assessment is critical (McNamara & Roeber, 2006); however, a limitation to this approach is how teachers are articulated in the framework to take on the responsibility of accumulating evidence in the validation process.

The argument-based evaluation requires an integrative, evaluative judgment of the degree to which evidence and theoretical rationales support the adequacy and appropriateness

of inferences and actions based on test scores. As such, validity is an inductive summary of both the existing evidence for and the potential consequences of test interpretation and use. Hence, what is to be validated is not the test as such, but the inferences derived from the scores - inferences about score meaning or interpretation and about the implications for action that the interpretation entails (Messick, 1987: 1; Messick, 1989: 13).

Furthermore, assessment validation entails the use of inferences, which is the hypotheses made about test score interpretation and uses. The process of answering these questions (inferences), i.e., providing evidence for these inferences, is validation. Messick (1987: 6) describes the evidence as 'both data, or facts, and the rationale or arguments that cement those facts into a justification of test-score inferences'. Expectedly, the sources of this evidence are limitless and are determined by the type of inference made about test score interpretation and uses. These sources could be identified when evaluating the content of the domain of reference or analysing the relationship between individual test responses and assessment tasks. Still, sources of evidence can be informed by the internal structure of test responses and the external background factors of the examinees. Other sources come from evaluating test processes and structure through repeated testing, establishing the relevance of the test based on instructional and remedial implications as well as motivation. Lastly, evaluation could mean tracing the social consequences of test scores interpretation and uses by reporting the intended and unintended outcomes of the test (Messick, 1987, 1989).

Also, the argument-based framework is based on Toulmin's argumentation model (Toulmin, 1958, 2003; Toulmin, et al., 1979, 1984). In this approach, an argument structure is formulated to guide validation studies of educational assessments (Chapelle, et al., 2008; Fulcher & Davidson, 2009; Mislavy, 2003). Elsewhere, this approach is referred to as the interpretive argument and the interpretation and use argument (IUA) framework (Kane, 1992, 2001, 2006, 2013). According to this framework, assessment evaluation integrates score interpretations and uses because claims about assessment scores are based on the interpretation of such scores and uses, which require 'decisions about these units of analysis' (Kane, 2013: 2). Kane's framework uses Toulmin's argument layout that defines the logical, functional procession in the argumentation process, containing six parts: claim, grounds, warrant, qualifier, rebuttal, and backing. Claims from assessment score interpretation and uses are based on grounds (i.e., assessment data) that require warrants. The warrants in the argument-based framework are made stronger by backings. The process requires scrutiny of the grounds (data) upon which the claim is made by providing qualifiers to accept the claim or using rebuttals in rejecting the claim. In Kane's view, the types of evidence in the interpretive argument are observation, generalisation, extrapolation, theory-based implications of decisions made about test scores, and technical issues (Kane, 1992).

Given the relevance of the interpretation and use argument (IUA) framework to evaluate the plausibility of the assessment score, providing a balance between score interpretation and score uses (Kane, 2006, 2013), this approach to classroom assessment has limitations. Bachman and Palmer (2010) objected to Kane's view about evaluating test score interpretation and

uses, as the argument approach was perceived to be too specific, and the claims made exclude emerging usefulness of an assessment in different contexts. A context-specific framework is critical to providing evidence of assessment evaluation (Xi & Davis, 2016). Another shortcoming of the argument-based framework is the accessibility of the framework due to the complex levels and the sophisticated construction of the argument (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). Evaluators, particularly teachers, are yet acquainted with some of the intricacies of implementing an argument-based validation. Therefore, a practical, simplified framework is needed to serve teachers in evaluating their assessment strategies and practices.

To simplify the contextuality, complexity and sophistication of implementing an argument-based validation, another framework was proposed - Assessment use argument (AUA) (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). The AUA is significant in evaluation studies as it helps streamline assessment into justifying the uses of assessment scores and evaluating the potential impacts and consequences of assessment. However, ignoring the interpretation of test scores and focusing assessment evaluation on the uses of test scores can limit the essence of accumulating evidence of the claims made. Both interpretation and uses of test scores are interwoven and potentially challenging to separate in the assessment process (Cronbach, 1988; Kane, 2013).

Lastly, argument-based frameworks are limited, like the Standards; hence, many of their applications were in other settings besides classroom. For instance, the argument-based framework, with formulated inferences, was used to evaluate the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) (Chappelle, et al., 2008). Chappelle, et al.' s (2008) inferences (domain description, evaluation, generalisation, explanation, extrapolation, and utilization) can be adapted to suit the claims being made in the classroom context. Hence the methodology is different for a learning-oriented assessment evaluation. The argument-based validation approach strongly focuses on high-stakes standardised assessment and fails to consider the dynamics of classroom assessments.

Given the limitations of the various approaches to evaluating the validity of teacher assessment practices, we explore the potential use of pragmatic and sociocultural theories to guide a learning-centred validation of teacher assessment practices.

The Potential Use of Sociocultural and Pragmatic Theories

This part explains two different theories – the sociocultural theory of learning and the pragmatic approach and what they offer in setting up a learning-oriented argument-based framework suitable for evaluating teacher assessment. These two theories shape our understanding of what should be an essential consideration during validation activities. The sociocultural aspect of assessment highlights the concerns about the limitations of traditional assessment validation approaches, which are not suitable for use by teachers in a multicultural classroom. Then, we explain that the pragmatic principles offer an opportunity to address the limitations of the traditional validation approaches.

Sociocultural theory

The concept of Sociocultural theory (SCT) (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; Wertsch, 1985) was implied from the work of Vygotsky whose idea of learning and education is explained from a cultural-historical perspective (Fleer, 2015). SCT concerns the interplay of human cognition and social processes or cultural artifacts (Lantolf, et al., 2015). Social factors contribute significantly to learning activities. Learning is, therefore, dependent on the prior existence of more complex cognitive structures, but these more complex cognitive structures are situated in the culture, not in the child. The child acquires them through interaction with adults, who help the child do things that it could not do alone. Through such shared activities, the child internalises the cognitive structures necessary to carry on independently (Bereiter, 1985: 206).

According to this theory, human development is evaluated 'through participation in cultural, linguistic and historically formed settings, such as family life, peer group interaction, and in institutional contexts like schooling, organised social activities, and workplaces ...' (Lantolf, et al., 2015: 1).

The application of SCT to educational activities, especially in the practice of educational assessment, has been argued for in many studies (Brookhart & Helena, 2003; Gipps, 1999; Mislavy, 2008; Moss, 2008; Moss, et al., 2008; Shepard, 2000b; Shepard, et al., 2018b). Therefore, the tenets have informed the design, development, and validation of classroom-based assessment and language assessments. Further, the consciousness of these tenets is evident in the past and in the most recent debates about using assessment to promote learning and teaching and student engagement (Black & William, 1998, 2004, 2018; Shepard, et al., 2018a; Stiggins, 2005). Moss (2008) and Moss, et al. (2008) studied the implications of the SCT on classroom assessment.

SCT can help develop a context-based validation approach to address the validity of using assessment to promote teaching and learning by providing context-based claims on assessment use (Bachman, 2013; Bachman & Palmer, 2010). The sociocultural theory advocates for meaningful and democratic interactions to promote learning. Hence, an important purpose of classroom assessment is using the assessment to promote healthy teacher-student and peer-to-peer interactions. Also, SCT helps to develop a framework to scaffold teacher understanding of assessment evaluation and simplify the complex levels involved in the traditional argument-based framework (Pea, 2004; Xi & Sawaki, 2017). Thus, the learning-centred framework for evaluating classroom-based assessment promotes teacher learning through their engagement in the evaluation process. It is believed that learning is not just a structural activity but a result of many cultural interplays and awareness of self in constructing learning. As an essential principle of SCT, the framework can serve as a scaffold to enhance teacher understanding and evaluation of teacher assessment practices. Involving a teacher in the evaluation process is deemed more practicable than leaving the process entirely in the hands of assessment specialists. The diversity in classrooms requires a conscious harnessing of the social and cultural resources within the classroom setting to accumulate context-based

evidence of an assessment in enhancing teaching and learning. The following section briefly discusses how pragmatism, as a philosophical stance, contributes positively to proposing a framework for classroom assessment validation.

Pragmatism in assessment validation

This section evaluates pragmatism and borrows from past theoretical discussions from pragmatists, to justify suggesting a learning-oriented validation approach. Using pragmatism in assessment validation attempts to answer the most central question about assessment - “How might we provide evidence for evaluating the practicality, trustworthiness and usefulness of classroom assessment or even externally provided assessment?” . What, then, does pragmatism bring to a teacher-based validation framework? The immediate answer would be whatever is feasible for teachers and applicable to justify assessment *for* learning theory. However, further explanations will be provided to support the contribution of pragmatism.

In applying a pragmatic approach, we need to consider the meaning of pragmatism as a branch of philosophy and past theorisation about pragmatism in validation research. Pragmatism finds a balance between ‘ an empirical philosophy that is not religious enough, and a religious philosophy that is not empirical enough’ (James, 1907: 15). In defining pragmatism, James (1907) cited Charles Peirce, also a pragmatist philosopher, who first introduced pragmatism into philosophy. The following extract of Charles Peirce’ s response to pragmatism summarises the very principle of pragmatism:

to develop a thought’ s meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance. And the tangible fact at the root of all our thought-distinctions, however subtle, is that there is no one of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice. To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve – what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all. (Cited in James, 1907: 46-47)

From this explanation, the understanding of truth is how transferable the truth is in real-life application. Thus, ‘pragmatism seeks to account for how people make sense of the world through action in the world’ (Stone & Zumbo, 2016: 557). Through the proposed framework, teachers could help to establish the meaningfulness of assessment in enhancing their teaching and promoting learning, using their cultural and social knowledge of the classroom as a resource, contributing to an appropriate approach to classroom assessment evaluation.

Within this philosophical understanding, we provide a “possible difference of practice” in the evaluation of a learning-oriented assessment. The purpose is to provide an accessible framework with which teachers can easily connect. The technicality of most past evaluation

practices is far-fetched for the classroom teacher leaving the evaluation the sole responsibility of assessment specialists. Unlike many measurement-oriented validation studies, this pragmatist, learning-oriented approach can promote stakeholders' interaction with assessments. We suggest this approach, taking inspiration from Stone and Zumbo (2016), who reaffirmed the potentially global usefulness of pragmatist thinking in accumulating evidence for test use and as a possible fit for addressing local issues. Thus, learning-oriented assessment evaluation would require a specific approach informed by pragmatic principles, as Stone and Zumbo (2016) highlighted. Their four principles of a pragmatic approach can be summarised: Acceptable actions should proceed with ease. Any impediments to our actions require us to chart new courses of action to make a distinction. Like empiricism, pragmatism appeals to senses; what is considered valuable is the meaning we make concerning the particularity of our actions, contexts, and situations; what works well for the context is the primary concern of the pragmatic approach (Stone & Zumbo, 2016).

Given that 'pragmatism is concerned with what works in practice' ; and theories and concepts 'are instruments that we use to guide our actions' (Stone & Zumbo, 2016: 559-560), we argue that a practical approach to classroom assessment evaluation should involve teachers. Teacher engagement is critical as they possess a socio-cultural understanding of the classroom and can constantly review the "possible difference of practice" through reflections and democratic interactions between the teachers and their students regarding teaching and learning. We believe this teacher reflection on practice can provide a pragmatic way to address the tension of balancing assessment usefulness trustworthiness, and diversity in a modern classroom.

With the potential of sociocultural and pragmatic theories to address the tensions of balancing accuracy and diversity in validating teacher assessment practices and to account for the co-construction nature of learning among the stakeholders, we propose a context-based validation approach for evaluating teacher assessment practices that is practical, trustworthy, and useful and as an alternative to the standards and argument-based approaches.

The Proposed Learning-centred Assessment Evaluation Framework

This section describes a learning-centred assessment evaluation framework underpinned by sociocultural learning theory. It seeks to provide an alternative to traditional approaches, expanding some of the tenets of educational assessment evaluation in the Standards as well as the argument-based framework. First, we highlight important principles guiding assessment evaluation and discuss appropriate hypotheses (inferences) related to classroom assessment practices. Then, we explain how this approach to evaluation can enhance teacher assessment learning and improve assessment *for* learning practices. Finally, we draw on past explanations about classroom assessment practices and validity theories to construct a teacher-based validity argument by highlighting claims from score interpretations and uses relevant to classroom assessments. This section would be a step towards using an adaptable framework for evaluating teacher-based assessment practices because, presently, 'despite an extensive

tradition and literature on validation of standardised educational and psychological tests, appropriate methods for validation of assessments used by teachers in classrooms are not well defined' (Bonner, 2013: 87).

Key principles and inferences for evaluating classroom assessment

There are guiding principles that guide the psychometric approach to validity. Some of these principles apply to classroom assessment evaluation. This section briefly provides practical tenets of applying validation theory to classroom assessments. We discuss four useful principles for a learning-centred validation framework.

First, the foundational principle for classroom assessment design is that it is built for learning purposes. One criticism of the traditional assessment validation approach is that it focuses on measurement, i.e., measuring student ability, progress, and skill. In contrast, we propose a learning-centred assessment evaluation practice using assessment to enhance learning and teaching activities. Decisions made from score uses are purely for learning purposes. Further, in this framework, plausible inferences for a test score interpretation and use in a classroom context are domain definitions, evaluation, explanation, utilisation, and ramification inferences. It is assumed that both generalisations and extrapolation inferences are unlikely to address claims relating to the uses of assessment to improve learning and teaching. Instead, both assumptions focus on the comparison of test scores interpretation and use with criteria external to classroom contexts. The purpose of using assessment to predict future performance is antithetical to assessment *for* learning principles (Shepard, et al., 2018b). Learning is not structural but is expressed as developmental progress, referred to as a learning progression (Briggs & Furtak, 2020; Lehrer & Schauble, 2015). Teacher perception of learning as a progression is critical to evaluating assessment claims.

Second, the teacher-made inference is made deductively and based on the teacher's conceptual framework (Black, et al., 2010; Bonner, 2013). However, conceptualisation of classroom assessment primarily relates to claims which address where a student would need to reach curriculum expectations; where learners are already; how best to help students reach learning goals (Black & Wiliam, 2018). To address these claims, relevant inferences teacher could make about test score interpretations and uses are domain definitions, evaluation, explanation, utilisation, and ramification. In addition to teachers developing inferences before using an assessment approach, this inference could also be set for teachers by external institutions, especially for externally developed assessments for formative purposes (Chapelle, et al., 2015; Koizumi, 2015). It is important to note that externally produced assessment should employ a bottom-top approach in the design and development of assessment, including setting purposes of assessment. What this means to a learning-centred assessment validation is that the setting up of the interpretive argument, which usually takes place in the development phase of assessment, should integrate teacher-own purposes, and intended use of the assessment. The more teachers are involved in the test design and development, the more substantial the evidence a teacher provides in the evaluation of the assessment (Bonner, 2013).

The third principle is that the purposes of assessment evolve. For an emerging interpretation, purpose and use, new validation should be carried out to address its context. Hence, evaluation can be carried out formatively (Kane, 2006) due to the fluid nature of teacher assessment practices (Bonner, 2013). Also, all possible sources of evidence (quantitative and qualitative) should be explored by all assessment stakeholders before attempting to use assessment data (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). There should be a triangulation of sources to either accept or reject assessment claims. A teacher works towards accumulating evidence to approve or disapprove the claims. In an instance of disapproval, evidence of rebuttals to the claims should be provided to develop a holistic argument for assessment score interpretation and use (Kane, 2006, 2013).

Lastly, the validity argument must be time-sensitive in responding to assessment tasks. A teacher can seek immediate feedback from the student about the cognitive processes undertaken by the students. Some evidence is collected during test administration, while some are best collected after test administration. Therefore, teacher involvement in assessment evaluation is a continuous and recursive approach to assessment evaluation. Evaluation is never a one-time effort but a circular process from planning the assessment process to developing and designing the assessment. A teacher-based evaluation approach should be an embedded process built into daily activities of teacher assessment practices. The discussion section of this paper provides how the framework can be used to develop teacher assessment evaluation literacy. Next, we present the framework for evaluating classroom assessment.

The learning-centred evaluation framework

This section presents the learning-centred framework (Figure 1) for evaluating teacher assessment practices. As argued above, the framework's purpose is to provide a practical approach to assessment validation, which can be entrenched in teacher assessment praxis. The framework relies on pragmatic philosophy and supports a socio-cultural, learning-oriented evaluation approach as argued for in several classroom-based assessment literatures (Brookhart & Helena, 2003; Gipps, 1999; Moss, 2003, 2008, 2016; Moss, et al., 2008; Shepard, 2000b, 2009).

The learning-centred framework is drawn from the extant theories on validation framework, such as the one presented by Chapelle, et al. (2015). However, we provide a more adaptable model to evaluating teacher assessment practices. As argued, we use socio-cultural and pragmatism theories to develop this framework, evident in our outline of the inferences, warrants and claims considering the context-specific teacher assessment practices.

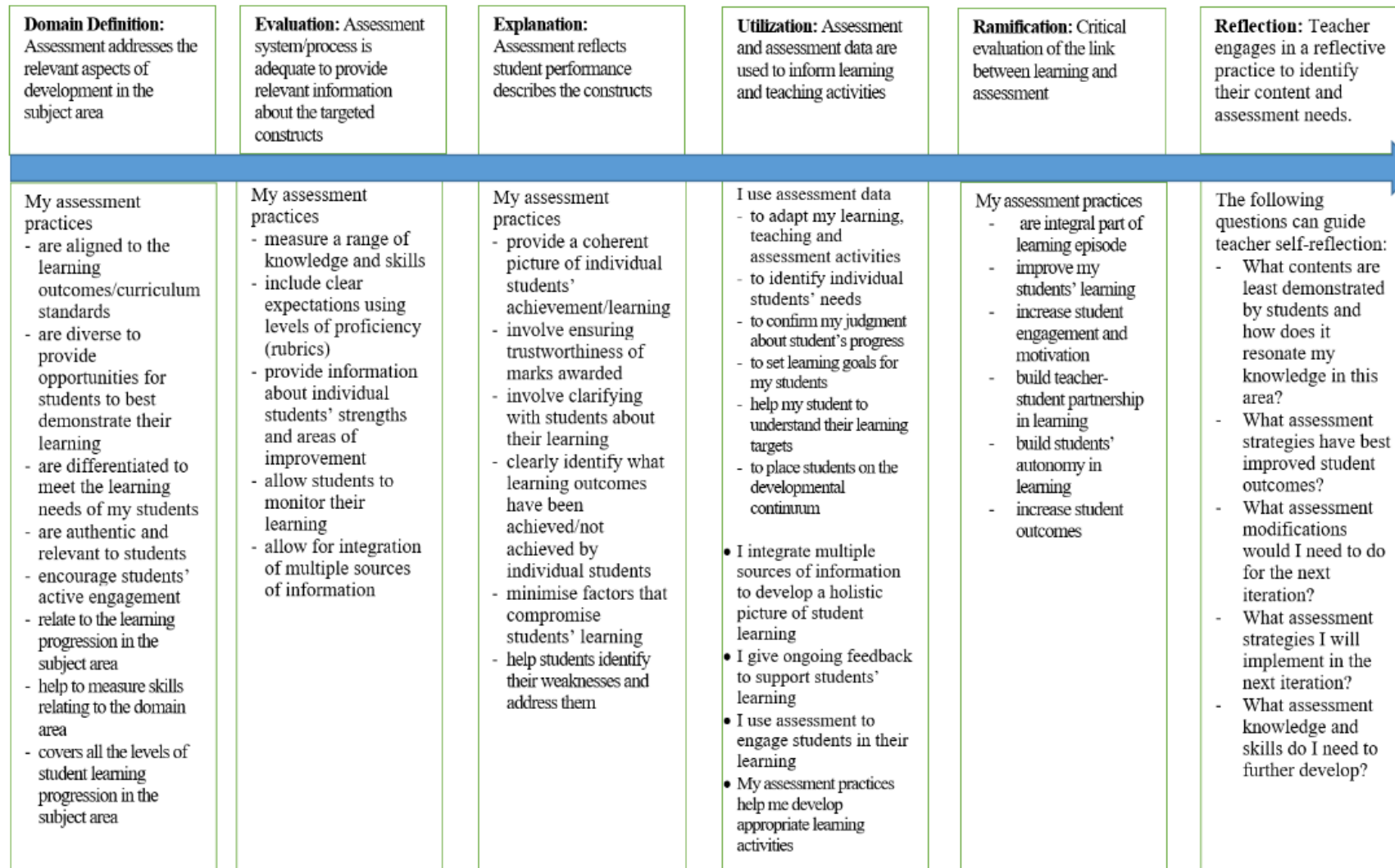


Figure 1. Inferences, warrants, and claims in the proposed learning-centred assessment evaluation framework.

To undertake a learning-oriented assessment evaluation, we articulate six inferences relevant to plausible claims from assessment score interpretation and use, based on the principles of effective assessment practices. First, we use a domain definition to set important considerations in classroom assessment. Domain definition inference supports teachers in ensuring that assessment tasks align with the relevant aspects of curriculum expectations and are suitable for the context of classroom assessment. We highlight some of the claims in the proposed framework, requiring evidence to evaluate teacher assessment practices based on domain definition inference.

The second inference is the evaluation inference, which helps to collect evidence regarding how learners are evaluated, the scoring process, and linking the evaluation stage to the appropriate curriculum content and learners' characteristics.

Explanation seeks further confirmation about the quality of teacher assessment practice, prompting teachers to gather evidence on the strategies learners used in undertaking assessment tasks. The explanation inference also helps to connect student performance with the construct being assessed.

Utilisation and ramification inferences are critical to evaluating classroom assessment practices (Chapelle, et al., 2008, 2015), though there is only a thin line between the two inferences. While utilisation inference deals with decisions made because of the assessment result, the ramification inference considers those claims about improved learning when an assessment result is used, especially by a student. Teacher's reflective practice provides evidence of assessment use. In other words, the reflection inference ensures that assessment practice promotes self-reflection for teachers.

Following each inference, a warrant leads teachers to the claims to support assessment practice. The claims are numbered under each warrant and are not in any way exhaustive. The claims presented are speculative of what we consider could apply to the intended purposes of and theoretical explanations of classroom assessment practices in the literature (e.g., Black & Wiliam, 2018; Chapelle, et al., 2015, 2008). Lastly, it is assumed that the evidence required for each claim is within reach of classroom teachers, however, we acknowledge that there are challenges teacher may encounter in using the learning-oriented framework. For instance, teacher cultural orientation about assessment may hinder student autonomy in learning, discouraging student-led assessment approaches. Another issue is the culture of accountability in many jurisdictions, which may hinder teacher to imbibe the principles of learning-oriented assessment evaluation. There are several factors that could impact teacher involvement in this framework, which we do not intend to address in this exploration, but we believe, when applied, the framework contributes positively to the way classroom-based assessment evaluation is implemented. In the next section, we discuss the contributions of this framework to the field of classroom assessment practice and research.

Discussion

The section discusses the contributions of the framework to teacher assessment practices and

professional development. There are six contributions to the field of classroom assessment and educational evaluation that our paper seeks.

First, we extended the current conceptualisation of validation approach that accounts for the socio-cultural context of assessment. A learning-oriented validation framework advocates giving attention to the context of assessment use in evaluating teacher assessment practices. Many of the evaluation studies were mostly carried out by external evaluators. However, the teacher as the evaluator can understand the primary purpose of using assessments in their context and justify the context of student learning, i.e., using student and the classroom context 'for making inferences about student learning' (Black & Wiliam, 2018: 2), as the context of assessment differs from one classroom to another. In the same way, justifiable use of externally developed assessments can be established based on teacher evaluation of such assessment use in the classroom.

Second, through the framework, we have provided a way by which validation of assessment practices becomes an integral component of teacher assessment practices. Given that the teacher education process is limited in equipping classroom teacher' s understanding of what assessment is, not to mention evaluating the process and has resulted in a narrow-minded classroom assessment practice (Hamp-Lyons, 2007), the framework can be a reflective tool to improve assessment practices. Hence, we argue the need to imbibe in teachers a process of evaluating their assessment practices. This study helps to fill this gap in teacher assessment education and argues for integrating assessment evaluation into teacher assessment practice, viewed as a means to an end and not as an end in the teaching and learning process. Further, the framework can best be implemented as part of a teacher' s professional responsibility for ensuring an effective assessment practice. With the framework, a teacher can provide evidence of intended and unintended impacts of an assessment process. This idea of embeddedness follows the scholarly argument of best assessment practice, which is integrating assessment into teachers' instructional activities (Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2018; Shohamy, 1998; Wiliam & Leahy, 2015).

Thirdly, the framework advances teacher assessment *for* learning (A \mathcal{L}) practices (Assessment Reform Group, 2002) and ensures teachers use assessment to promote student learning. As this paper advocates, the tenets of A \mathcal{L} are entrenched in the learning-centred framework that can help to promote teacher theory of assessment evaluation in undertaking a learning-focused assessment practice. Thus, the framework guides against the negative washback of AoL practices, consistently reported in the literature (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Kunnan, 2010, 2018; McNamara & Ryan, 2011). We have used this framework to argue that the focus of assessment validation is student learning rather than the validity of the measurement (Bonner, 2013; Shepard, 2000a). Claims that support improved learning should be supported appropriately by teacher evaluation of the assessment process. Assessment should support the teacher in the important facets of student learning. Essentially, teachers use assessment to answer crucial questions of where a learner needs to get to, where a learner is currently, and how best to get a learner to the next level. These three questions are critical aspects of A \mathcal{L}

strategies (Black & Wiliam, 2018). Thus, the teacher assessment evaluation framework developed in this paper is informed by the traditional measurement theory (argument model) but heavily influenced by the non-measurement (learning) theory. The two theories, already discussed in this paper, inform the learning-centred validation framework (in Figure 1), highlighting the inferences that inform the possible claims that could be made on using an assessment in promoting student learning.

The framework supports previous conceptualisations of teacher-led evaluation practice. As Bonner (2013: 103) argues that ‘teacher self-inquiry may be more effective than researcher-driven inquiry for improving the validity of teacher practice’. The more a teacher uses the framework, the more they develop expertise, such as communicating effectively, motivating students, and enhancing other assessment strategies (Zhao, et al., 2018). Similarly, the fundamental logic behind a learning-centred assessment validation concerns the teacher’s ability to provide a defensible assessment practice. Literature also suggests that teacher learning can be improved when a teacher ‘engage(s) in continuous (ongoing) classroom assessment integrated with teaching, in a potentially formative role’ (Ratnam & Tharu, 2018: 121). Teacher-based evaluation can contribute positively to enhancing teacher assessment knowledge, beliefs, and orientation, thus promoting teacher ‘understandings of the fundamental assessment concepts and procedures deemed likely to influence educational decisions’ (Popham, 2017: 25). Teacher participation in the assessment evaluation process is another way of improving assessment expertise (Davison, 2019; Michell & Davison, 2019). As Lam (2018: 115) noted, teacher learning is a ‘complex process, which is beyond the provision of initial teacher education, short-lived professional development ...’. Teacher-led assessment evaluation promotes teacher understanding of their evaluative function of providing ‘the kinds of data called for in the standard to support the valid interpretations of the test results for their intended purposes’ (AERA, et al., 2014: 4). As a teacher gets involved in the study of assessment evaluation, the search for evidence to justify the consistency and accuracy of her/his judgment of the learner’s progress can be actualised. Moreso, what an assessment says about such a learner, is a way of confirming or disconfirming teacher judgment, which in turn gives more confidence to a teacher. In Australia, teachers regularly judge students’ progress towards state and national curricula (Willis & Klenowski, 2018). Therefore, prompts from the evaluation framework can ‘sustain extensive teacher learning about assessment, but also curriculum, instruction, their students, and about themselves’ (Hill, et al., 2018: 195). Hopefully, teacher learning can be improved through a teacher-led assessment evaluation framework. The framework proposed in this paper can help to usher a teacher into a conscious consideration of the potential areas of importance in evaluating assessment practice and a balanced assessment system (Black, 1993; Black, et al., 2011; Chappuis, et al., 2017).

Inclusive assessment and democratic participation of assessment stakeholders can be enhanced using the proposed framework. Teacher assessment practice involves determining a student's current level, as progress towards curriculum expectations (Black & Wiliam, 2018), in a democratic atmosphere. Also, teacher practice is concerned with using assessment to identify

specific strengths and weaknesses of learners and using assessment outcomes to inform instructional decisions (Alderson, et al., 2015; Zhao, et al., 2018). Using the framework, a teacher gets to articulate assessment responsibility more clearly. Also, searching for evidence through student feedback and peer feedback can enhance positive interactions in the classroom (Asadi, et al., 2017; Black & Wiliam, 2018; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This active participation of teacher and student in assessment evaluation promotes dialogic interaction between a teacher and students (Dixon & Hawe, 2018; Sadler, 2010). For instance, a teacher's investigation into the test takers' cognitive functioning can be an important source of evidence to back a claim based on explanation inference. Some of the claims in the framework would require the teacher to ask questions from the student and take questions from learners regarding the assessment process. More learning-based evidence is provided through teacher-student relationship and using assessment strategies, such as simple questioning, student reflective writing and other advanced techniques to explain test-takers' cognitive processes while evaluating the usefulness and practicality of assessment process.


The framework can be a valuable way to evaluate an externally designed summative-based formative assessment, with teachers responding to the claims in the framework. Teacher responses to the claims can then be used as sources of evidence for the usefulness, trustworthiness, and practicality of an assessment in enhancing teacher assessment practices. The claims raised in the framework are inexhaustible, just a guide. They were informed by theories in the field of classroom assessment and the result of an exploratory qualitative phase during a doctoral study and recently used to evaluate teacher assessment practice (Ijiwade & Alonzo, 2023). Therefore, the evidence a teacher can provide is wider than the claims addressed in the teacher-based evaluation argument. For instance, a teacher can investigate students' cognitive functioning immediately after the assessment to justify that students' responses to the assessment are not because of a lucky guess. The use of simple questioning, student-reflective writing, and other advanced techniques can be deployed by a teacher to explain the cognitive processes of test-takers (Bonner, 2013). Hopefully, the sources of evidence for the claims would be within reach of every teacher. Evaluating assessments based on this framework would increase teacher confidence about her/his assessment practices and the authenticity of the assessment approach to the classroom context.


Conclusions

Educational assessment validation has evolved over the years. While various approaches have been developed, an argument-based framework for evaluating educational assessments is still popular despite its limitations in addressing many context-based issues. Moreso, the practice and the purpose of assessment has evolved, making the argument-based framework misaligned to classroom assessment evaluation. Hence, a pragmatic philosophy and sociocultural theory must provide an adapted argument framework for implementing a learning-oriented assessment evaluation. Although the learning-centred validation approach proposed in this paper is still in its developmental stage, this concept maybe useful to guide

teachers' assessment practices, mainly using the framework to evaluate their assessment *for* learning practice designed to support teaching and promote student learning. Lastly, the framework could be helpful for test developers and classroom assessment researchers, providing important considerations in developing and evaluating the usefulness, trustworthiness, and practicality of assessments promoting learning and teaching.

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**Teacher-team reflections on the quality and modes of thinking in
Writing Intensive courses at the University of the Witwatersrand
during the first year of the global COVID-19 pandemic**

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Abstract

Writing Intensive (WI) courses depend on student engagement and continuous responses to student work. The sudden move to online learning in the face of COVID-19 presented profound challenges to this model. This is unsurprising since it is widely accepted that globally the quality of learning, particularly the acquisition of deep literacy, declined significantly throughout the pandemic (OECD, 2021; Garfinkle, 2020). This paper draws on the reflections of three course teams in different disciplines and follows the method pioneered by John Bean and Barbara Walvoord in the evaluation of writing programmes (Bean, et al., 2005). It mines iterative and comparative teacher team reflections but does not seek to provide quantitative data on 'proof of impact'. From the evidence of these three courses, it is suggested that student learning and problem solving can be enhanced through the explicit teaching of the types of reasoning required, in these cases analogic, empathetic, and inferential. The argument is located within wider international arguments on the crisis of deep literacy and the work of The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development on developing literacy skills in a digital world (OECD, 2021).

Keywords: Writing Intensive, critical thinking, writing programme development

Introduction

The pandemic and the immediate switch to online learning brought a global crisis of quality in learning, particularly in the quality of critical thinking (OECD, 2021). This crisis struck at the core activity of Writing Intensive courses in the Wits Writing Programme (WWP) which is to develop effective disciplinary writing and thinking within disciplines. We explore this crisis of criticality through a discourse-based analysis of teaching team reflections on three WI courses which ran during 2020. The focus on reflection suggests principles of adaptation for the whole programme, both in terms of the reflective method of analysis and in the identification of



salient modes of critical thinking, which while present in each course had not been previously explicitly recognised.

In this paper, the context of the crisis of criticality, its relevance to the emerging pedagogy and structure of the WWP, and an explanation of the methods are set out before mapping the richly textured teaching team reflections. The salient modes of reasoning as identified from the reflections are examined, and lastly, practical suggestions are offered for how to employ these modes of reasoning in future iterations of these courses.

The crisis of criticality

In his cross-disciplinary argument about the erosion of deep literacy through constant online communication, written during the early stages of the pandemic, Adam Garfinkle (2020) describes the extensive reach of the crisis of criticality. Garfinkle (2020) draws on the work of reading expert Maryanne Wolf to define deep literacy as a learning process which changes the mind of the learner through focused conversation with the text:

what happens when a reader engages with an extended piece of writing in such a way as to anticipate an author's direction and meaning, engages what one knows already in a dialectical process with the text'.¹

Most importantly, this deep processing, and the intellectual fusion of writer and reader, capacitates successive new insights, because the mind forms itself, establishes new neural pathways, as a direct result of its experiences of learning (Wolf, 2007). With the resort to anxious and rushed online learning, Garfinkle (2020) argues that we are in danger of losing our ability to develop deep processes of learning.²

The 2021 OECD PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) report, *21st-Century Readers: Developing Literacy Skills in a Digital World*, confirms the crisis of criticality, noting that only 9% of 15-year-old children in OECD countries possess the reading ability to distinguish between fact and opinion (OECD PISA, 2021: 5)³. Andreas Schleicher, the OECD Director for Education and Skills, has argued that,

¹ Also see Wolf (2009: 32) who describes deep reading as 'the array of sophisticated processes that propel comprehension and that include inferential and deductive reasoning, analogical skills, critical analysis, reflection, and insight'.

² Garfinkle (2020), following an observation from Henry Kissinger about strategic thinking only being possible after knowledge is aggregated, suggests that original thought is only possible through processing and connecting thoughts through these three modes. He writes that the 'deep-reading brain excels at making connections among analogical, inferential, and empathetic modes of reasoning, and knows how to associate them all with accumulated background knowledge' (Garfinkle, 2020: 6).

³ See also the WWP handbook 2019, that distinguishes between fact, inference, and opinion as one of the common goals of all WI courses.

Literacy in the 20th century was about extracting and processing pre-coded and – for school students – carefully curated information; in the 21st century, it is about constructing and validating knowledge ... The more knowledge technology allows us to search and access, the more important it is to develop deep understanding and the capacity to navigate ambiguity, triangulate viewpoints, and make sense out of content. (OECD PISA, 2021: 3)

In his presentation in the webinar which introduced this report, Schleicher argued for the importance of recognising that the skills necessary to critically navigate the growing digital world, must be taught (OECD PISA, 2021).

Local learning context: moving WI courses online without preparation.

We all remember that day we had to leave the office with the sense of catastrophe at our heels and the urgent need to find ways to enable teaching to continue. For the WWP, the challenge was how to maintain networked channels of communication, to engage all students, to help them build on tacit knowledge to think further, to experiment, and to practice communicating their understanding effectively within their disciplines.

The WWP had been gaining momentum. It was formalised in 2018, thanks to a government grant, with over 40 Writing Intensives (WI) courses recognised, all faculties represented, and each WI course supported by Writing Fellow senior student tutors (WFs), numbering over 300 at the beginning of 2020⁴. This is the first formalised WI programme at any South African university. It has been supported by the Campus Writing Programme at the University of Missouri, Columbia, and particularly by Professor Martha Townsend, who has offered crucial guidance.

Annual WWP reports since 2018 have included comments from lecturers that they could not now imagine teaching any other way, and from Writing Fellow (WF) tutors that they wished that they had been taught in this way themselves⁵. However, the sudden necessity to move to remote teaching and learning at the end of March 2020, in an extremely unequal country with an unstable national electricity grid and extremely high data costs,⁶ was a challenge for which we were not prepared. The sudden removal of the physical campus, with its equalising access

⁴ See WWP Annual Reports 2018 – 2020 (available on request from pamela.nichols@wits.ac.za) and <https://www.wits.ac.za/media/wits-university/learning-and-teaching/documents/ReviewTeachingLearning2015-2019.pdf>). For more context also see Nichols (2017) and Nichols, et al, (2019).

⁵ Annual Reports 2018 - 2020.

⁶ The costs of data remains a huge obstacle to online learning in South Africa, which has the highest data costs in Africa (Bottomley, 2020). The university has attempted to secure deals with a service provider to provide students with free data while on the university's learning management system, but students still experience problems. See WI lecturers' reflections 2021 in WWP Annual report 2020.

to books, quiet spaces, data-free internet, and conversation, dramatically posed the question of how the WWP could maintain the commitment to engaging each student.

Each WI course was acutely aware of this challenge. In order to be recognised as WI by the Writing Board of the Faculties, each course had been redesigned around habitual forms of engagement, such as regular informal writing and reading exercises and problem-solving assignments⁷. The engine of a WI course is learning to explore, wrestle with, and then perform effective thinking and its communication in each discipline; it relies on regular reflection on, and response to, student writing made possible by Writing Fellow (WF) tutors. Each course employs writing-to-learn activities (low-stakes activities to produce generative and reflective writing and thinking) as well as learning-to-write activities (high-stake tasks which teach students how to produce effective discipline-specific texts). All courses are in this way *developmental*, striving to enhance cognitive development, as well as *rhetorical*, teaching writing, reasoning, and ways of communicating within a discipline.

Such active learning cannot be developed through rote learning. The programme has always been explicit in its rejection of passive learning, which remains an inherited presence in the national education system through the traces of authoritarian classroom practices created through 'Fundamental Pedagogics' (Enslin, 1984), apartheid's philosophy of education. WI courses, in explicit contrast, are taught through activating each student, finding their entry points of engagement, coaxing them into asking questions and refining those questions, gaining an ability to analyse arguments, including developing an awareness of the implied audience and purpose of each text, so that they can position arguments and respond accordingly. WI courses thus seek to introduce students to increasingly scholarly conversation with the texts that they read, with each other, with the WFs, and with their lecturers, through developing their ability to engage in disciplinary-specific arguments. How to re-create this 'resonant classroom' (Nichols, 2016) and maintain such conversations within and between WI courses online became our central concern.

Teaching team reflection as method

The discussion below provides a window into the continuing struggle to maintain engagement in three previously successful WI courses, located respectively in Arts, in Social Work, and in Engineering. The argument is drawn from the teaching team reflections of WI lecturers and WF tutors, following the discourse-based method of the Writing Across the Curriculum pioneer Barbara Walvoord (Nichols, 2016)⁸. This method does not seek to correlate teaching team reflections to student data, but rather focuses on how teacher perceptions are developed and refined through metacognitive writing and discussion.

⁷ See WWP Handbook 2019 for a comprehensive description of the processes of the programme, much of which were developed from the processes of the flagship WI programme at the University of Missouri, Columbia, in the United States.

⁸ Endorsed, discussed, and applied by Bean, et al. (2005)

We deliberately chose not to conduct surveys or to attempt statistical research during the pandemic when our students and colleagues were overburdened and described themselves as overwhelmed, as they experimented and inevitably made mistakes in responding to profound external challenges. Rather, we developed a method which built on required processes and gave the opportunity for each teaching team to listen to each other and think together about what happened and how the course could be revised. The research on the impact of courses is part of an ongoing WWP evaluation. This project invests in teacher talk, sifted, and formalised through iterative conversation, to develop course revision internally and collectively.

A common procedure was adopted in each course:

- As part of normal WWP required practice, each WI lecturer and WF tutor responded to 18 reflection questions.
- Each teaching team read their other team members' responses.
- Focus groups were held by each team, led by the WI lecturer, to discuss their answers. These focus groups were recorded and transcribed.
- Each WI lecturer wrote a summary report of their group' s discussion, which was shared with the group, discussed, and revised, and then submitted to the WWP Head.
- From the reports, transcripts and recordings, original reflection question answers, the WWP Head looked for patterns of identified course strengths and weaknesses and drafted an overview reading.
- This reading was shared with the WI lecturers who suggested revisions and discussed the implications for strategic planning.

The method seeks to build each team' s collective agency and ownership, and community of thinking across WI courses. It understands writing, talking, and revision as an iterative, connected process of individual and collective thinking. It creates the opportunity for the WFs and WI lecturer to listen carefully to each other, to think about and to compare their recent teaching experiences and to consider what they might do differently. It also builds on the WWP Head' s outsider role⁹ to suggest common patterns and strategies, which are then presented to the WI lecturers for revision and amendment. The method extends the skills of active listening, characteristic of a writing centre consultation, into collective, programmatic development.¹⁰

All of the quotations in italics in the teaching team reflections below, are taken from either the submitted end-of-course reflections or from the focus group transcripts.

⁹ See McLeod (1995) and Flash (2021) for further explication of the role of the WAC administrator as the intellectual foreigner who can pose useful questions to the discipline specialists.

¹⁰ This emerging principle of programmatic sustainability and growth through collective development, draws both on the OECD' s identification of collective thinking as a principle for post-COVID-19 recovery (2021) and from the work of Ostrom (1990).

The courses selected had a relatively small student enrolment, and respectively worked with postgraduate, third year, and first year undergraduate students. They were also selected because each lecturer was in the process revising their course, so again pragmatically, this analysis does not create extra work but rather builds on existing interest.

The starting point of these reflections was an assessment of what was working well and what required attention in 2019. Each team then considered, in the light of these reflections, what worked well or what did not in 2020.

Teaching team reflection 1: Learning to write and think like an expert-insider in cultural management courses

WI team: lecturer, Ms. Avril Joffe; 2 WF tutors, 1 Teaching Assistant (TA)

Course background

The first teaching team reflection is based upon two consecutive MA courses in the Wits School of Arts which together form a year's course in Cultural Policy and Management. The first, *Cultural Policy and Leadership*, draws on cultural policy theories and on the 2003 and 2005 UNESCO conventions to consider the governance of culture and, specifically, cultural policy in Africa. The second, *Creativity, Culture, and the Economy*, considers the interactions between cultural policy and the cultural and creative industries, 'city making', digital technologies and models of entrepreneurship. Both courses have been recognised as WI since 2016 and have the smallest student enrolment (12) in the whole programme. The students are mostly from an older age group, successfully established in their professional careers in the creative sector (until Covid-19) but unfamiliar with scholarly research and writing¹¹.

The primary critical thinking aim identified by the lecturer was to develop the perspective of the 'expert insider' (Macdonald, 1994) in the students' working roles as a cultural policy advisor or an arts strategist. The courses were designed to help the students to learn to write and think as an informed and scholarly advisor or practitioner. For the lecturer, the two courses represent the first stage in developing a fully WI MA programme in the department, with all courses recognised as WI and clear learning paths between them, focused on the dynamic between scholarship and material realities in the creative industries and the wider cultural sector.

Starting point

In the year before the pandemic, an external examiner noted that writing in this course, specifically student ability to compose scholarly arguments, had improved¹². Further work was deemed necessary to ensure greater transference of writing skills acquired through course work into the students' final research reports, and to introduce better time management skills

¹¹ See Joffe (2019) for further discussion of these courses and their influence in the sector.

¹² WWP Annual Report (2019) – available on request.

among the students. The course teaching team also noted tighter intellectual connections between the course material and the individual careers of the students.

2020 adaptations: What worked

With the move by the University to 'Emergency Remote Teaching' in March 2020 there was a reduction of material covered and a reframing of objectives to consider the impact of Covid-19: on the governance of culture; on participatory policy making in the structuring of Covid-19 relief; on human rights and gender considerations in the sector; and on ways in which cultural agencies might reimagine their mandates.

What worked with the immediately adapted courses was the ability to stay in contact online and to maintain a focus on developmental responses. Writing consultations with Writing Fellows were also reported to work. When the students submitted drafts for consultation, and resubmitted revised drafts, the WFs thought most student writing improved. Flexible and immediate online meetings among students, WF tutors, and the lecturer allowed for greater responsiveness to learning issues. The habitual learning rhythms and regular requirements implicit in the WI course structure was reported as helpful. While writing improvement was not as evident as in previous years, the WI structure ensured that the students knew that they should write regularly, were required to submit reflections, and to be in regular contact with the WI teaching team.

The WFs in this course reported that their work was essentially unchanged online, though intensified. One WF noted that the

key elements of my online role were to ensure that I facilitate continuous dialogue between students, academia, as well as a continuity in critical engagement with their work, and feedback for their writing. This role did not change extensively ... However, ... the human level was exposed through the informal interactions on WhatsApp ... which assisted ... an even more tailored approach to each student. In addition to this, a platform like WhatsApp facilitated a quicker, instant form of communication.

As in previous years, the WFs knitted the course together, providing students with the guidance and sympathy of a more experienced peer. A WF remarked that:

they all would always revert to me for any assistance, elaboration, explanations ... In addition, the added benefit of having gone through the course allowed them to also ask for coping mechanisms which lessened the weight of fighting to survive.

The WFs saw the benefit of this work to their own emergent scholarship. A WF commented that working on this course:

has made me aware of my own style of writing, locating my own voice and experiences within those of other scholars in the discipline. This became evident as I was writing and

completing my research report in 2020. ... Lastly, it allowed me to immerse myself in multiple perspectives and reflections of existing theory as well as new, personalised experiences of each practitioner [referring to students on the course].

This observation was echoed by another WF, who commented that she learned to:

read my work as a reader and not as me, the writer. That separation was not always clear to me. I respect the process of writing more and note some of the mistakes that students make, I also fall victim to.

2020 adaptations: What needed work

However, while the WFs reported that they were able to improve their scholarship, the students were less resilient. In fact, their ability to study appeared to have been dramatically reduced. A concerned WF tutor observed that the students were so stuck in this explosion of this disastrous event of Covid-19 that they completely ignored even the basic act of making sure that you read at least five articles per week.

Disengagement became evident. The lecturer noted the students' lack of interest in a specially arranged continental webinar:

We had organised students' participation in three webinars held on the continent (Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania) in a space of 10 days around the time of this assignment. We had hoped the students would be inspired to hear how artists and creatives in other African countries were responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, how their governments were supporting the sector (or not) and their innovative strategies to survive.

One WF's explanation for this lack interest was that the

students were unable to position themselves objectively within the sector as they were so immersed in their own challenges of not being able to hustle (earn income in an ad hoc manner in this gig economy). They also ... [appeared] disinterested in what others were saying, whether on social media or the news in general.

The lecturer added that the circumstances of the pandemic appeared to have damaged students'

ability to absorb what was happening in real time to the sector, and relate these issues to the sector, [together with an] inability to think in a distanced way about the impact of COVID on issues explored by the course.

She added that this pandemic-induced damage, also meant an inability to read:

I would say, 'right let's discuss - what did we mean by this?'. But nobody had read. Nobody said a word. Nobody speaks up. It was just too painful; it was just too painful.¹³

The teaching team understood this 'paralysis' (as described by a WF) as arising from a combination of personal circumstances, emotional distress, restricted access to data, and an unavoidable pressure to spend time on economic survival. Students on this course had typically worked part-time while studying. However, with the pandemic and repeated lockdowns, there was little or no short-term work available in the cultural sector. The lecturer estimated that 80% of the students struggled to keep up with the demands of the course.

Such disengagement frustrated the WI principle of constant responses to student work. Most students submitted work late or at the last minute, despite the generous extension of deadlines. The WFs then faced a bottleneck, so, as one WF noted, their work changed from promoting the development of scholars, to making sure final submissions were properly packaged¹⁴. The second semester course relied on group work; however, these groups experienced multiple issues of miscommunication and an unequal distribution of tasks, so that only a few students carried the load for others. Disengagement and underperformance became a cumulative problem and by semester 2, Covid-19 fatigue was apparent¹⁵. In semester 2, the lecturer observed that,

the majority of the students withdrew from the process and rhythm of work we had established at the beginning of the year. Most students needed to be reminded of earlier feedback, as they were reverting to past mistakes. The quality of their work was compromised as it was merely submitted to fulfil course requirements.

These two masters level courses in Cultural Policy and Management, which had been show-cases for highly prepared learning and innovative teaching,¹⁶ became, through no fault of

¹³ The OECD PISA (2021: 22) Readers Report connects a lack of interest in global events to the inability to read: 'Reading is key to the growing and changing needs of an interconnected world. PISA 2018 showed that global competence – the ability to easily move between local and global spheres- is strongly correlated with reading performance. This is not surprising as both reading and global competence require weighing the reliability and relevance of information, reasoning with evidence and describing and explaining complex situations and problems'

¹⁴ Writing understood as 'packaging' rather than thinking is something that WI courses seek to avoid (Bean, 2011),

¹⁵ Other WI courses in semester 2, 2020 reported evidence of COVID-19 fatigue. For example, in a Law course, the WI lecturer reported that the same students who had performed well in the first semester slumped in the second, for no apparent reason other than Covid fatigue. See Jean Moore, WI lecturer reflection semester 2, 2020 in WWP Annual report 2020.

¹⁶ See Joffe (2019) and the Wits Faculty of Humanities and School of Education, Presspause webinar series, 2020.

their own, traumatic experiences for their experienced, concerned, and conscientious WI team. The teaching team did their best for the students, and some students benefited from the developmental aspects of the course and improved their writing. However, learning for most of these students was severely impaired by the pandemic. The creative sector was savaged by Covid-19, by lockdowns and by very limited government support¹⁷. Unsurprisingly, there were devastating psychological and economic effects on the students enrolled in this course. The challenge for the teaching team was how to begin to support and to refocus these shattered students, so that they could return to learning how to write, to read and to think like 'expert insiders' .

Teaching team reflection 2: The importance of wellness and empathy in a Social Work course

Health and Well-being, Dr Roshini Pillay, 4 WFs, 1 TA.

Course background

The second example is a short first-year Social Work course established in 2009 and recognised as WI in 2018. It runs for half a semester and considers models of health care in South Africa, and the role of the Social Worker, previously with a focus on the health management of people living with HIV/AIDS. There were 57 students enrolled for the course in 2020. The critical thinking skills identified by the lecturer were to:

- compare and contrast models of health care,
- critically describe and analyse the South African public and private health systems, and
- identify values at play in health and wellness provision and in health work teams.

Starting point

In 2019, the course was offered in a blended format, part online and part face-to-face. The course lecturer, Dr Pillay, has a particular research interest in the use of technology-enhanced learning to further inclusion and values of social justice (see Pillay & Agherdien, 2021).

2020 adaptations: What worked

As with the Cultural Policy and Management courses, the subject content of the course in 2020 was reframed around the impact of Covid-19. Here, however, it appeared that the pandemic rather than being experienced primarily as a disruptor, allowed a sharper focus on content and delivery.

Following a professional Social Work approach, the first step to adaptation after lockdown was a needs-assessment survey. From the 53 survey answers it was understood that

¹⁷ Debates over limited government support, and corruption engulfing what support was available, became ever fiercer within the sector.

25 students would access the course through a smart phone, 24 via a laptop, 4 via a tablet. Only 7 students reported constraints on access to connectivity and only 2 students had no internet access at all. However, 22 students reported that they had sufficient data for online learning. The class was split into 5 groups, each led by either a WF or a TA, in line with the existing strategy of learning through collaboration and mесо¹⁸ Social Work practice, and to ameliorate different capabilities to access the course.

Small group work was confirmed as an important constant. Immediate adaptation of the course in response to the pandemic included: reducing content, developing videos for students and placing them on the learning management system, creating online discussion forums, and improving communication channels with the class representatives. The group assignment was reframed around COVID-19, allowing both students and staff to draw from their current challenges, which for many included being health workers on the front-line in the battle against the pandemic.

The focus on collaborative groups as both teaching method and professional practice, as well as on issues of wellness and social justice, may explain why the students and teaching team worked particularly hard to stay in contact with each other. WhatsApp served them well as the cheapest, most immediate, and most efficient way of maintaining constant communication between the lecturer with the WFs, the WFs with other WFs, and the WFs with their group of students. WhatsApp allowed for the sharing of files as well as more personal conversations and was seen as vital to maintaining student engagement. Writing Fellows sometimes made use of their own personal funds to maintain these WhatsApp connections. One WF comments that

communication increased a lot because of technology. The lecturer was also on WhatsApp, the lecturer was responsive and available for us all the time.

Another WF added that

I didn't feel lost at any point, Doc. You were always available. Anytime you were ready to answer any questions to clarify any confusions.

In this course, the WFs also reported that responses to student drafts, and other concerns including questions about readings, intensified. The WFs believed that offering the opportunity for repeated feedback on the same draft resulted in improved writing. This service was going

¹⁸ Mесо practice in Social Work involves working primarily with groups, 'Although mесо social workers may offer direct individual services, their primary focus centers on problem-solving on behalf of groups of clients, or "client systems" ' (Social Work Guide, 2020). Mесо practice has been described as an essential intervention for students of social work to master, as it is powerful, positive, empowering, affirming, and provides opportunities for mutual aid (Shulman, 2016).

beyond their brief but was offered because they saw the value to the students. One WF commented that

The way they [students] present their arguments improved because of these feedback sessions and I think ... some students after discussing the feedback ... volunteered to resubmit.

Another noted the value of redrafting after consultations:

I had to make them submit twice – they [the students] were willing and you know it was a good experience.

Unlike most courses in the WWP, discussion forums were active. A WF noted that he asked students to post their questions on the forum rather than send questions directly to him. He saw this as a strategy that both established professional boundaries and encouraged peer learning. He further observed that

I saw lots of students collaborating, via WhatsApp on the last assignment with the activity that required an interview. ... So you would see them [students] engaging in that WhatsApp group without the WF - this showed how technology supported collaboration.

It was also reported that the WFs took initiatives, sourced strategies, and methods, and improved their own knowledge of learning technology, for example, creating short videos which were greatly appreciated by the students. As most WFs were students of Social Work themselves, the pandemic appeared to integrate writing support with professional values. One WF for example commented that the

'ethic of care that you were taught as a social worker... unconsciously you apply them [in WF work] ... [I] try to learn as much as possible so that I can be the best tutor for the students' .

Another WF noted an ethic of care in this course, and that it extended to WF team members. She observed that there was comfort in *'doing something collectively, you feel like it is legit'* . This felt sense of the value of each member and of their collective work, facilitated responsive thinking and solutions, such as the use of WhatsApp voice notes. All the WFs appreciated the sense of caring for the wellbeing of the team and of the students.

The WFs demonstrated this caring themselves by providing insight into the living situations of the students. One WF brought to the attention of the team,

The reality of how bad it is for people to work from home. Some people stay in informal settlements, some in a house full of people. They do not have time. The only time they have is evening, after hours.

Another noted that students had to study at night that

*most of them will do their schoolwork at night because of their living arrangements, so they will post a lot of questions on the group at about 1 AM*¹⁹.

He added that if he was awake, he would respond. Many students lived in places with weak connectivity, so online sessions were frequently disrupted with students dropping out and then trying to re-enter a session. Several WFs consequently created WhatsApp voice notes which could be accessed at any time at little data cost. The WFs took note of which students were absent and periodically checked on them.

The WFs were empathetic to the plight of students, perhaps because it was familiar from their own experiences. One noted that

I was empathic because I understood the difficulty of transitioning from lecture room to home and online.

This sympathy²⁰ was a factor in strengthening communication.

As with the Cultural Policy and Management courses, the WFs noted improvement in their own writing and research skills, in their confidence as educators, in their ability to give effective feedback to student drafts, in their sense of their own scholarly identity, and, because of the subject matter of this course, in their understanding of the pandemic.

2020 adaptations: What needed work

The lecturer took a holistic view and divided challenges into the personal, technological, structural, and administrative. These issues at first consideration appear to go beyond the classroom, but, of course, with remote learning, all these issues intersect with learning, which the lecturer decided needed acknowledgement. Hence while acknowledgement did not provide a solution, it did allow emotional distress to be recognised, contextualised, and addressed.

¹⁹ The university offered students 10 Gigs of daytime data for study purposes and 20 Gigs of past midnight data during 2020.

²⁰ The word sympathy here is used in layman's terms to indicate common feeling. Dr Pillay uses the word empathy and relates it to Carl Rogers' concept of walking next to someone, while constantly checking your understanding of their journey (see: <http://cultureofempathy.com>)

There were, however, casualties among the students. The WFs noted that some students were unable to cope. One WF noted that

I had one student that deregistered because he was failing to cope and even though we tried to encourage him to continue, he just decided that this online thing is not for me.

Many students were handicapped by insufficient data and so were unable to join or remain connected to Microsoft Teams meetings. This weakness of connection was frustrating, as WFs needed to re-admit students, repeat information, or ask the students to repeat. With the university's provision of data through a private service provider, more students were able to connect but not at the same time, as many students only had access to night-time data. There were reports of plagiarism with a WF noting that first drafts often had information that was cut and pasted and so he would '*give them a scare and tell them that the policy on plagiarism might result in exclusion*'. WFs also noted a deterioration in the quality of students' reading.

In terms of the teaching by WFs, there was a danger of emotional exhaustion and a blurring of boundaries. A WF reported that sometimes she felt that the ease of contact through WhatsApp created an overreliance. While

WhatsApp as a platform made communication easy, ... at the same time it gave too much access, and sometimes I felt like I needed a break ... (I) don't want them to feel abandoned because it's their first experience with online isolated learning. But I still want boundaries to be clear (so) that there (need to be scheduled) times for this ... Anyhow, I took it in my stride because I was appreciating that they are feeling lost, abandoned, and disconnected.

Clearly this course benefited from the collective professional desire to understand and to promote wellness, which included an ongoing need to protect the team, to find ways to make empathy sustainable, and to deepen student learning while acknowledging the inequities made starkly visible by remote learning. While there was an acknowledgement of increased plagiarism, and of shallow reading, a lesson learned here was that sustainable empathetic thinking can lessen the degree of disengagement.

Teaching team reflection 3: Learning by doing in Engineering Design

Industrial Engineering Design

WI team: lecturer: Ms. Bontle Tladi, 2 WFs, 4 TAs

Course background

The final example is a third-year undergraduate course on the theory and techniques of industrial engineering design which requires students to apply industrial design principles to various projects and tasks, both within groups and individually. It runs for a year and has been WI since 2018; in 2020 it had 28 students enrolled, supported by 2 WF tutors.

The WI lecturer for the course described the critical thinking aim as to learn to reason within the discipline.

Design ... is a practice of thinking critically. Most of the coursework is project based (we learn and practice design by “doing” it – the course has a strong “learning by doing” pedagogical approach). However, the ability to demonstrate the design competence in the course is heavily dependent on communication – my ability to assess is directly correlated to my ability to access what is being shared. Thus, the course also has a strong emphasis on being able to effectively communicate the quality of critical thinking that has gone into the various design projects.

Underneath this primary aim of understanding, practicing, and communicating design as thinking, she describes subsidiary aims to:

- familiarise students with a repertoire of design principles,
- integrate and apply skills learnt in the first two years of the degree,
- explore and understand problems within the industry and the broader community, and
- practice and reflect on professional teamwork.

As with the courses in Cultural Policy and Management, and in Social Work, familiarity and understanding of the current professional landscape is as important as understanding scholarly writing within the field, but this course is slightly different in that in terms of content and delivery, it seeks explicitly to teach processes of reasoning within the discipline.

It is also a gateway course, as it is the first year in which students specialise in Industrial Engineering. For most students, the previous two years focused on the common curriculum for all Mechanical, Industrial, and Aeronautical Engineering students; the other students came from other disciplines within the faculty. So, both the subject of this course and its programmatic position, required inducting students into common scholarly and professional practice, which require the identification, practicing and developing, and reflecting on discipline-specific processes of reasoning.

Starting point

The strengths of the course were reported as the class discussions and afternoon group-based workshops; client-based project briefs; the ongoing integration of WF support into the course activities; WF response to drafts; WF workshops with small groups of students; and students taking the initiative to visit the Wits Writing Centre, and to engage with the WFs of their own accord. What needed work, the WI team believed, was embedding the WF assistance, so that it

was integral to the course; developing a regular rhythm of continuous low-stakes writing rather than over-weighting the final project-based report and demonstrating the relevance of the WWP motto of ‘writing as thinking’ to design. This is one of the few pioneering WI courses in Engineering Sciences²¹. The enthusiasm of this WI team has sparked interest within the School and the Faculty.

2020 adaptations: What worked

Unlike the other two courses, assessments were not reframed in 2020, though content was reduced, and methods of delivery were recalibrated. Again, and unusually in terms of the rest of the WWP, a significant change with lockdown noted by the lecturer was of more engaged student participation in WF led Forums. In earlier years, student responses were cut-and-pasted from other work, but in 2020 these responses were developed through peer discussions of each other’s posts. The forums served both to increase participation and the opportunity for students to help each other. A WF echoed her opinion:

Forums were a huge success. Students could develop their writing while simultaneously revising their course work.

The lecturer also emphasised the importance of the ‘summary submissions’ required each week from the students to check their understanding of the course material. The summary submissions revealed mistakes and partial understandings, and so allowed the lecturer to adjust her teaching accordingly. They were also valued by the students as aids to memory and a tool to develop their independent learning.

Again, there were increased requests for WF responses to drafts. Because of their role in maintaining continuous contact and communication, the WFs became more important during the pandemic, with the lecturer understanding their role as the core ‘support for writing’. A Writing Fellow explained,

We had more responsibility in terms of facilitating WI strategies and embedding writing in the course from the beginning. We had to present more in-depth strategies to students for them to take an interest in writing while juggling our own research and considering that these were abnormal times so we couldn’t pressurise them to participate. The burden was on us to encourage them to read and write, which took a lot of effort. We also availed ourselves on social media (WhatsApp) to limit contact barriers.

2020 adaptations: What needed work

²¹ There is large critical thinking course in the Engineering Faculty, but it is based on the reading of literature and is largely taught by Humanities students. It does not teach the critical thinking skills which are particular to engineering.

The WI team identified as a problem the issue of dissonance in feedback, between the lecturer's responses and WF responses. Both lecturer and WFs responded to student drafts, but some WFs reported that students were reluctant to share work in progress with them, and that some students were confused when WF feedback appeared to contradict that of the lecturer.

The WFs in this course were not from the discipline, so there was a possibility, or perception of the possibility by the students, that they might mis-direct students. The lecturer, however, wanted the students to think through the different responses and to make their own decisions. For the lecturer this dissonance in feedback provided an interesting course design problem, and she asked herself,

How is their (student) agency still supported in a way that does not compromise or override discipline competencies. This has implications on how the course itself is designed to facilitate this (learning through dissonance).

If the students were used to learning by rote, or with dealing with problems and questions with a right and wrong answer, dissonance, if overcome, could result in increased engagement. The WFs then had a difficult balance to strike: to avoid, at all costs, teaching what they did not know, and helping the students to follow their own thinking and make their own choices.

The challenges of 2020 were those of design. A WF wrote that the experience of 2020,

has given me lots of ideas. I've started storing/filing all my presentations/writing strategies notes so that I can re-use them next year, I also have ideas of how to embed the WI program within the course so that it doesn't come across as extra work for student. I've created a google doc for my next cohort so that we can begin with it from the beginning of the year. To sum up, I've started thinking of how to continue and prepare in advance for the next group of students.

WFs are doing amazing work for the University community, and I think it's important that more of us get the opportunity to present at ... annual seminars such as the [...]one I got to present at early this year with Bontle.

Both lecturer and WFs wish to assess the impact of WI integration in the course to encourage more WI teaching and learning. They believe that the course still needs to habituate the students into habits of reflective learning and draft sharing. Unlike the other two courses, however, all the students in this course were able to access online materials and workshops. The ongoing teaching challenge is to work further on the avowed focus of the course, which is to develop learning and the course itself through reflective, inferential thinking.

Identifying and supporting course-specific modes of reasoning

The reading of all three group reflections revealed that the pandemic had disrupted previous abilities to study in a deep way and revealed the need to identify more specifically what types of thinking each course aimed to achieve, both in terms of processes of thinking and in terms of learning to write discipline-specific texts.

Reading across these reflections identified the following target salient modes of reasoning in each course.

- Teaching team 1: analogical reasoning of learning how to adopt the role of expert insider, which was the stated aim of the course.
- Teaching team 2: empathetic reasoning, foregrounded by the pandemic, and which could be formalised in terms of professional empathy.
- Teaching team 3: inferential reasoning, already explicitly taught in the understanding of design, but could be formalised further in the learning processes of both students and WFs.

This metacognitive recognition of the specific critical thinking skills necessary to solve disciplinary problems, requires its own vocabulary, to complement (not replace) the vocabulary employed to identify, construct and position arguments.^{22 23} These terms for different modes of reasoning provided tools for the lecturers, who could employ all three, or choose which thinking aim to prioritise at a particular point in a course.

Before this research, these three modes of reasoning had not been explicitly recognised by the course lecturers. Coincidentally, these three modes of reasoning were identified by Adam Garfinkle as attributes of deep literacy. Original thought, he suggests, is derived from connections between these three modes of reasoning and their relationship to background knowledge (Garfinkle, 2020).

²² For an earlier relevant initiative in science education see Grayson (1996), which outlines the design of a Science Foundation Programme (SFP) at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, which in its preparatory stages, before identifying themes, required all participating lecturers to identify explicitly the thinking skills that they aimed to teach to teach. The SFP also used writing-to-learn techniques, peer-learning, and self-assessment to develop metacognitive confirmation of learning. It was designed for disadvantaged South African students, not as a stepping-stone to studying science at university but rather as a scaffolded experience and reflection on the type of learning and thinking that they would need to succeed as university science students. This paper follows a similar approach though the application of these strategies and principles are for *all* students (a development for the future suggested by Grayson 1997), because the immediate problem of how to deepen online learning is relevant to all students. Also, the theory and approach proposed here are explicitly aligned to the global scholarship and international networks of the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement, including Writing Intensive (WI) programmes and Writing Within Disciplines (WID).

²³ Sally Matthews (2015) in discussing her design of her history course at Rhodes University, laments that while critical thinking is a constantly lauded as a teaching outcome, it is hardly defined.

These three modes of reasoning can be understood in the following ways.

Analogical reasoning

Analogical reasoning is learning through comparison, or, more accurately, the interaction between relational cognition, and symbolic systems, which enhance relational cognition. In the words of the psychologist Dedre Gentner (2010: 752), 'language forms a positive feedback system with relational cognition and this system is a major driver of specifically human learning'. Gentner (2010: 753) describes this process as a boot strapping mechanism of the mind, which allows alignment and mapping, and which 'makes humans uniquely powerful learners'.

Empathetic reasoning within the disciplines

Empathy is understood to be cognitive, emotional, and compassionate, and was particularly relevant during the pandemic. Elif Shafak, a novelist and lecturer in Political Studies, quotes the inspiration of Toni Morrison: 'I get angry about things, and then get on, and go to work' (cited in Shafak, 2020). What does such 'work' mean for learning in Higher Education? The reading and study of literature is generally understood to improve the ability to empathise and to shift subject positions, but is the mode of empathetic reasoning useful in learning within other disciplines?

Inferential reasoning and tacit knowledge

This mode of reasoning involves the surfacing of the interactions between declarative knowledge and the cognitive model of the learner. Inferential reasoning is an active process of inquiry to uncover misconceptions and to enable reconfiguration of cognitive models. Such learning requires regular feedback to develop an ability to monitor and reflect on what has been inferred and how that inference changes existing conceptions and anticipates future conceptions. This type of reasoning works with tacit knowledge to test and to build, and, as with the other two forms of reasoning, it is a critical component of writing understood as thinking. Harvey Wiener (1992: 7), the Founding President of the National Council of Writing Program Administrators, argued that:

The role of inferential reasoning is vital for both readers and writers – in weighing audience, purpose, theses, issues of logic and sequence - in short many of the essential elements in composing draw on the confluence between denotation and connotation, implication and inference, suggestion and statement.

Strategies to develop further these salient types of reasoning both within, and across WI courses, are set out below, together with suggestions for the further development of the WF role. The strategies and suggestions have been drawn from the experiences of the three

courses discussed in this article, from the WWP as a whole, and from reflections on the relevant international scholarly literature.

(i) Analogic thinking: Developing the role of the WF and student acculturation into scholarly writing and thinking

Analogic thinking is a mode of learning through comparison between what is currently understood and models of something or someone different. Comparison allows students to map and align new observations to previous understandings. Analogic thinking plays a critical role in this process. Two forms of analogic understanding are considered here. Firstly, the WF tutors themselves provide important role models of successful students. Secondly, implicit in the work of the WFs, and hence accessible to all WI courses, is the process of the scaffolded learning of scholarly conversation through guided responses to writing drafts.

WFs as role models

The WF role is a dynamic one. WFs are students who are themselves developing as scholars. There is no one path to becoming a WF. As observed above, some have been students on the same WI course, while others were also Wits Writing Centre (WWC) consultants. Perhaps most interesting, for the development of trans-disciplinary understanding, were WFs who worked in WI courses in different disciplines, so expanding their experience of teaching styles and of the self-understanding of disciplines and their ability to bring their knowledge of their home discipline into conversation with other disciplines. WF work is thus intellectually stimulating and enables rich conversations about how students learn to think and write within and across disciplines and it also contributes significantly to the career development of the WFs themselves.

In 2020 the WF role was seriously threatened by demands from students that the WFs bridge the gap between students and the classroom caused by the sudden shift to online learning. The threat to their role as writing coaches and as role models of successful students, and the danger of an unchecked drift to them becoming underpaid adjunct faculty, became ever clearer. In response, the role of the WF as writing coach was made more explicit, and a continuing professional development plan for WFs developed. At the same time, WFs were encouraged to develop voluntary, self-directed writing groups focused on modelling teaching ideas and on responses to member's own writing. Going forward, writing groups will play an important role in the professional development of WFs. By promoting sustainable writing networks not dependent either on lecturers or supervisors, writing groups also contribute to growing a writing eco system across the university²⁴.

Letters and slow thought

²⁴ The professional development of writing consultants and WFs through developing their own writing has long been seen as an efficient and rich form of training. See for example, Bifuh-Ambe (2013).

In learning how to be a critically informed student, by observing the WF, students learn by analogy. They also need to practice how to read, how to think and how to write like a scholar, which is a form of analogic practice made much harder by reliance on digital learning. Hasty online courses with press-the-tab answers, isolation leading to social media trawling, click-bait tactics and the success of industrious online manipulators, the advances of readily available AI applications, may all contribute to a daily shallowness of engagement²⁵. Scholarly engagement, by definition, requires the opposite of what Linda Stone termed 'continual partial attention (cited in Garfinkle, 2021). In the WI digital ecosystem, the aim is to create and to encourage thoughtful and engaged reading and writing, and responses to both, and to provide opportunities to slow down, to think further, and to practice what Maryanne Wolf (2018) has termed 'cognitive patience'.

An initial idea to draw students into more scholarly consideration of their work was through the Wits Writing Centre (WWC) strategy, designed at the beginning of lockdown, to work through the low tech, low data option of email correspondence in response to student drafts²⁶. This was a formalised process guided by templates designed to provide the metacognitive opportunity to employ informal writing to hone formal writing. It has been adopted in several courses within the WWP and is central to the related research project²⁷. Four of the WFs in the three courses discussed here have used these templates in their WWC work. Letter response to student drafts thus offers an easily available method to introduce slower, and increasingly scholarly, conversations about writing into the courses.

Letters also addressed Bontle Tladi's concern about dissonance in feedback, by their ability to foreground options. As the students become less concerned with a single evaluation of their work, and become more aware of multiple views, including their own, they begin to understand writing and research as a craft, which they shape through their choice of which responses to incorporate. Letters can be constructed and protected as free spaces to think through ideas, and significantly to think through dissonance without the compulsion to find either an immediate solution or a consensus²⁸.

Increasing the opportunity for students to see their work through multiple views informs the creation of a writing culture which emphasises craft, meta-awareness of cognitive

²⁵ Daniel Kahneman, in *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011), makes the point that fast, associative and intuitive thought is as crucial as slow effortful thought, and that wisdom lies in the interaction between fast and slow thought. Both speeds of thought are clearly necessary. However, as the courses discussed in this paper reveal, the current crisis in learning online undermines effortful thinking. The strategies discussed seek to reintroduce it, but not, of course, to the exclusion of intuitive, associative thinking.

²⁶ WI Online Handbook: Message in a Bottle, 2020, and Nichols, P. 2020, Letter from the Wits Writing Programme. Available on request.

²⁷ Erasmus, Z., Mngomezulu, N., and Nichols P. 2020. 'Epistolary Pedagogy for the Covid-19 Pandemic, South Africa' research project, funded by the Oppenhemier Memorial Trust. Available on request.

²⁸ See the classic description of free spaces and the generation of democratic change in Evans and Boyte (1992).

processes, and the writer's choice of how to revise and frame. Encouraging peer learning also removes pressure from the WFs who no longer need to be the sole interlocutor but can rather oversee and intervene when they see a need for guidance.

(ii) Empathetic reasoning within the discipline

Responding to the exigencies of the pandemic required lecturers, WFs, and students to review and develop their roles with a consideration of each other's well-being and the varied conditions under which students and staff were operating. Foregrounding wellbeing, both in course content and method, recognising and working with it as a core theme, appears to have been directly connected to a greater ability to engage and develop the critical thinking, reading, and writing required by the Social Work course. While the teaching experiences of the Social Work course and the cultural management course differed considerably, as explored above, in both the importance of empathy became increasingly clear. Hence there is a strong case for empathetic reasoning to be made much more explicit in these courses and related to cognitive and compassionate reasoning required by the disciplines.

(iii) Inferential reasoning and building on tacit knowledge

Inferential reasoning resembles the teaching of inquiry. It is the posing of challenges so that students uncover their misconceptions, reconfigure their cognitive models of understanding, and make new connections in their knowledge. As Michael Polanyi wrote in 1966 in *The Tacit Dimension*, 'Discoveries are made possible by pursuing possibilities suggested by existing knowledge' (cited in Wiener, 1992). This type of reasoning is promoted through modelling, coaching, scaffolding, reflecting, and explaining (Kurfiss, 1988). Wiener (1992) suggests building inferential reading skills through encouraging students to read beyond the words, to ask questions as they read, to draw predictions and predict outcomes, and if the answer is not immediately apparent, to draw on their skills of inference²⁹. Inferential reading in the digital age also includes the ability to construct and validate while reading, to navigate between texts, to detect bias, to validate and to test authority as far as possible, by, for example, checking the reliability of a site through an internet search³⁰. In developing this self-conscious skill of constructing knowledge through inference, the question arises of whether WFs should come from the same discipline as the particular WI course.

In the first and second courses considered here, WFs came mainly from within the discipline. In the third course, which explicitly taught inferential thinking, the WFs were not

²⁹ The reading of these courses suggests salient critical thinking skills for further development, but, as mentioned above, these thinking skills are relevant to all courses. Avril Joffe, for example, notes that a "key writing strategy in the Cultural Policy and Management course are the required 'Reading Responses' which are designed to promote inferential reading."

³⁰ See PISA report for extensive discussion of navigation, construction and validation skills and Wineberg (2021)

students in the discipline. The current position of the WWP is that the WI lecturer chooses their WFs and decides if they should come from within the discipline. This remains the status quo, as there can be value in an outsider's view of the specific questions and answers which a course seeks to raise.

The habits suggested by Wiener (1992) to develop inferential reasoning can be enhanced by WFs trained to follow students' thinking. This is the skill required of the writing centre consultant, who frequently does not have the same subject background as the client, but who is practiced in helping the student to identify rhetorical positioning, respond to disciplinary markers, employ a vocabulary to describe elements of argument, and now as suggested here, to develop a vocabulary to describe metacognitive moves. Through attentive and active listening, the WF prompts the student to explain, reflect and infer, and so to see their own thinking and build upon it. Such a listening role could enhance a course designed around the development of inferential thought.

Conclusion: Surfacing modes of reasoning within and across disciplines

Andreas Schleicher has commented that in promoting digital literacy in the 21st century, physical or technical infrastructure is less important than the development of effective, self-regulated learning skills³¹. It is the development of these skills that is central to the practice of the three courses considered in this paper, and to the theory and practice of both the WWP and the WWC.

There is a large body of scholarship on the teaching of critical thinking in WI courses on which this paper draws to suggest pragmatic strategies³². The paper does not suggest a mechanistic micro-skills approach to teaching measurable critical thinking skills³³. It is situated rather within the traditional Writing Across the Curriculum approach of promoting learning through working with discipline-specific problems and arguments, and of encouraging each student to wrestle with meaning-making. It argues that particularly when students are removed from acculturation processes available in the face-to-face classroom, WI courses can be enhanced by developing greater metacognitive identification of the thinking skills entailed in solving problems, and that lecturers should design their courses with this increased instrumental awareness. In this sense, the article seeks a middle ground between a 'psychometric' approach towards critical thinking aims and the traditional Writing Across

³¹ Schleicher's final remarks in the Webinar to launch 21st century readers PISA report, April 2021.

³² An introduction to considering how to teach critical thinking in the writing class can be found in Kurfiss (1988)

³³ See Ennis (2013) and skills-based micro credentials as described in EDUCAUSE Horizon Report Teaching and Learning Edition (2021: 22-23).

the Curriculum approach which understands all academic writing as thesis-based writing.³⁴ It suggests that thinking skills need to be identified, taught, and reflected upon to enable discipline-specific problem solving³⁵.

We need to teach these skills of deep literacy explicitly because as Patricia M Greenfield (2009) has observed,

Every medium has its losses and weaknesses; every medium develops some cognitive skills at the expense of others. Although the visual capabilities of learning video games and the Internet may develop impressive visual intelligence, the cost seems to be deep processing: mindful knowledge, inductive analysis, critical thinking, imagination and reflection.

While the disciplines considered here are different, the concerns to improve deep processing are common and surface in teaching conversations across courses. As Bontle Tladi has suggested, for the sake of the whole programme, it is useful to provide: *'a virtual sharing table with other practitioners to touch-base, to let off steam, to share and celebrate successes, to serve as a solution generation corner, and to facilitate continued development'*.

The case studies discussed have revealed not only the significant constraints created by the pandemic on the development of deeper engagement and self-reflexive learning and writing across disciplines but also, and more importantly, the creative and deeply committed responses to those constraints developed by those teaching the courses. Each lecturer has indicated a recognition not only of the need to spend longer personally on reflection on teaching issues and strategies, but also the critical and generative influence of group reflections within and across courses and disciplines.

More broadly, the case studies have demonstrated the importance of developing deep literacy within and across disciplines, and ways of achieving that goal. In their reflective practice the lecturers and WFs confirmed Karl Deutsch's observation that the process of developing disciplinary and cross-disciplinary work is much like 'the process of breathing in and out', as both shape 'the long-time production cycle of knowledge' (cited in Greenberger, 1971).

Perhaps, most significantly, the case studies and the reflections on them, suggest the importance of developing new strategies for addressing the now widely recognised global crisis

³⁴ See Bean (2011: 20-21) who presents these approaches as oppositional. In an extreme form this might be the case, but given the crisis in learning exacerbated by the pandemic, might not a compromise approach which emphasises argument in the discipline *and* seeks to embed argument in disciplinary and professional ways of thinking, enable deeper engagement? Bean himself (2005) supported such a compromise, a measurement of skills designed to surface patterns and strategies for improvement, in his endorsement of Barbara Walvoord's assessment methods for university programmes.

³⁵ Stice (2021) suggests a similar strategy, and points out, for example, the power of naming and measuring students' ability to recognise and position 'hindsight bias' in a history course.

of quality learning which has been deepened at every level of the education system by the multi-faceted impact of the pandemic³⁶.

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This article is dedicated to Rutendo Chigudu (1983-2021).

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³⁶For an introduction to the extensive global debate around "schooling without learning", see World Bank (2018).

Bontle Tladi is an Industrial Engineer by training and a developing Social Design theorist and facilitator. Her research interests are broadly in the extension of design to the areas of social impact and social innovation. She is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Pretoria. 

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Doctor who?
**Developing a translation device for exploring successful
doctoral being and becoming**

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Abstract

Doctoral training and education tends to focus on how to research and write a thesis, which can take many forms. However, a thesis is not the only valued outcome of a doctorate: the emerging Doctor is important too. Being and becoming a Doctor implies identity work and engaging affective dimensions of researcher development alongside researching and writing a thesis. These are not always explicit in doctoral education, though. Thus, we contend that their role in researcher development needs to be named, described, and understood. In this paper we use Constellations from Legitimation Code Theory to make visible two valued doctoral attributes and dispositions as exemplars. We have used published papers in the field of doctoral studies as data. Within increasingly diverse doctoral student cohorts, it is important to actively foreground the development of valued affective dispositions through doctoral education to enable more candidates to achieve success in their doctorates.

Keywords: attributes, axiology, doctoral education, equity, inclusion, research culture

Introduction

When we think of a successful doctorate, what usually comes to mind first? The thesis¹, probably – the research itself and the original contribution to knowledge that it is making through the work of the researcher(s) involved. We think about knowledge – knowledge production and the impact of that knowledge on research and perhaps also practice, especially if we are considering

¹ In using the term ‘thesis’ in this paper we do acknowledge that this may take the form of a thesis by publication, a ‘big book’ thesis, a professional doctorate, a critical-creative project, or even a practice-based thesis. There are many forms of creating and presenting doctoral-level knowledge, although in South African universities the ‘big book’ seems to be the most common form (e.g., a +/- 80,000-word dissertation) (CHE, 2022: 51)



professional and practice-based doctorates (for example, in design, fine art, and education). If we think of the researcher, it may be primarily as the producer or creator of this knowledge, as the vehicle for 'writing it up' and getting it out into the world. This is not to say that the field of doctoral education does not think or care about the development of doctoral candidates; there is a body of research globally on aspects of being a successful doctoral candidate and different dimensions of this, including emotional and mental wellbeing (see Aitchison & Mowbray, 2013; Carter, et al., 2013; Doloriert, et al., 2012; Mewburn, 2011). Rather, it may be that the overt development of the doctoral candidate as a person is peripheral rather than central to supervision. Combined with pressures across the disciplines in many higher education contexts (such as the UK, South Africa, and Australia) – those in which dyadic or one-on-one supervision is common as well as those with team and cohort supervision models – to attract, retain, and graduate increasing numbers of doctorate-holders, doctoral education in these disciplines may face challenges in supporting both supervisors and candidates in the tricky work of personal and professional development, which may be subsumed by a focus on 'getting through'. Supervisors working alone with their candidates cannot share the load with others, and time pressures on supervision and doctoral study (see Carter, et al., 2017; Manathunga, 2019) may mean that wider conversations about the 'being and becoming' inherent in doctoral study are neglected or less possible.

Yet, the doctorate is by nature transformative (Barnacle, 2005). As Barnacle and Mewburn (2010: 433, emphasis added) point out '[c]ompleting a PhD does not just involve becoming an expert in a particular topic area, but comprises a transformation of identity, that of *becoming* a scholar or researcher'. In becoming a scholar, candidates must navigate multiple identities, both personal and professional, while crossing many thresholds. Some of these thresholds are related to the doing and writing of the research itself, such as argumentation, theorising, and analysis (Kiley & Wisker, 2009). But, as we will show in this paper, there are other kinds of thresholds to cross that are transformative of the self, the person becoming a 'Dr', and these are as important to be aware of in all their complexity. These thresholds speak to the different dimensions of doing a doctorate we will expand on later: the product, the process, and the person, although we argue that the person needs to be given specific attention. This is more pertinent now than ever as many universities are committed to enacting more inclusive doctoral education and supervision, thereby creating wider success for different kinds of candidates, such as those previously excluded from and under-represented in doctoral study (see EDEPI, n.d; SJQinHE, n.d).

Part of the transformative nature of becoming a doctor is displaying 'doctorateness' (Trafford & Leshem, 2008). Yazdani and Shokooh (2018: 42, emphasis added), drawing on the research of Trafford and Leshem (2008) and others, define doctorateness as

A personal quality, that following a developmental and transformative apprenticeship process, results in the formation of an independent scholar with a certain identity and level of competence and creation of an original contribution, which extend knowledge through

scholarship and receipt of the highest academic degree and culminates stewardship of the discipline.

Doctorateness is therefore an implicit part of completing the doctorate and is central to what examiners and supervisors look for in a thesis (Trafford & Leshem, 2009). This personal quality, though, is more closely connected in the literatures to the product and the process, which are more overtly about knowledge and less about the 'knower' or researcher. We therefore contend that, to create a more holistic sense of doctorateness with a clear focus on the person driving the process and creating the product, we need to pay greater attention to the affective dimensions of doctoral work, which are key to being and becoming a 'Dr' .

However, what is notable in reading the field is how many of the markers of being a successful doctoral student – attributes, behaviours, values, and personal characteristics – are not explicitly defined, inferring an assumption of shared understandings or taken-for-granted meanings. For instance, terms like 'independent' and 'confident' are often used when describing the 'ideal PhD student' (see for example Aitchison, et al., 2012; Cutri, et al., 2021; McAlpine, et al., 2012). However, if you are paying attention to these issues, as we are in this paper, you may begin to wonder if 'confident' and 'independent' have the same meaning or imply the same behaviours or values everywhere they are mentioned, across all disciplines and fields of study and in different national and institutional contexts. We suspect that they do not, but it is not always possible to work out the exact meanings or any differences in meaning in all the papers in which these characteristics of candidates are mentioned as being necessary or desirable for doctoral success. This then raises further questions this paper will address:

1. What do these different attributes imply in terms of doctoral being and becoming, and student behaviours and values?
2. Can we find a way to 'see' all the meanings and work out whether and how these are communicated to candidates and made part of deliberate or conscious doctoral education?

We are suggesting here that what it means to be 'confident' in the context of doctoral research may have multiple meanings across and even within specific disciplinary, departmental, and institutional contexts, and that what it takes to develop these attributes may involve being able to see and understand the different meanings of these concepts or behaviours. Specifically, we have to consider what this would mean for doctoral supervision and education, especially but not only in disciplines or fields where supervisors and candidates work away from larger research groups or communities, and where time is pressured and condensed. We argue in this paper for the use of a theoretical tool drawn from Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) – axiological semantic density and the building of constellations – to not only surface the dominant attributes, values and behaviours referred to in the literatures, but further to explore the different meanings implied in these references. We hope that this will provide evidence for both the value ascribed to

affective aspects of being and becoming a successful doctoral student and the multiple possible meanings embedded within these attributes, dispositions, and ways of being. Ultimately, we hope that those involved in providing researcher development and support, including supervisors, can use these insights to begin to reflect on their own meanings and assumptions and how these impact on the doctoral candidates in their context.

Doctoral education: Three dimensions of doing a 'PhD'

There are three interlinked dimensions to undertaking postgraduate study: the *product* of the research (the thesis), the *process* of designing, conducting, and writing about the research, and the *person* or people involved in the project (the candidate, primarily, but also the research supervisors). Research has observed that the product is often the focus of doctoral training, support, and policy environments (CHE, 2022; Cutri, et al., 2021; Smith McGloin, 2021). Although university and government policies and guidelines at doctoral level do speak to the need to educate and develop researchers (for example, the Vitae Framework for Researcher Development used in the United Kingdom, South Africa, Australia, and parts of the European Union), practice wisdom suggests that the process itself may be under-considered or perhaps assumed (Cutri, et al., 2021) rather than explicitly focused on in many contexts. This implies that the attributes and dispositions of successful researchers may be subsumed into a focus on aspects of doctoral education directly linked to the creation of the product (the thesis). This may lead, as argued by Aitchison and Mowbray (2013), Cutri, et al. (2021), Manathunga (2007), and Smith McGloin (2021), to intense struggles with thesis writing and working with feedback on writing, to doctoral researchers feeling like imposters, to struggles in integrating into and becoming part of a research culture, and to anxiety around time to completion.

The 'ideal' doctoral student

There is a great deal of published research on many different aspects of being a 'good' or successful doctoral candidate. Studies focus on, for example, working with feedback and doctoral writing (Aitchison, et al., 2012; Wei, et al., 2019), managing difficult emotions in relation to aspects of university administrative processes (McAlpine, et al., 2012), managing supervision relationships and processes (Parker-Jenkins, 2018), and academic integrity and ethical behaviours (Cutri, et al., 2021). A key feature of a successful candidate, especially in systems that overtly reward quicker completions times and high throughput rates, is their ability to manage their time and their project effectively so that they can complete as quickly as possible (for example, the UK and South Africa both cite three years as the minimum time for completion of a full-time PhD). This may have implications for how candidates manage their work-life balance, as supervisors may expect the project to come before everything else (see Guerin, et al., 2014). Further, this may impact on the development of the doctoral person: studies have shown, more so in the last decade, that mental health struggles are on the rise in doctoral student cohorts, particularly anxiety and depression (Evans, et al., 2018; Jackman, et al., 2022); these struggles have been

exacerbated during the Covid pandemic. Addressing these is a key focus of policy and practice in contexts such as the UK and Europe.

The ‘ideal’ doctoral supervisor

To create both an original contribution to knowledge and develop an expert scholarly identity, doctoral candidates require the support, assistance, and guidance of at least one research supervisor. There is much research dealing with the nature of good or supportive supervision and its converse. Studies argue that ‘ideal’ supervisors are attentive to candidates’ requests for help (Åkerlind & McAlpine, 2017), adaptable and flexible, especially for part-time candidates or in cases where candidates’ circumstances or study plans change, and are able and willing to offer constructive feedback that enables candidates to learn the discourses of the discipline through their writing, reading, and thinking work (Kumar & Stracke, 2007; Stracke & Kumar, 2020). Additionally, supervisors are called on to be attentive to candidates’ mental and emotional wellbeing, referring candidates for professional assistance as needed and generally being kind and accommodating where needed (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2015; Strandler, et al., 2014). This research points to the need for supervisors to ‘see’ their candidates in the sense of recognising them as whole people with full lives that include but are not solely focused on their doctorate.

But being and becoming an ‘ideal’ supervisor in line with what research suggests this entails involves not only shepherding a process towards the creation of a product but nurturing and educating a doctoral person. The context of the university, institutional culture, and departmental and disciplinary cultures and expectations can have a profound impact on what counts as a legitimate ‘product’ as well as a valued and successful doctoral graduate. Many factors shape who a candidate is coming into a doctorate, why they choose to do a one, what they want to do with that degree, and who they are when they graduate. Many of these are not within the remit of the supervisor or the university to manage or control, of course. But the point here is the field needs to be careful – in speaking about the main dispositions and attitudes higher education values in a successful doctoral student – not to gloss over the complexities of taking on a doctoral identity and making it authentic, especially given the diversity of student and supervisor cohorts in terms of race, gender, social class, dis/ability, nationality, sexuality, language, and future career goals and plans. Doctoral educators and supervisors need to question and reflect on what the letters ‘Dr’ mean in terms of the expectations of graduates in the context in which they work. For example, in the arts, humanities and social sciences where the development and expression of an authorial ‘voice’ is a particular marker of success, yet where ‘loneliness’ is a seemingly common part of the doctoral journey (Hughes & Tight, 2013), what kinds of affective development are needed to help candidates find and develop their voice? What can supervisors and researcher developers do in these disciplines to create opportunities for wider conversations about knowledge-making as well as knower-making work?

Questions that this paper is reflecting on include how we become and be a Doctor in our chosen field of research and practice. This is increasingly coming to the fore of research and

practice, especially given the growing size and diversity of doctoral student cohorts in both the global North and South (Cloete, et al., 2015; Nerad, 2021). Research increasingly shows the importance of thinking about emotions, mental wellbeing, and community: writing at doctoral level involves particular sets of knowledge-making and meaning-making practices which implicate disciplinary knowledge, certainly, but crucially, values, ways of reading, writing, thinking and also being and acting (Inouye & McAlpine, 2019). This means that we do not only need epistemological resources to do research and write a thesis; we also need axiological and ontological resources (see Cutri, et al., 2021; Frick, 2011). In other words, we need emotional resources, value-oriented resources, community or cultural resources, and knowledge resources to complete a doctoral degree successfully and become a recognised researcher and peer in our fields of study. A successful doctoral graduate, then, is a 'constellation' of different attributes, dispositions, skills, knowledges, and behaviours. To explore more fully what the field of doctoral education values in terms of dispositions and attributes specifically, we have chosen a theoretical and analytical tool from the broad framework of Legitimation Code Theory (Maton, 2020; Maton & Doran, 2021) that has enabled us to tease apart and visualise this part of this constellation that we believe needs to be examined more closely.

Legitimation Code Theory: Constellations

Semantics is a dimension of the larger framework of Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), which focuses on the relative context-dependence of meanings (termed semantic gravity) and the relative complexity of meanings (termed semantic density) (Maton, 2020). The value of using the dimension of Semantics in research and practice is in looking more closely at practices of meaning-making, so not only what meanings matter in a specific context, but the extent to which these meanings are context-dependent, the relative complexity of meanings, and the interconnectedness of meanings. You can zoom into specific meanings, zoom out to the bigger picture, and zoom across contexts to see connections and gaps. In this paper, we are focusing specifically on semantic density. Semantic density provides a useful way for conceptualising the multiple meanings within and between concepts, practices, ideas, and beliefs. The process of adding more meanings to a concept, practice, idea, or belief is referred to as condensation (Maton & Doran, 2021). The greater the condensation, the stronger the semantic density, and vice versa.

There are two different forms of semantic density, epistemological semantic density (ESD) and axiological semantic density (ASD). Briefly put, epistemological semantic density relates to the building of knowledge. Studies have used this concept to look at how a curriculum connects and builds knowledge into a larger whole, for example Rusznyak (2020) and Maton and Doran (2021). Axiological semantic density relates to the building of knowers, as, for example, Lambrinos' (2019) work has shown: building particular dispositions, attitudes, and ways of being that are valued or necessary for success. We have argued thus far that there is a product and a process in producing both the thesis and the doctoral graduate. Therefore, we build both epistemological semantic density and axiological semantic density in any doctoral journey.

However, as we are interested here in the doctoral graduate and the process by which this person develops, tacitly and consciously, we are focused on the condensation of axiological meanings within doctoral study and will use the concept of axiological semantic density to unpack these meanings.

One of the ways that axiological (and epistemological) semantic density can be conceptualised and mapped is through constellations (Maton & Doran, 2021). Constellations are 'groupings (of any socio-cultural practice) that appear to have coherence from a particular point in space and time to actors adopting a particular cosmology or worldview' (Maton, 2016: 237). Doctoral education can be conceptualised as a constellation with groupings of stances, beliefs and practices that frame how we understand the ways in which we debate and critique knowledge, write and revise our work, talk to other researchers and stakeholders within our networks, manage our supervisors and ourselves, and how doctoral education relates to other fields and contexts within and beyond higher education. Each constellation comprises smaller clusters; these clusters are 'groupings of practices that come together and create meaning about a particular stance' (Lambrinos, 2019: 62). For example, a cluster of actions and behaviours which demonstrate a disposition of (self) confidence or independence in a candidate. Each cluster comprises linked nodes, which in our study tend to represent concrete actions and expectations that imply an attribute or disposition, such as confidence. These on their own may have meaning, but when linked to other nodes (actions/expectations) within a cluster these meanings may become more nuanced through being related to other meanings (nodes). Constellations can be zoomed in to visualise the relative complexity of a single meaning, for example 'independence' or 'confidence' : two dispositions valued as markers of success at doctoral level. Constellations can also be zoomed out to show how clusters are connected to one another.

To explore the axiological condensation of the attributes and dispositions that are both expected and required for doctoral candidates to be successful, we have adapted Lambrinos' (2019) model for getting at harder-to-see internalised dispositions through tracking examples or evidence of more visible behaviours and concrete actions that imply the presence and development of these necessary dispositions (Figure 1). We will be building clusters around two often-mentioned ideal attributes for success in doctoral study, namely independence and confidence. There are many more valued attributes and dispositions, some of which may be discipline-specific and context-dependent and some of which may be shared across different disciplines and contexts, but we are focusing on these two for the purposes of this paper and the limitations of space.

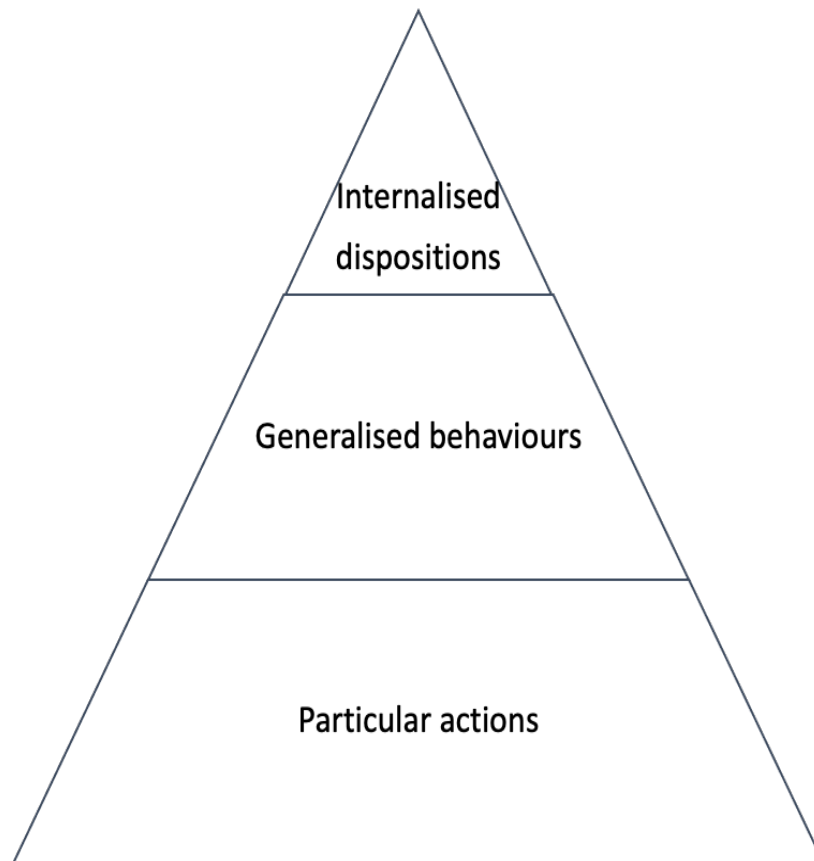


Figure 1: Development of internalised dispositions
(Adapted from Lambrinos, 2019: 161, 175)

In building the clusters discussed in the next section, we started by identifying the internalised dispositions and attributes that candidates are expected to develop and display over the course of the doctorate. We then looked for the evidence the literature provided that indicated the development or presence of these internalised dispositions, which led us to what we then separated into generalised behaviours and concrete actions. In our clusters, the solid dots are nodes (see Figure 2); these are actions, such as ‘choose and contact your prospective supervisor’ (Independence) and ‘Join a local or online writing group’ (Confidence). These actions identified as nodes were then grouped into clusters where they pointed to more generalised behaviours or stances, such as taking initiative or valuing collaboration, which is denoted with an open dot. These smaller groupings of meanings – clusters – were then connected into larger clusters of meanings around the organising point, which is the internalised disposition or attribute implied by these actions and behaviours, here these are independence and confidence.

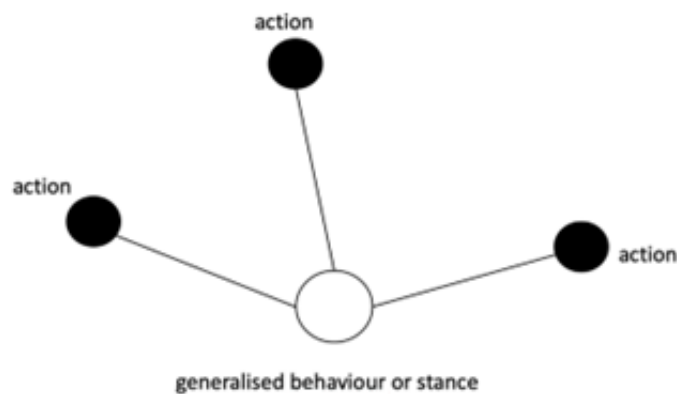


Figure 2: Illustration of the basic construction of nodes and clusters

Before we discuss the findings, we want to acknowledge again that because this is conceptual work, we are rather deliberately simplifying a complex issue. We are doing this because we want to see the possible potential meanings hidden within seemingly straightforward attributes such as becoming confident, being independent, showing authority, or taking initiative, and illustrate how un-straightforward developing these attributes might be for many candidates.

Reading the field of doctoral education

The data used in the analysis has been drawn from published research in peer-reviewed journals in the field of higher education studies more broadly, and doctoral and postgraduate education more specifically. We chose peer-reviewed papers only rather than including the grey literatures, mainly for practical reasons. There would simply be too much data to if we included popular presses and blogs; there is a great deal of published peer-reviewed work on doctoral education, and specifically on notions of what makes for a successful doctorate and doctoral candidate.

The process of generating data began with a conversation between us (Sherran as primary supervisor and Martina as doctoral candidate) about Martina's doctoral journey and what did and did not help her own process of becoming a 'Doctor'. This grew into a larger conversation about feedback and support for writing, battling with poor self-confidence and isolation, and the role supervision can play in opening spaces to grapple less privately with some of the affective dimensions of the doctoral journey. We noted the relative lack in the literature we were both reading of explicit mention of how these affective attributes or characteristics are developed, which led us back to this literature; we created our dataset as we re-read these papers, looking more closely at the meanings implied in and overtly discussed around the dispositions and attributes of successful doctoral candidature. We expanded our reading organically through following citations, for example, looking at the reference lists of papers that were overtly focused on, for example, emotions in doctoral study (Mowbray & Aitchison, 2013) or imposter syndrome (Cutri, et al., 2021), and returning to databases to look for papers that considered similar issues

from different geographical and theoretical perspectives. It would be impossible to create any kind of exhaustive reading list, so we managed the reading list in relation to saturation, i.e., when we felt we were not seeing any new actions or implied behaviours mentioned in further reading.

As we read, we created a shared table in Google Drive in which we captured the bibliographic reference, a summary of the main argument or focus of the paper, and a set of keywords pertaining to attributes, dispositions and 'ways of being' in doctoral study, especially to success in doctoral study. Under each attribute (e.g., self-confidence) we captured what counted as evidence of this (e.g., asking to change supervisors, or volunteering to present work in progress). This table was then refined using the model adapted from Lambrinos (2019) into the two tables in the following section. Sherran then coded the data around confidence and Martina coded the data around independence, using the same tabular coding template we created together. We then met to compare, debate, and refine our codes and findings, and collaboratively drew the clusters discussed in the following section.

Altogether we read and annotated papers written by researchers in the United Kingdom, South Africa, Sweden, Finland, Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. We were able to therefore track a range of different understandings of what it means, for example, to become and be confident, independent, resilient, self-regulated, articulate – all often-cited attributes and dispositions of successful doctoral candidates. In the discussion that follows we will focus on two particularly prevalent attributes and the behaviours and actions that attach to these in the literature we have consulted: independence and confidence.

Findings

In this section we reflect first on independence and then on confidence. We begin with a table that captures a distilled version of the coding process, followed by an account of some of the data that has been drawn on in the coding process, and finally a visual representation of the cluster we have created following the process outlined earlier in the paper.

Independence

Independence is a highly sought-after quality for PhD candidates and it is regularly mentioned in articles pertaining to doctoral journeys and development – the 'independent scholar' or the 'independent researcher' is seen as a defining attribute signalling the completion of the PhD (Frick & Brodin, 2014; Halai, 2011; Manathunga, 2011; Mullins & Kiley, 2002; Overall, et al., 2011; Sverdlik, et al., 2018; Frick, et al., 2016). Yet, as our reading has found, there are inherent tensions in how independence is seen in the literature. Independence is simultaneously an attribute that candidates need to possess before attempting a PhD (Carter, et al., 2013) and should be developed gradually over the course of the PhD (Gurr, 2001; Halai, 2011). Independence is also an attribute that needs to be developed both one's own and in collaboration with others (Blaj-Ward, 2011; Gardner, 2009; McAlpine, 2012). Thus, independence is something doctoral candidates should *have* and is something that they should *be* (Sverdlik, et

al., 2018; Lovitts, 2005), especially in the arts and humanities where many candidates work outside of teams or established groups of scholars (Table 1).

Table 1: Actions and behaviours in relation to developing independence

Actions	Behaviours	Internalised disposition/attribute
Select advisor Select topic Design research project Manage research project Have research agenda Develop research skills Make judgements Solve problems Make decisions about research Take ownership of decisions Practice writing Reviewing work Copying models	Taking initiative	Independence
Working alone Requires no instruction Engage with feedback	Work autonomously	
Not asking for help Gain expertise	Self-reliant	
Work collaboratively Consult resources	Resourceful	
Critical thinking Creative thinking Writing skills Research skills	Skilled	

In drawing the independence clusters, we sought to distinguish between concrete actions and generalised behaviours. To start, we perused the literature for mentions of concrete actions – things that the doctoral candidate must *do* to be recognised as being independent. For example, an independent doctoral candidate must be able to select a supervisor and a topic (Lovitts, 2005), set and meet deadlines (Sverdlik, et al., 2018), take ownership of decisions about their research (Overall, et al., 2011), engage critically with feedback (Grant, 2003), work without guidance (Cotterall, 2011), and seek and make use of resources (McAlpine, 2012). Some of these actions pertain to things that must happen before the start of researching the thesis, some are expected during the writing of the thesis, and others are expected when the thesis is completed. For example,

Since the supervisor's main goal is to ensure that the student becomes an independent researcher, students who **consistently respect timelines, prepare for meetings, exhibit openness and respect for feedback**, and **demonstrate their capabilities in their work**, are likely to ensure the satisfaction of their supervisors in the relationship. (Sverdlik, et al., 2018: 371)

These actions (in bold) were then grouped together as generalised behaviours, for example, being able to design and manage a research project and developing research and writing skills were seen as examples of *taking initiative*; being able to meet deadlines, prepare for meetings, and engage with feedback were seen as *working autonomously*. Often, these behaviours were stated in the literature. For example, '[a] third [faculty member] defined a successful student as 'a person who initiates [his or her] own research agenda and is able to work individually and collaboratively. They take their own initiative' (Gardner, 2009: 393). At other times, behaviour was implied. For example, 'I am particularly fond of supervision as it allows me to see students who were initially dependent on me for development of their research skills and scholarship slowly but surely blossoming into independent scholars and becoming experts in their areas of study' (Halai, 2011: 45) The implication here is that an independent scholar is more self-reliant and has their own expertise to draw on.

The terms 'independent' or 'independence' were regularly used with no qualification – the assumption being that there is an implied, shared understanding of what being independent or having independence means for the doctoral candidate. These are a few examples:

... [a]doctoral graduate should become an **independent researcher** with multiple competences, including leadership, communication, and multitasking. (Han & Xu, 2021: 12)

... a term used frequently to describe positive theses was 'scholarship', described by interviewees from all disciplines as originality, coherence, and a sense of student autonomy or **independence**. (Mullins & Kiley, 2002: 379)

A principal challenge of doctoral supervision is how to provide enough guidance for students to learn research skills while giving students autonomy to become confident **independent researchers**. (Overall, et al., 2011: 791)

This analysis has been distilled into the visualisation in Figure 3 of the independence cluster we have identified as being part of a larger constellation of 'successful doctoral candidate'. As a reminder, the open dots are the behaviours, named in Table 1 in the middle column, and the closed dots are the concrete actions that are expected of candidates.

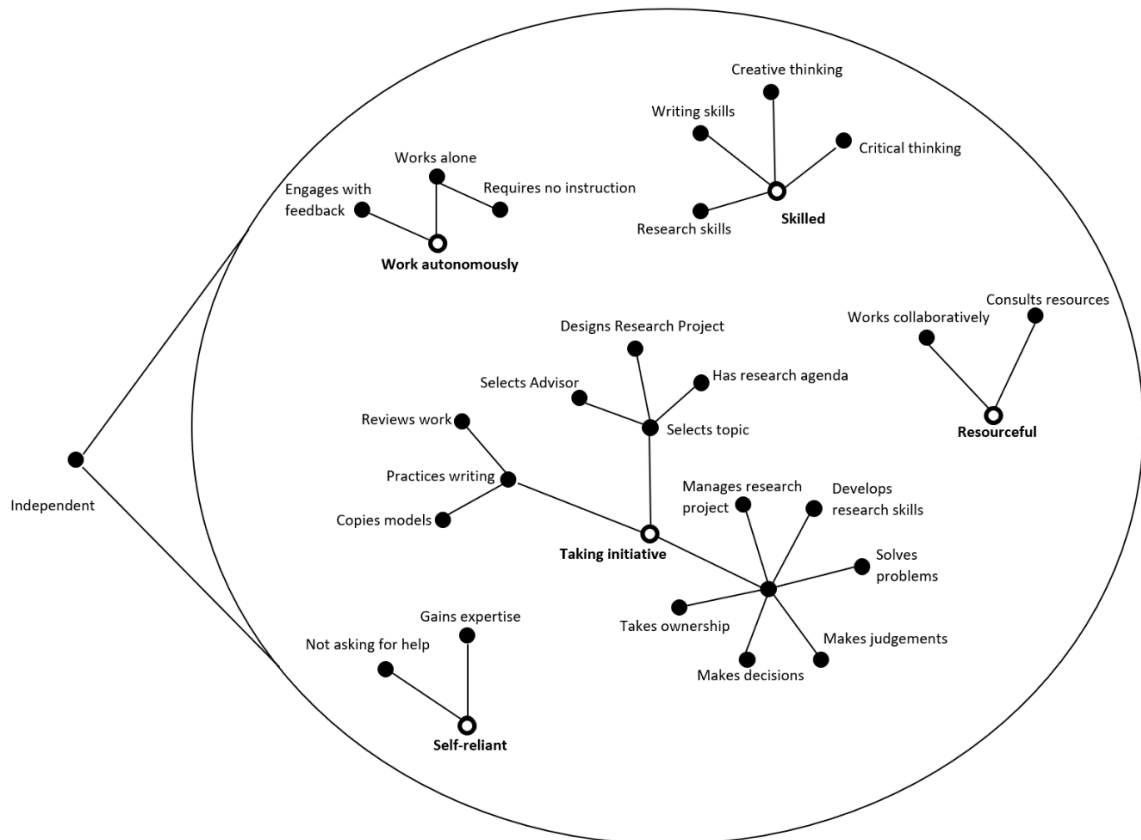


Figure 3: The independence cluster

Confidence

Confidence – expressed in the literature as both the candidate’ s confidence in themselves, the confidence they exhibit or express through externally-facing engagement, and the confidence their supervisors have in them – is a significant theme running through the work on different aspects of successful doctoral candidature. We have excluded the work around supervisors and their confidence in the researchers they work with, as we are focused here on the candidates and what is being said and/or implied to them when supervisors, researcher developers and so on tell them they need to become and be more confident.

Confidence, both self-confidence or belief in one’ s own ability and competence and the confidence we then project to others, seems to develop around three sets of behaviours: those related to writing and feedback; those related to being part of a community of peers; and those related to becoming more immersed in a discipline and body of knowledge and related skills and competencies. Table 2 below indicates the specific actions the literature indicates as being useful, relevant, and common for doctoral candidates, both to increase or add to their confidence or to mitigate threats to their (self) confidence.

Table 2: Actions and behaviours in relation to developing confidence

Actions	Behaviours	Internalised disposition/attribute
Create a writing group Join a support/writing group Ask for help Offer support to others Share work in progress Reflect on feedback	Engaged	Confident
Claim and defend a voice Explain and evidence ideas Present at conference Contribute to knowledge Immersed in disciplinary discourse(s) Take ownership of writing	Scholarly	
Write effectively and clearly Analyse other people' s writing Learn disciplinary conventions Learn from writing models and exemplars	Skilled	
Be open to ongoing learning Make mistakes Comfortable with not knowing	'Liminal'	
Giving feedback to others Engage in peer support Foster supportive engagements	Collaborative	
Manage responses to criticism Balance work, life, doctorate Avoid isolation Reach out to supervisors	Managing self and others	

In relation to writing and feedback, the literature mentioned both the development and enhancement of confidence as well as threats to confidence. Actions here were related to finding other people to write with or speak with about one' s writing; reflecting on feedback received and being proactive about asking for specific kinds of feedback, both from supervisors and from one' s wider scholarly community; revising and reworking one' s writing; and attending training workshops to develop writing skills and practices. Here, we see authors talking about the importance of focusing on behaviours such as becoming *skilled* and embracing *collaboration* and community in the first instance. In the second instance, the behaviour implied is around *self-management* in the face of an event that has undermined a candidate' s confidence:

I developed **confidence in my own ability** to analyse my own and the work of the others in the group, because of the skills of analysis that we learnt. This allowed me to position myself as student with authority over my own work, such that I could argue for my ways of thinking and writing, challenging critique for the first time in my years as a student. The work with the group gave me the skills to **become a confident academic writer** after many years of undergraduate and post-graduate experiences. (Maher, et al., 2008: 265)

Our earlier review of literature showed that some students experience criticisms delivered by supervisors as **damaging to their self-esteem and confidence**. (Li & Seale, 2007: 521)

Research that focuses on feedback playing a significant role in building (and undermining) confidence tends to point to actions that both enhance a candidate's own confidence or implies actions that may need to be taken to mitigate threats to or perceived attacks on their self-confidence. Actions coded here included being proactive about approaching supervisors for meetings and feedback; reflecting critically on feedback and creating action plans for revisions; engaging in positive self-talk after difficult criticism; seeking feedback from peers and critical friends; offering feedback as a critical friend to others; looking beyond supervision for help with writing (i.e., mitigating over-reliance on supervisors); and developing the ability to explain and defend one's ideas to others. The behaviours implied by these actions have been captured as 'liminal' (i.e., being comfortable with not having all the answers), being collaborative, and managing oneself and others (particularly supervisors, it seems).

There is significant overlap in the data between developing confidence through positive feedback and despite negative feedback and being part of a scholarly community of peers. Peer writing groups or communities are a significant space for developing one's self-confidence, a necessary pre-requisite for projecting confidence in one's writing, willingness to share work-in-progress formally and informally, and thereby making progress in the doctorate. In the text below, we see authors speaking about the value of being *engaged* with other writers and how that built their confidence as well as their writing skills:

It has been shown that the peer feedback component of these types of writing groups helps students to **build their writing confidence**, foster greater reflective practice, and encourage them to take ownership of their writing style. (Cutri, et al., 2021: 11)

In contrast to many other institutionally sanctioned forums such as the often competitive, combative spaces of research forums, training workshops and student conferences, writing groups were hotbeds of emotion, that helped participants **build confidence and resilience**. (Aitchison & Mowbray, 2013: 865)

The third area mentioned that appears closely linked to the development of confidence – both self-confidence and confidence expressed through written text and spoken engagement

(for example, in supervision meetings or at colloquia/conferences) – is becoming immersed in a discipline and proficient in understanding and using a pertinent body of knowledge and related skills and competencies. The literature here speaks about the need for candidates to claim a ‘voice’ and to be authoritative in their writing, but this is closely connected to mentions of disciplinary discourses and conventions and being skilled not generically but in the specialist ways of working in different disciplines or fields of study (see also Duff, 2007; Paré, 2010).

To claim and express a voice, of which an original argument is a significant part, postgraduate student-writers must **have confidence in their claims to knowledge**, and in the evidence and explanation they have selected and developed to sustain that argument. They need to believe they have something original and worthy to add to the conversations and debates that their discourse or disciplinary community is interested in. (Clarence, 2020: 50)

Journey is aware of cultural differences in rhetorical organisation and genre, disciplinary conventions and of his rhetorical choices as a writer. He is also open to the idea of experimentation in writing. ... Journey has twice initiated contact with international experts in his field to seek feedback on his draft papers, reporting that their **positive responses boosted his confidence and reassured him of the relevance of his work**. (Cotterall, 2011: 420)

This analysis has been distilled into a visualisation (Figure 4) of the confidence cluster we have identified as being part of a larger constellation of ‘successful doctoral candidate’. As a reminder, the open dots are the behaviours, named in Table 2 in the middle column, and the closed dots are the concrete actions that are expected of candidates.

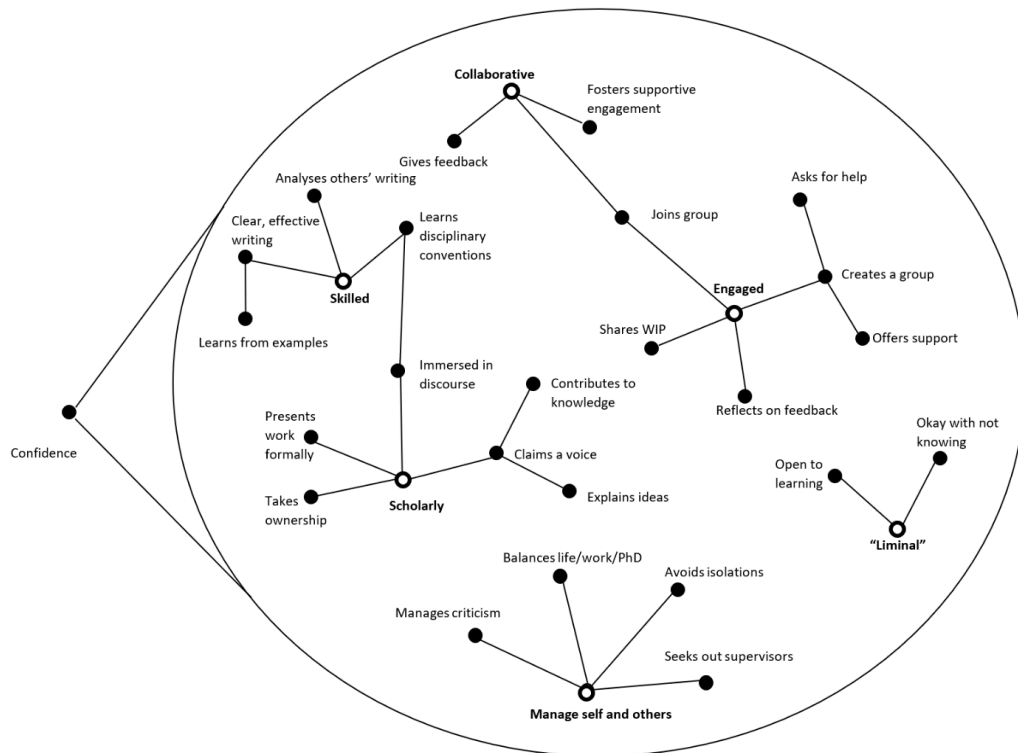


Figure 4: The confidence cluster

Discussion

There are three overarching threads that we have drawn from our investigation thus far: complexity, diversity, and disciplinary discourse(s). We now discuss the implications of our findings following these threads.

In terms of complexity, we are referring to what our clustering process has shown us (see Figures 3 and 4). Specifically, how many possible axiological meanings are condensed into seemingly straightforward dispositions such as 'independence' and 'confidence'. Other dispositions we have coded in the wider study speak to successful candidates being self-regulated, resilient, meticulous, creative, autonomous, and persistent. The process of using the LCT tools discussed in this paper to isolate, characterise, and then connect actions into more generalised behaviours, and then into internalised dispositions illustrates that becoming and being independent, confident, resilient, and more is not simple at all. In fact, these processes of becoming and being are ongoing (without a defined end point) and multi-layered. They are also not linear; confidence in one's writing, for example, waxes and wanes as we get feedback, begin new writing projects, and grapple with revisions (Aitchison, et al., 2012; Inouye & McAlpine, 2019). Yet, supervisors, doctoral and researcher educators/developers and the field itself refer to these dispositions frequently in relation to the kinds of things we want doctoral candidates to be doing, thinking and being, without necessarily interrogating what we mean, what we are asking them to do practically, and what kinds of resources they need access to so that they can develop what are regarded as successful dispositions and attributes. This points to a need for supervisor and researcher development work to focus on these affective, dispositional aspects of doctoral

success so that meanings attached to markers of success can be interrogated and made visible to those working with doctoral candidates as well as to the candidates themselves.

This interrogation and visibility is crucial now more than ever as doctoral cohorts around the world are becoming increasingly diverse in a range of ways, some less obvious than others. The more obvious ways in which we think of diversity include race, socioeconomic status, gender, (dis)ability, sexual orientation. But doctoral cohorts are also diverse in terms of their registration status (part or full time); their route to the doctorate (i.e., their prior academic learning and training at Master's and undergraduate level); the kind of doctorate they are enrolled for (e.g., practice-based, professional, or 'traditional big book' doctorate); the languages they read, write and think in; whether they are 'home' or 'international' candidates; how much support they have from family and friends; whether they have caring responsibilities or not. This multi-layered diversity affects the ways in which doctoral candidates engage with their studies, their supervisors, and their peers – how they ask for help, who they ask, whether and how they 'network', and how they respond to feedback, advice and guidance – which all connects with the actions they take to develop valued behaviours and internalised dispositions.

In essence, our analysis here shows at the very least how many possible actions are part of, for example, displaying 'scholarly' behaviour as it connects to becoming and being a more confident researcher. Consider the extent to which a part-time candidate who is a woman, self-funded and has significant caring responsibilities (e.g., children) can 'attend and present their work at conferences' compared to a single researcher who has funding and few or no additional responsibilities at home. Their respective capacity to develop the kinds of confidence that come from attending conferences, engaging with experts and other researchers, and thereby undertaking different forms of public engagement will be quite different. The first researcher may be considered less successful than the second one if she has only attended two conferences to the other researcher's four or five, but would this account of success have considered their different circumstances and access to resources such as childcare or funding? Considering the (inexhaustive) range of actions and behaviours our present clusters illustrate and then asking questions that dig deeper into different candidates' circumstances may enable us, firstly, to offer differentiated and sensitive support to candidates like the first researcher who may need more help getting to a conference than the second, and secondly, to widen our definitions of successful engagement and perhaps create different ways in which doctoral candidates can network and share their research locally.

A final thread we have identified in the data is the ways in which the discipline or field the candidate is working within constructs some actions and behaviours as successful whereas others may contradict this. For example, in many of the sciences teamwork is highly valued; researchers join labs or teams, and they construct knowledge for their own projects both individually and collaboratively. They are not expected to work out things on their own. By contrast, in several of the social sciences and arts and humanities disciplines, still, the 'lone scholar' is a more recognisable trope where candidates are expected to construct knowledge on their own or with one or two supervisors, and where networking and finding external communities or collaborators

can be harder as these are not typically part and parcel of the research environment. We have looked at research emerging from several different countries and higher education systems and what is interesting is that the internalised dispositions and attributes expected in a successful doctoral graduate are relatively consistent across these contexts. Everyone wants to graduate 'doctors' who are independent, self-regulated, confident, resilient, meticulous, creative, autonomous, persistent. But the expectations of what it is to be 'creative' or 'meticulous' will likely be quite different for a philosopher and a textile designer, or for a political scientist and an art historian. Thus, even in the arts and humanities, there are no set definitions of these attributes. Therefore, the clusters we have created thus far can be further refined and extended through considering actions and behaviours that are valued in particular disciplines in relation to how they make knowledge and what kinds of knowers or researcher dispositions they value and seek to cultivate. Similarly, there may be behaviours in some national, regional and cultural contexts that do not look the same in others, pointing to the need to create contextualised clusters and constellations within your own discipline, field, and national or societal context.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to examine and make visible the various meanings embedded in attributes that doctoral candidates are expected to have and/or develop throughout the course of the doctoral journey, focusing specifically on two attributes mentioned regularly in the literature: confidence and independence. In both instances, our analysis has shown that there are multiple axiological meanings embedded in these seemingly straightforward dispositions; there are also tensions within and between these meanings that might make it difficult for candidates to understand and navigate what is required of them. For instance, our analysis has shown that some of the behaviours that may relate to becoming and being independent, such as working things out without leaning too much on others, may contradict behaviours that contribute to building confidence, such as forming and relying on peers in a writing group. Although we have focused on these two attributes, there are many others such as being collaborative (Kiley, 2009), creative (Lovitts, 2015), persistent (McAlpine, et al., 2012), adaptable (Barret & Hussey, 2015), resilient (Aitchison, et al., 2012), enthusiastic (Åkerlind & McAlpine, 2017), assertive (Carter & Kumar, 2017), and resourceful (Li & Seale, 2007). Our analysis process could be applied to making visible the meanings embedded in these dispositions or attributes, too.

We have used constellations and axiological semantic density from Legitimation Code Theory as conceptual and analytical tools to both zoom in on specific attributes and to zoom out to see the connected nature of these attributes as they relate to overall doctoral success. Our contention is that if we can see and name the meanings that are pertinent and embedded in our contexts and in our university and social cultures, as well as those that may transcend our local institutions, disciplines, and contexts, we as educators and supervisors can begin a process of interrogating these more closely. Specifically, we can start questioning whether our expectations are fair, in the first place – whether we are expecting the same outcomes of all candidates without taking their circumstances, motivations and access to resources into closer account. We can


explore the extent to which our expectations are visible and explained to candidates through supervision, training and education, and other events doctoral candidates attend during their candidature. Further, we can question the extent to which we may be applying a 'cookie cutter' mold to the education, training, and supervision of heterogenous cohorts of doctoral candidates, in terms of who they are, why they are doing a doctorate, and the disciplines or fields in which they are working.

Our analysis has implications for supervision, researcher development and doctoral education, as well as research support and admissions. It firstly highlights the importance of understanding and naming what might be embedded in these expected attributes, and secondly, allows for a greater understanding of what universities want doctoral candidates to be and do in their disciplines and fields, in local and national contexts, and across these. This in turn enables doctoral educators and supervisors to adjust their practices to meet the needs of all candidates. Doctoral candidates are not islands, but part of larger, complex wholes that encompass knowledge, ways of knowing and doing, and ways of being.

What we hope this conceptual analysis contributes to the field of doctoral education and is an opening of space and a tool with which to speak about how we can do doctoral education and supervision in socially just ways. As this paper is conceptual in nature, there is room to explore these attributes in a more empirical manner. We hope that further research leads to greater recognition of different versions of doctoral success and being that give deeper realisation to the espoused goals of equity, diversity, inclusion, and transformation, in higher education.

Author biographies

Sherran Clarence is a senior lecturer at Nottingham Trent University specialising in doctoral education and development. She is also a senior research associate in CHERTL at Rhodes University. Her current research focuses on enabling greater representation and belonging in academia for doctoral and early career researchers, informed by feminist and participatory theories and methods. 

Martina van Heerden is a senior lecturer in English for Educational Development at the University of the Western Cape. Her research focuses on feedback on student writing, specifically the role of feedback in assisting students to take on relevant ways of knowing and disciplinary dispositions in addition to the knowledges valued in the disciplines. Her work has appeared in *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *The Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning*, and *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*. 

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**Reimagining reflexivity through a critical theoretical framework:
Autoethnographic narratives on becoming a (de)colonised researcher**

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Abstract

The theory and practice of reflexivity need to be reimagined. In the increasingly globalised world of medical education research, critical perspectives and methodologies for honest, powerful, and just reflexivity are needed. Autoethnography offers a compelling methodological approach to reflexivity, for it interrogates self and interpersonal interactions within socio-cultural contexts through retrospective autobiographical storytelling. Southern theory, decoloniality, and intersectionality together framed critical reflections on power inequalities at personal, contextual, and epistemological levels, throughout the qualitative research process. Reflective questions informed by these theories are included to practically guide individuals in their reflexivity. We are collectively responsible for epistemically- and socially-just research, which means the disruption of normative and hegemonic (i.e., White, Western, Eurocentric, and colonial) research and reflexivity practices; and the development of ethical research that does not reproduce inequalities but welcomes and amplifies other ways of knowing, doing and being.

Keywords: autoethnography, decoloniality, intersectionality, methodology, reflexivity, southern theory

Introduction

The theory and practice of reflexivity need to be reimagined. It is ironic that while engaging in reflexivity, researchers often fail to actually critically reflect on themselves and their contexts in meaningful ways. What does it mean to be White and do medical education research (MER) in an increasingly globalized world? As medicine comes to reckon with its colonial legacy, and issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion come to the fore, we need to explore how researchers can critically and ethically practice reflexivity. Taking the stance of a storyteller, I will use autoethnography to share my narratives of around being and becoming critically reflexive during my doctoral journey.



It is naive to assume that knowledge production is neutral and research value- and assumption-free. Autoethnographers recognise the multitude of ways personal experiences influence the research process (Ellis, et al., 2011). This is why the methodology of autoethnography offers a relevant approach to reflexivity: it considers the self within socio-cultural contexts through autobiographical storytelling (Adams, et al., 2017; Ellis et al., 2011; Smith, 2017; Trahar, 2009). Autoethnography may be defined as a highly-personalised qualitative research methodology that uses autobiographical storytelling to understand lived experiences and interactions with others in socio-cultural contexts (Adams, et al., 2017; Smith, 2017). In turn, reflexivity may be defined as an ongoing practice of critical self-reflection of researcher positionality throughout the research process to acknowledge and mitigate potential researcher-effects (e.g., biases, assumptions, values) on the research project. Both autoethnography and reflexivity seek to richly describe and systematically analyse lived experiences in socially conscious ways.

Autoethnographic narratives may be done individually or collaboratively, take different forms (e.g., written stories, interviews, audio/visual recordings), and consist of thick and rich descriptions of personal past experiences (thoughts, feelings, observations) (Ellis, et al., 2011). These narratives, usually retrospectively and selectively written, in consultation with in-the-moment artefacts (journal entries, field notes, recorded conversations) and relevant related materials (news articles, blogs, videos, photographs from the same time) to assist with recall, can include everyday experiences, yet usually focus on deviations or exceptions to the norm. These may be emotional encounters, cultural clashes, belief confrontations, times of crisis and epiphanies – as these are more often remembered as significant and transformative moments (Ellis, et al., 2011).

My personal narratives, written in hindsight, alongside revisiting my research journal and interview field notes, demonstrate how one can be and become critically-reflexive. In order to understand my identity, power and context, a theoretical framework informed by Southern theory, decoloniality and intersectionality was developed (see Figure 1 for an overview).

A critical theoretical framework for reflexivity: drawing on Southern theory, decoloniality and intersectionality to understand power in knowledge production

Recently there have been calls to disrupt the harmful legacy of MER, including using critical theories to interrogate the role of the researcher in the research process (Wyatt, 2022). Three critical theories were drawn upon to construct a theoretical framework for thinking about and practicing reflexivity: Southern theory, decoloniality and intersectionality (see Figure 1). While these theories share related dimensions, such as viewing knowledge production through a lens of power, discrimination, and 'othering' of those different to the 'norm', and pursuing emancipation and empowerment of the oppressed; they also possess particular nuances that emphasise different aspects of power and oppression. Taken together, this theoretical framework enables critical reflexive interrogation of oneself within larger systems and structures of power in which MER takes place.

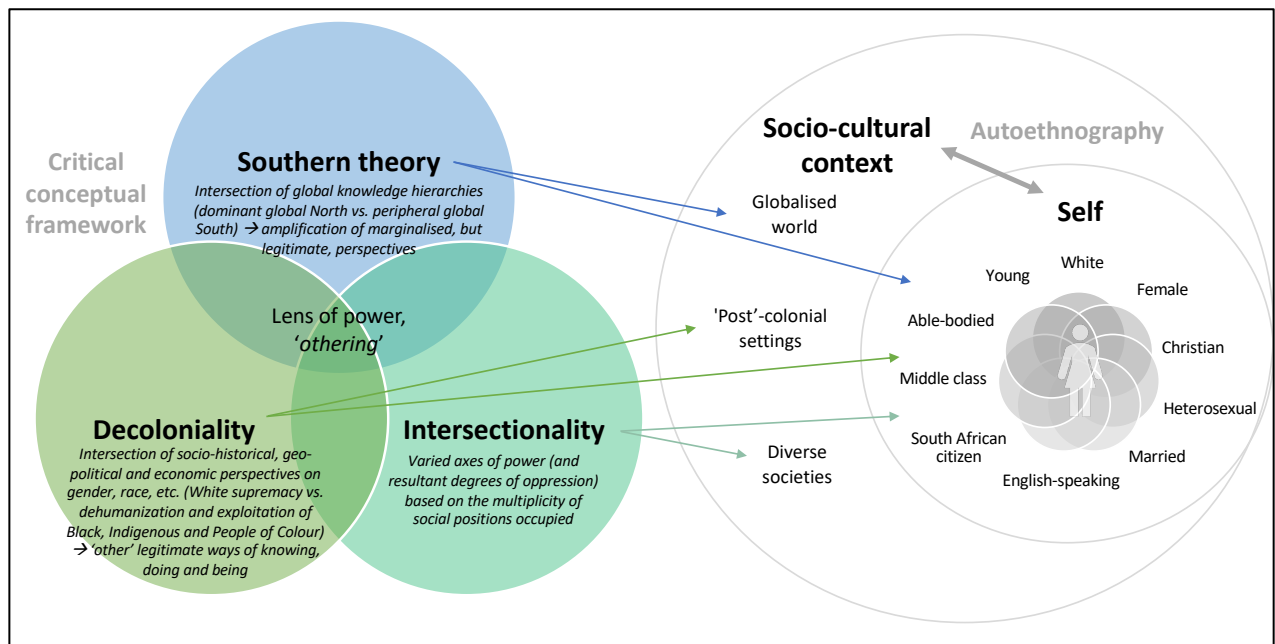


Figure 1: A theoretical framework for critical reflexivity

Using overlapping dimensions from Southern theory, decoloniality and intersectionality, identity and power can be interrogated; for instance, examining who a researcher is in globalised, 'post' -colonial, and diverse socio-cultural contexts. Southern theory views knowledge production through a lens of global power hierarchies; knowledge from the global North as dominant (the 'norm' and 'centre') and knowledge from the global South as peripheral (the 'other'). Southern theory seeks to re-centre knowledge production with Southerners as legitimate knowledge producers (Connell, 2014). Decoloniality sees (continued) human oppression as a result of (persistent) coloniality (Euro-centric ideologies of supremacy) that defined knowledge production, relationships, culture, labour, etc. Decoloniality seeks to resist, disrupt, and deconstruct coloniality; reclaim and re-centre 'other' (Black, Indigenous), but legitimate, ways of knowing, doing and being (Maldonado-Torres, 2016; Naidu, 2021a). Intersectionality understands human discrimination and oppression ('othering') as a result of multiple, interacting and changing social positions and identities occupied (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, class, nationality, citizen or migrant status, language, culture, employment status, occupation, etc.) that facilitate or constrain social relations, leading to resultant power inequalities (privileged vs. disadvantaged) (Crenshaw, 1989; Monrouxe, 2015). Examples of socio-cultural context and identity dimensions taken from my doctoral study.

Medicine is a colonial artefact, in that modern medicine emerged from Western knowledge structures that were rooted in colonialism and coloniality (Naidu, 2021a). Likewise, dominant theories and methodologies used in MER may be described as White, Western, Eurocentric or 'colonial' (Paton, et al., 2020). This hegemony is reflected in the dominance of MER publications from the global North (Maggio, et al., 2022). In the global South however, we are deeply aware that we cannot simply transpose the (assumed) 'universal truths' of the global North to our vastly different contexts (Bleakley, et al., 2008; Naidu & Kumagai, 2016). Importing

from the global North has been called a ‘new wave of imperialism’ or neocolonialism (Bleakley, et al., 2008: 266).

Southern theory highlights the fact that knowledge construction is stratified along global hierarchies: the unequal North-South economy of knowledge is structured according to the history of colonialism (Connell, 2014). Southern theory seeks to foreground social thought from societies of the peripheral global South, in contrast to the hegemonic centre of the global North (Connell, 2014). It is not just that indigenous knowledges may not be valued by the global North, but can be suppressed, hidden or misappropriated (Naidu, 2021b).

Southern theory emphasizes the *diversity* of ideas *from* the periphery *by* the periphery (Connell, 2014). It is important that the data is not mined from the global South and exported to Northern databanks and journals; research *on* the South should be done *for* the South by those *in* the South. Adopting a Southern theory perspective contributes to decolonial research as it levels the “Northern tilt” through “Southern exposure” (Naidu, 2021b).

We need to challenge the colonial gaze (Bleakley, et al., 2008). Decoloniality seeks to oppose the coloniality of power, knowledge and being; with coloniality referring to the ongoing and present realities and lived experiences as a result of colonisation (i.e., racism and White supremacy, sexism, patriarchy, capitalism, etc.) (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). To illustrate, ‘What the Europeans did was to deprive Africans of legitimacy and recognition in the global cultural order dominated by European patterns. The former was confined to the category of the “exotic”’ (Quijano, 2007: 170). Today, we still see an ‘exotic-othering’ of cultural diversity in medical education (Zanting, et al., 2020).

Reproducing coloniality has been termed epistemic violence and injustice (Heleta, 2016; Paton, et al., 2020). In the complex Southern milieu I find myself in, in order to be an ethical researcher, I need to be decolonial; seeking equity, social and epistemic justice – or else I risk doing harm through perpetuating oppression (Paton, et al., 2020; Wyatt, 2022). Critically reflecting on my positionality within colonial power matrices, making the invisible visible through reflexivity, is thus part of decolonial research (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Naidu, 2021a, 2021b; Wong, et al., 2021). This critical consciousness disrupts comfort and reflexivity may be described as *discomfort* (Pillow, 2003). Autoethnography too is a decolonial methodology (Augustus, 2022; Kelley, 2021; Pham & Gothberg, 2020; Van Katwyk & Guzik, 2022) for it intentionally contrasts ‘other’ ways of researching in comparison to mainstream White, masculine, hetero-sexual, middle- and upper-class, Christian and able-bodied perspectives (Ellis, et al., 2011).

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) views individuals as multidimensional and complex, occupying a number of different and nuanced social positions (Bauer, 2014; Hancock, 2007; Hankivsky, 2014). These social positions are not static, they may change over time and space, nor do they exist in isolation; rather, they occur in, and dynamically interact with, interdependent systems and structures of power (Hancock, 2007; Hankivsky, 2014). This means that individuals’ lived experiences are shaped by the combination of intersections of these social positions, structures and systems, and therefore experience different privileges and oppressions as a result (Hancock, 2007; Hankivsky, 2014). Southern theory and decoloniality both view oppression as

intersectional, and more specifically uncover the roots of these power inequalities and hierarchies as coloniality (Naidu, 2021a). In other words, in considering intersectionality from a decolonial perspective, we need to acknowledge that elements of identity are not ahistorical or fixed, but colonial-constructs (e.g., ‘White’ and ‘Black’); and, that oppression occurs beyond the level of the individual to that of communities and institutions (Hira, 2020).

Intersectionality is an illuminative framework for reflexivity because it reveals the multiple and dynamic combination of positions individuals (researcher and participants) may occupy, and the resultant power they may possess (or lack). Autoethnography understands that our varied assumptions can stem from differences in race, gender, sexuality, age, ability, class, education, religion (Ellis, et al., 2011); yet intersectionality views these differences in a compound manner. We cannot be one-dimensional in our reflexivity (Verdonk & Abma, 2013). Not having to reflect on my ‘Whiteness’ reveals an underlying assumption (of colonial norms) and privilege – one that reflexivity disrupts (Verdonk, 2015).

Using autoethnographic narratives to illustrate critical reflexive practice throughout the research process

‘How do we study others without studying ourselves?’ (Koch & Harrington, 1998: 883)

Much like autoethnography, reflexivity examines self in relation to their research. This self-examination is ongoing and takes place throughout the research process; from research conceptualization through to reporting findings (Ramani, et al., 2018). Researchers are asked to critically reflect on their beliefs, values, assumptions, biases, prejudices, etc. and how these may influence their research thinking, practices and outputs (Ramani, et al., 2018). The goal of reflexivity is not to achieve neutrality or objective detachment, rather, it is about being critically-conscious of who you are as a researcher and how that may (will) impact on your research study, from start to finish – and beyond. Reflexivity is not a problem but an opportunity for not just *rigorous*, but *ethical* qualitative research (Darawsheh, 2014; Finlay, 2002; Guillemín & Gillam, 2004; Jootun, et al., 2009; Koch & Harrington, 1998; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Pillow, 2003).

Reflexivity should be practiced at two (overlapping) levels, the personal and the epistemological (Ramani, et al., 2018). Personal reflexivity centres on the individual; whereas epistemological reflexivity reflects on knowledge generation (Ramani, et al., 2018). While the presented theoretical framework as a whole has relevant aspects for critical reflexive interrogation, Southern theory is a particularly useful lens at an epistemological-level, decoloniality at epistemological- and personal-levels, and intersectionality at a personal-level (see Table 1 for critical questions for researchers for reflexive thinking and practices informed by each theory).

Table 1: Guide questions for researchers on how to practice critical reflexivity (table adapted from Ramani, et al. (2018)).

Stage	Personal reflexivity	Epistemological reflexivity
Research conceptualization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why this research idea? What do I want to achieve with this research study? What is my underlying motivation for undertaking this specific research project? • What do I know about this research phenomenon? What has been my experience of it? What have been the experiences of others? What assumptions and biases might I (and others) have? What makes me (and others) feel uncomfortable about investigating this phenomenon, and why? Am I an insider or outsider? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What research paradigm am I operating within? Why have I chosen it? What are its assumptions? • What theories, concepts and methodologies am I drawing on in this study and why? Where do they originate? Are they diverse and inclusive or might they reproduce hegemonic or harmful 'norms' ? Are there alternative perspectives I could draw on instead? Who am I citing and validating? Who am I ignoring? Who do I think is the 'authority' in this matter, and why? • What critical epistemological gap is my research project filling? • Where am I, my research phenomenon and my institution situated within the global knowledge economy? • Who are the members of my research team? Are they diverse, or are they homogenous and 'normative' ? Do I need to include representative and active collaborators (participatory > tokenism) to enable a more diverse and critical research project?
Sampling strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who am I inviting to partake in my study? Why? What prejudices might I hold about the sampled population, their social positions and contexts? Who may I have un/intentionally left out? Have I used my position of (relative) power to pressure or coerce potential participants to participate? How might participants be protected and empowered vs. exploited or misappropriated? Are participants insiders or outsiders? What are shared, and differing, beliefs, values and experiences? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are alternative populations explored? Are multiple, even contradicting, experiences and (indigenous) knowledges invited and included?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the cases sampled typical or extreme, critical and maximally-diverse? How have I defined 'typical' or 'extreme' ? 	
Data collection	<p>Data collection preparation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Am I guilty of one-dimensional stereotyping of participants based on my perceptions and prejudices of their identities and contexts? • What power might I possess? What power might my participants possess? How might I mitigate their impact on the data collection processes? • How might I enable participation (i.e., provide equitable access)? <p>Data collection techniques and questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are my inquires open-ended? • Have I excluded certain topics or specific questions because of personal beliefs or assumptions? • Does the data collection space dis/advantage the participant or do they feel comfortable? <p>Data collection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have I created a neutral or safe space? Am I being culturally-humble, sensitive and respectful? How would I describe the quality of my relationship or my interactions with my participants? • What thoughts, feelings and observations have I captured in my field notes? Why these? What were my responses to uncomfortable moments? What should I do differently next time? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are participants equal partners in data collection processes? • Are the data collection tools I am using empowering or discriminating against my participants? • Are multiple and 'other' perspectives contributing to the final data set and informing interpretations?
Data analysis and interpretation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have I kept an audit trail (with honest detailing) of my data analysis and interpretation processes (e.g., analysis descriptions; explanations in a research journal; methodological log of research decisions)? • How are others' experiences different to mine? Have I been active in avoiding confirmation bias by looking for divergent views or negative cases? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are participants collaborators in the meaning-making processes? • Have I used participants' own words as evidence for interpretations and support for meaning-making (e.g., participant voice through quotations)? • Have participants been asked to check if their responses have been authentically captured (e.g., member checking/sharing)?

	<p>Have I considered all the data equally? Have I excluded any data?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have I used participants' own words to define codes, themes and interpretations vs. imposing preconceived frameworks and theories? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have other independent researchers, with potentially different backgrounds and views, reviewed my data and interpretations?
Reporting findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What beliefs, pre- or mis-conceptions, assumptions, values, biases did I hold about the research phenomenon <i>before</i> I began investigating it? How have these changed? • How might I have influenced the research process and outputs? How have I bracketed my beliefs, assumptions, values, biases etc. in reporting my findings? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whose voices or perspectives have I placed at the centre? Whose have I silenced vs. amplified? • What is new or "other" about the phenomenon I have investigated? What is powerful about these findings? Do they contradict hegemonic assumptions of the global North or do they reproduce coloniality? Are my findings epistemically- and socially-just? • Where do these findings sit in the global knowledge hierarchy? Where might my findings be valued? Where are they unwanted? Who "owns" these findings? • Where should I present and publish these findings? How are participants informed of these findings? • How are participants and collaborators acknowledged? Are collaborators included as equal partners in publication authorship?
Throughout	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who (do I think) am I? Who was I? Who do I want to be? What (multiple) identities and social positions do I occupy? What resultant power might I experience because of it? How might these identities impact on my research project? • What coloniality might I have (unconsciously) internalized? What (potentially hidden) aspects of coloniality may be present in my institution and broader context? • Have I stopped to regularly return to my initial 'who am I' narrative and reflect on changes that may have occurred in my research thinking and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have I been critical of what I have been consuming (e.g., literature, theories) and using (e.g., methodologies, data collection tools) in my research project? • Have I had regular and ongoing critical conversations and debriefings with my colleagues, supervisor, collaborators, participants, etc. especially after critical incidences (emotional encounters, cultural clashes, belief confrontations) to disclose and bracket any potential assumptions, biases, prejudices, etc. so as to not influence analyses, interpretations and findings? • Have I used peer-review throughout my research project to interrogate my blind spots (e.g., research proposal approval, research

	<p>practices? What epiphanies or transformative experiences (i.e., blind spots exposed) have I experienced during this research project? How has my development impacted on these research processes and outputs?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have I kept a research journal honestly detailing my experiences, thoughts, feelings, observations, etc. throughout the research project? Have I reflected back on previous narratives at each stage of the research process? 	<p>ethics approval, departmental/committee presentations, student-supervisor meetings, etc.) and what changes have I made in light of critical feedback?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Am I contributing to the equalizing of the global knowledge economy or reinforcing hierarchies and reproducing coloniality?
After	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Am I now an insider or outsider? • How do I now define my identity and socio-cultural context? • How might my changed positionality impact on future research projects? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What 'other' perspectives still need to be explored in future research?

The stages of the qualitative research process by Ramani, et al. (2018) have been used to structure the autoethnographic narratives below.

Research conceptualisation

This narrative begins a couple years before I undertook a doctorate in medical education (ME). I was a master's student in the field of cancer cell biology at a prestigious, but historically-White, South African university. During this time the #RhodesMustFall movement erupted. A statue of Cecil John Rhodes, a symbol of coloniality and White supremacy, on a South African university campus, sparked student protests across the country, and beyond, calling for free, decolonised Higher Education.

As a White student, I was deeply confronted with the reality of coloniality and my resultant privilege. While South Africa might have been labelled 'post' -Apartheid and 'post' - colonial, the ideologies of coloniality persisted and had permeated my subconscious. I needed to examine and expose the hidden views I had internalised, unlearning and relearning, to be an ethical and reflexive researcher. I cannot pretend that these times of disruption and exposure to concepts such as decoloniality would not shape my thinking around ME going forwards.

These profoundly uncomfortable and transformative learning experiences triggered my jump from health *sciences* to health sciences *education*; I simply wanted to be a part of the solution to Higher Education in South Africa, not part of the problem. I enrolled for a PhD in ME.

My doctoral study explored clinician-educators' conceptions of assessment (Sims & Cilliers, 2023a) and factors influencing their practice in diverse Southern contexts (Sims & Cilliers, 2023b). Conceptualising the participants of my study as complex, intersectional individuals, along with the relevance of their diverse Southern contexts on their practice, was a reflexive starting

point. Adopting an interpretivist paradigm and qualitative research approach was important in centring the experiences and perspectives of my participants, leading to a more epistemic- and socially-just research endeavour. If I had viewed my participants as one-dimensional stereotypes, ignored the realities and influences of their contexts, or selected a paradigm and methodologies that did not give participant experiences and meaning making a voice, this would have led to fallible and unjust research.

While critical theories were transformative to my personal learning, I needed to reflexively be aware that dimensions of power, identity and context may not be the most salient variables within the experiences of my participants. While I could use this critical theoretical framework to sensitise who I was as a researcher (Figure 1), I also needed to bracket these ideologies when developing my research project (Bishop & Shepherd, 2011; Jootun, et al., 2009; Koch & Harrington, 1998). In the end, a theoretical framework of Health Behaviour Theory (HBT) was selected to explore the assessment behaviours of clinician-educators (Cilliers, et al., 2015; Glanz, et al., 2015) and a phenomenographic methodology employed to investigate their conceptions (Marton, 1981; Stenfors-Hayes, et al., 2013). HBT reflexively understood that multiple personal and contextual factors intersect to shape behaviour. Phenomenography describes conceptions as the range of qualitatively different ways individuals experience and make meaning of phenomena. It was important for me to use a theoretical framework and methodology that validated diversity in experiences, understandings, and practices – aligning with a decolonial desire for magnifying potentially ‘other’ ways of knowing.

During research conceptualisation I became cognisant of where authors and their studies were located (not just geographically). It quickly became clear that the vast majority of literature reviewed originated from the global North.

Sampling strategy

I used a purposive sampling strategy with an aim of maximising the possible diversity of clinician-educators interviewed. Three different medical schools in socially, economically, politically, culturally, linguistically and colonially diverse contexts within the global South (South Africa and Mexico) were selected as sampling sites (Sims & Cilliers, 2023a).

These sampling decisions were rooted in my growing awareness that perspectives from the South were often neglected and under-valued (Ajjawi, et al., 2022; Doja, et al., 2014; Gosselin, et al., 2016; Maggio, et al., 2022; Rotgans, 2011; Tutarel, 2002). The initial intention was for broader sampling from Namibia, Mozambique, Egypt, India, Indonesia, and Chile, yet while these fell through due to feasibility issues, seeking to centre sampling in Southern contexts was an intentionally critical and just decision.

While attempting to be inclusive in my sampling strategy I reflected on whom I may have excluded from the conversation, as there is a hierarchy amongst health professions with medicine at the top. My sampling was pragmatically delimited to assessment in medical programmes only: was this an act of discrimination against other health professionals? Was I guilty of reenforcing existing power inequalities?

In my study limitations I had to acknowledge that the absence of a broader, potentially divergent or contradictory, health professions perspective is potentially harmful and epistemically unjust. I further recognise that validation of my findings needs to be expanded to other health professions.

I did, however, in preparing for data collection, interview a health professional outside of the field of medicine as a pilot. Yet I need to confess that I felt relieved at easing into my data collection by speaking with an allied health professional over a clinician, as I perceived it to be 'low(er)-stakes', which reveals my own hierarchical thinking of different health professions. Despite this, the pilot interview was powerful in developing my interview guide before data collection had even begun.

The iterative development of my interview guide further demonstrates a more equal partnership with my participants. While opening questions were broad, based on unprompted responses from participants, additional questions were included based on their varied responses. Flexibly adapting my guide is critical reflexivity in action as it empowers participants as co-drivers of research and acknowledges that the research agenda, and authority, do not lie with me alone.

While purposive sampling was our goal, not all participants invited agreed to be interviewed. At the time my non-reflexive assumption was a lack of convenience due to likely busy clinical schedules, yet it could have been due to other factors. For instance, due to the 'high-stakes' nature of medical assessment (i.e., certification for clinical practice) participants may have been hesitant to reveal potentially harmful understandings and practices. In South African in particular, discrimination against students in assessments was raised in the #RhodesMustFall movement – could this have been a reason for non-participation?

A retrospective strategy to supporting informed consent and participation (not coercion) is to ensure that the invitation and accompanying information letter clearly explains the purpose of the study, why they are specifically being invited to participate (their value) and assurance of ethical practices (e.g., the right to withdraw from the study without fear of negative consequences, the maintenance of confidentiality, anonymizing of data).

Data collection

It was paramount to use interviews as my method of data collection, for it facilitated the co-construction of knowledge. Interviews can be considered a decolonial tool, 'Speak *to* us, not *about* us' (Chetty, 2019: 203). I am not *allowing* participants to speak, or speaking on their *behalf*, I am *listening* to and *amplifying* what they have to say. Data collection methods that limit participant voice can do harm.

In preparing for data collection, I undertook background research on sampling sites to engage with potential misconceptions or examine possible unconscious biases ahead of time. This was done through both reading local literature and speaking to an insider beforehand; to develop a working, albeit limited, understanding of unfamiliar contexts. One-on-one, in-person interviews took place in South Africa and Mexico (in 2019), with clinician-educators from several

disciplines (e.g., family medicine, obstetrics, gynaecology, internal medicine, surgery, public health), totalling thirty-one participants (Sims & Cilliers, 2023a).

While I was familiar with the South African context, I was both an insider and outsider. An insider as a South African citizen, but an outsider as White – the legacy of a colonial minority. Even though I may identify as South African, I had to be cautious not to make assumptions about my participants or their contexts, as though I already ‘knew’ them. I had to remember that our lived experiences may have been radically different based on my privileged upbringing. I do not pretend to claim cultural-competency, rather, a mindset of cultural-*humility* was adopted (Wong, et al., 2021).

Considering power dimensions and building rapport are oft mentioned as part of interview methodologies, yet how exactly to negotiate or neutralise these remains unclear. Intersectionality illuminated the social positions I occupied in comparison to my participants: I was White, at one sampling site all participants were Latino; I was English-speaking; at two sampling sites English was not the medium of instruction, but those of the coloniser (Afrikaans and Spanish); I was young and a female, the vast majority of participants were older and male; I was a student researcher, my participants were clinicians. These contrasting positions highlighted potential power differentials that may impact data collection.

In attempting to neutralise any power hierarchies I adopted a transparent approach in my interviews. I would start by sharing ‘insider information’ (e.g., study background, interview questions) so as to not disadvantage my participants. Moreover, I would signal humility through sharing who I was – and was *not*. I wanted to put my participants at ease; I was not an experienced or expert educationalist here to judge them, but to listen and learn. While traditionally there might be a perceived hierarchy between the researcher and the participants (with the researcher at the ‘top’) I had been concerned about the hierarchy I perceived between myself as a doctoral student and novice qualitative researcher (at the ‘bottom’) in comparison to my participants as powerful sub-specialist clinician-educators.

My use of transparency, most likely rooted in my own sense of imposter syndrome (Keefer, 2015), gave my participants the space to disclose their own feelings of insecurity. I was taken aback to hear some participants exclaim that they did not feel qualified as clinicians (their primary professional identity) to speak about their assessment practices with any sort of educational authority. My disclosure, and their responses, a mutual relieving of pressures, created a safe space, encouraged openness in dialoguing and developed a sense of comradery. In general, I found the dialogic nature of our interviews to be a facilitator of open and honest co-construction of findings. However, I cannot claim to feel like I ‘belong’ in clinician-privileged spaces.

In reflexive hindsight, I wonder if emphasising my developing doctoral identity (i.e., a student and novice qualitative researcher) over the many other social positions and identities I occupied (e.g., White, female, middle-class, etc.) helped delimit the potential impact of these on the data collection and analysis processes? Or, if my transparency and authenticity reduced perceived competency and credibility as a researcher in the eyes of my participants? Notwithstanding, while I may have *felt* a particular way, I cannot truly know how my participants

saw me. Asking participants for feedback, perhaps at the end of each interview, would have been a collaborative approach to reflexivity that I could have taken.

In terms of the interviews themselves, one of my earliest left me feeling shaken due to uncomfortable gender dynamics. From the beginning I felt disrespected and sexualised by the tone and body language of the male participant. Was this simply the reality of the intersection of my gender and age in a patriarchal society?

Within positivist research paradigms that assume objectivity and universalism the idea of subjective and *embodied* research is alien. Yet even within interpretivist paradigms we ignore or dismiss the very real emotions and physical sensations we actively experience in our bodies while performing research activities. How could I collect data neutrally when my stomach was clenching, heartbeat racing, brow sweating and cheeks flushing? Years later the feelings of hot embarrassment, even shame, linger.

As soon as the interview ended, I rushed to my supervisor's office to try to make sense of what had just occurred. Through gently debriefing, disclosing my thoughts, feelings, and observations to my supportive supervisor, who listened without judgement, I could bracket my tumultuous emotions and keep the data collected 'untainted'. I did however begin to feel a sense of dread before subsequent interviews with male participants. I had to consciously make the decision to remain open-minded ahead of following interviews, to not reproduce the harm I had experienced.

Despite this, the many positive interview interactions I had thereafter helped shift my emotions. One of my final interviews was a high point in my study: despite (unreflexively) assuming our 'opposite-ness' (an older Latino male specialist clinician) we immediately 'clicked' and at one stage, together sharing a board marker, we excitedly drew on the conference room board – co-construction at its finest.

Keeping field notes (Korstjens & Moser, 2018), capturing thoughts, feelings, and observations in the moment, and reflecting on these individually, and with my supervisor through critical conversations, enabled me to reflexively debrief and process my experiences. Revisiting these before subsequent interviews kept reflexivity front and centre throughout data collection. Additionally, returning to them during analysis, and centring the data itself (e.g., repeated listing of audio-recorded interviews, repeated reading of interview transcripts) contributed to ensuring that I was remaining true to my participants and not letting my personal views cloud interpretation (Probst, 2015).

Data analysis and interpretation

Conducting, transcribing, and analysing the interviews myself, in a timely manner, enabled immersion and a deep familiarity with my participants' experiences, understandings and practices of assessment. Yet I remained conscious of my 'outsider' status, which in turn granted me an ability to look at my data with fresh eyes.

All this being said, the idea of 'meaning making', the researcher as the active constructor and interpretive lens in qualitative research, was something I struggled with as a prior

positivist researcher. Despite inductively drawing on theoretical frameworks and analytical methodologies, balancing it with deductive analysis was a constant negotiation. Was I being too prescriptive in my use of HBT? Were divergent or negative cases being considered or hidden? Was I guilty of confirmation bias, being swayed by the current consensus in the (Northern) literature? Or was I attempting to craft a uniquely Southern narrative that may (or may not) be present? Thick and rich interpretations rooted in and supported by participant (verbatim) quotations was how I sought to be reflexive in this stage of the research process.

When it came to making a defensible decision around ceasing data collection and analysis, I was pleased to discover the (neo-positivist) concept of data saturation. I can now see that I unreflexively treated it as a 'tick-the-box' activity during my PhD. As I work towards publishing from my PhD, retrospective reflexivity on data saturation, versus the concepts of information power, theoretical sufficiency and conceptual depth (Sims & Cilliers, 2023b), has led me to re-read all my interview transcripts and interrogate my interpretations again while publishing the findings.

Reporting findings

Caution needs to be practiced to not perpetuate colonially-constructed divides such as a North/South binary which could reinforce power inequalities (Paton, et al., 2020). Furthermore, the concept "global South" is homogenising and threatens to ignore the very differences and diversities Southern researchers are trying to highlight. In fact, the global North has used the term global South to spin false narratives about it, delegitimizing its sources of knowledge (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012).

In the reporting of my study findings, I had to be aware of these nuances and debates. Special care was taken to compare and contrast the findings from my study to those found in the literature, noting that previous work had been conducted almost exclusively in Northern settings by Northern researchers. Southern Theory asked what "other", but important, necessary and legitimate perspectives had my study uncovered? (Naidu, 2021b, 2021c)

The alignment between the findings of my conceptions study and those published (Sims & Cilliers, 2023a) was surprising; yet when it came to factors influencing assessment, variations between South Africa and Mexico were found, reflecting their diversities, along with unique elements not necessarily seen in the global North (Sims & Cilliers, 2023b). Overall, my doctoral research has expanded, deepened, and enriched the current body of work on assessment in ME and amplified Southern perspectives.

In terms of disseminating my findings, reporting on local knowledges from the margins risks being dismissed by the mainstream knowledge economy – leading to a pressure to reproduce Northern Theory and privileging the use of Western lenses (Connell, et al., 2018; Gosselin, et al., 2016; Montgomery, 2019). I need to be careful not to capitulate towards the global North. Additionally, the act of writing for and publishing in English-medium journals could be considered problematic (Engward & Davis, 2015). I feel conflicted in my desire to publish in renowned international journals. It is for my own professional reward and recognition or would

it support epistemically- and socially-just practices? In order to bring perspectives from the periphery into the mainstream publishing in these journals is a tension I must live with. However, in publishing other aspects of my PhD I have intentionally sought to publish in local, African journals.

Conclusion

This paper sought to illustrate how autoethnographic narratives may be used to demonstrate reflexivity through the entire qualitative research process, at both personal and epistemological levels, as viewed through a sensitizing critical theoretical framework informed by Southern theory, decoloniality and intersectionality.

Being and becoming reflexive while researching in the White, Western, Euro-centric, colonial world of ME, where the culture, norms and embedded values largely reflect my own experiences and subconscious thinking, is uncomfortable – because it problematizes *who I am*. Although, as reflexivity is an ongoing and never-ending process (Watt, 2015), I must acknowledge that my reflexivity is a work in progress. Just as one's intersectional positions may shift over time, so does one's reflexivity. The limitations of reflexive insight needs to be acknowledged - 'Our personal myth' is imperfectly knowable ... for we cannot [truly] step outside of the self, to [completely] view the impact of the self" – nor know how our participants may have perceived and responded to us (Bishop & Shepherd, 2011: 1286, 1287). Moreover, 'true' reflexivity can never be completely achieved for human beings are, by nature, subjective, self-conscious, socially-constructed and continuously evolving (Finlay, 2002: 532). Hence the developmental call to continue *being* and *becoming* reflexive researchers, living with discomfort, as we grow and repeatedly rewrite our narratives.


A point of reflection in terms of using autoethnography as a methodology for reflexivity is the issue of relational ethics: while my research project obtained ethics approval from my, and participating, institutions, the question of ethics in reflexivity remains grey (i.e., has my disclosure of personal stories implicated any of my participants?) (Ellis, et al., 2011). Moreover, would my personal narratives be richer and more reflexive if developed collaboratively and collectively (Naidu & Kumagai, 2016) – with my doctoral supervisor, research collaborators and participants? Was I dissuaded from a more participatory ethnography and reflexivity in order to protect myself from the risks of vulnerability (Smith, 2017; Van Katwyk & Guzik, 2022)? In South Africa we have a beautiful philosophy called '*ubuntu*' – I am because we are – meaning that our humanity is shared; we cannot exist without others. Would a conceptual framing and practice of ubuntu give us the space to empathetically and nonjudgmentally practice reflexivity together?

All this being said, I need to be careful not to be a 'White saviour', proposing a White solution instead of listening to and passing the microphone to Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (Pham & Gothberg, 2020). Is it appropriate for me to write about decoloniality as a White person, a 'colonizer', or at least a reproducer of coloniality at times? I have blind spots. I am going to make mistakes. I do not have (even a fraction of) the answers. These narratives are simply an honest attempt to share my grappling with being and becoming a reflexive researcher

while White in diverse, 'post' -colonial contexts. We need to disrupt normative reflexive practices and challenge our deeply held and hidden beliefs that exist within coloniality and White supremacist systems and structures (Van Katwyk & Guzik, 2022; Wyatt, 2022). I am a (de)colonized researcher in progress (Kelley, 2021).

In closing, we cannot plead ignorance. ME researchers need to be critical in their reflexivity, mindful of the many social positions they occupy, their relation to power, and how they can use that power for ethical research that does not reproduce inequalities but welcomes and amplifies other ways of knowing, doing and being. We are collectively responsible to resisting and disrupting harmful and unjust MER practices (Wyatt, 2022). An autoethnographic methodology and the critical conceptual framework presented here hold immense value for powerful, epistemically- and socially-just MER in a globalised world.

Author biography

Danica Sims is an educationalist and researcher in the field of Higher Education; more specifically medical, health professions, and health sciences education. She is a departmental lecturer in the Department of Education at the University of Oxford and a research associate at the University of Johannesburg. Her work focuses on assessment, curriculum, faculty development, online education and qualitative research methodologies - usually with a critical take. She is passionate about amplifying marginalised perspectives from the global South. 

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Book Review

Murris, K. 2022. *Karen Barad as Educator: Agential Realism and Education*. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore Ptd Ltd.

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What do the tracing of stories about plastic bricks, the moon, an aquarium, Zuko, a pregnant stingray, Facebook, a stick, ghosts, and many other kin, have in common? And, how might ‘[a]rticulating those stories ... help “stretch” our response-ability as educators to include a//humans and other-than-humans as part of our earthly survival and more just futures’ (Murris, 2022: 18). And, ‘[w]hat on earth (and beyond) could quantum physics teach educators?’ (Murris, 2022: 6). These are just some of the questions that Karin Murris opens up in ‘Karen Barad as Educator: Agential Realism and Education’ (2022). Murris provides a glimpse into the life and work of the Theoretical Physicist and Professor of Feminist Studies, Philosophy, and History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz (USA), Karen Barad, and how/what their agential realism contributes to contemporary education (research) philosophy, theory and/or practice. Barad’s use of ‘they’ , ‘their’ , and ‘them’ , instead of ‘she’ and ‘her’ is a grammatical choice that draws attention to the use of gender-neutral language and is a deliberate move away from the use of singular pronouns (Murris, 2022: 8). Murris (2022: 8) says she makes the familiar ‘I’ unfamiliar by using ‘iii’ (also in plural).

Agential realism is a philosophy aligned with the ontological turn in philosophy. Du Preez, *et al.* (2022: 5) state: “The ontological re/turn, as a response to the posthuman condition, brought with it a vast assemblage of thought experiments in the form of new realism/s, new vitalism/s, new feminist materialism/s, matter realism/s, speculative realism/s, object-oriented ontologies, and non-representational theories. The emergence of these theories is also the result of the overreach of social constructivism (the social construction of reality) evident in both critical theory and poststructuralism” . First used in a 1995-chapter, Barad further expands on agential realism in their magnum opus, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007). Some of the concepts dealt with include intra-action, quantum entanglement, erasure, phenomenon, indeterminacy, diffraction, agential cut, agential separability, spacetimemattering, and onto-epistemic-ethical. As Murris (2022: ix) explains, this book is aimed for those (lecturers, teachers, artists, therapists, parents and grandparents, funders of education research, organisers of educational events, as well as detached youth workers) interested in alternatives to the dominant neoliberal national curricula, educational policies, and humanist teaching, research, and conference agendas; and who share a general interest in the ‘ “what” and the “how” of educational encounters’ .

Murris (2022: 2) explains: ‘Agential realism is a philosophy *practised*, not a philosophy *applied* to practice. It is an *entangling* theory–practice affair’ . Agential realism



questions Cartesian dualisms and troubles the discursive privilege that has been afforded to philosophy by also bringing into question the material dimension. This move is a philosophical response to the dominance of representationalist philosophies that privilege the discursive by bringing matter/material into the picture too. The focus on the material-discursive also challenges hegemonic, colonising anthropocentric ways of knowing and being. What further distinguishes agential realism from other relational conceptual frameworks, is that it is also intra-active.

Intra-action is a neologism first used by Donna Haraway in 1992 and intra-actively developed by Barad. As a key component to agential realism, *intra-action*, *contra inter-action*, does not assume the prior existence of determinately bounded and propertied entities that come into existence with one another. Rather, it troubles traditional notions of causality which assume an independent and determinate object, and the relations between such objects, in which one affects or changes the other. Intra-action further assumes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through intra-action, and '*signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*' (italics in original text; Barad, 2007). To talk of individual identity is therefore problematic because it assumes some pre-determining set of characteristics that mark that individual identity, as opposed to an open becoming through intra-action. 'Existence', for Barad,

is [therefore] not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating. Which is not to say that emergence happens once and for all, as an event or as a process that takes place according to some external measure of space and of time, but rather that time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future. (2007: xi)

Murris (2022: 27) makes it more concrete when writing: 'Sense-making, theorising, imagining, knowing, reading, writing, remembering, walking, critiquing, dressing, exercising, lesson planning, learning, mothering, and birthing—they are all *intra-active material-discursive practices* with/in the world' .

Murris employs a *diffractive* methodology. Diffraction is used by Barad (2007: 71) to describe their methodological approach of 'reading insights through one another in attending to and responding to the details and specificities of relations of difference and how they matter' . Diffraction is a counterpoint to reflection. Although both are optical phenomena, reflection is about mirroring and sameness, whereas 'diffraction is marked by patterns of difference' (Barad, 2007: 71). Like Barad - for whom 'writing style is not just an aesthetic choice, a literary device, a form of play, or merely a way of being creative' (Murris, 2022: 8) - Murris (2022: 73) deliberately chose to only explain the diffractive methodology in the final chapter to further

disrupt 'styles of writing and teaching that proceed unilinearly with a hierarchical structure because it positions the author as the expert: *explaining-theories-by-giving-definitions-of-concepts- and-then-applying-them-to-empirical-data-or-by-giving-examples*' . Murriss (2022: 25) states that 'the book' s structure is more like a game of hopscotch. You can hop in this chapter from one knot to the next, backwards, forwards, and sideways' . This leaves a rather large openness to the end; an emptiness, a void, as Barad and Murriss would say. It invites the reader, in typical posthuman style, to further experiment with ideas, to trace complex relational-phenomena, to intra-act in material-discursive ways with/in the world that we are bending and shaping and that bends and shapes us in our relational becoming. On the contrary, it also leaves many traces revealed in the book, somewhat untouched and unturned, which could be confusing for a first-time reader of agential realism and posthumanism. Toward the end, one might want to return and further wander/wonder about

how the world *is* in its iterative becoming, including our own actions as pedagogues, what are the implications for teaching and learning? As current curricula are steeped in practices of reflection and reflexivity, how does diffraction reconfigure curriculum development in all phases of education? How do posthumanist educators move away from the notion of the teacher as the "expert" ? How does it work in education when knowledge production is understood as performative and an iterative world-making practice? How can we re-imagine the role of the educator? (Murriss, 2022: 72)

In less than 100 pages, Murriss introduces the reader to a maze of (rather challenging) concepts (which she at no time claims to cover completely), often relying excessively on footnotes (that 'helps us *walk around* in concepts'), which is at times more confusing than clarifying. That being said, Murriss (2022: 27) eloquently traces the effects of agential realism on/in research and teaching practice without reducing Barad' s entangled ideas to ' a how-to-*apply*-agential realism guide' .

Finally, this book is an ideal entry point for reading groups who are interested in slowing down to intra-act (Du Preez & Du Toit, 2022) with/along agential realism, posthumanism (and the posthuman condition), and (new) feminist materialism/s. It asks for re-reading and moving in and between pages so that ideas can aerate and ripen. Reading groups and scholars engaging with this book might particularly be interested in further experimenting and theorising Murriss' plea for de/colonisation by adopting the diffractive methodology in teaching, learning, assessment, and education research. Of further interest might be tracing Murriss and Barad' s stance/s on the ontological status of the human when asking what it means to decentre the human in agential realist research. This is particularly important if we agree that an agential realist analysis is anti-anthropocentric, but anthro-po-situated (as Murriss argues).

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