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Unpacking the notion of 'criticality' in liberatory praxis: A critical pedagogy perspective

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Abstract

This paper is informed by the field of socially just pedagogies. A critical pedagogy perspective grounded in a transformative and liberatory praxis is employed to discuss why the notion of *criticality* is fundamental to classroom engagement, especially within historically white South African universities. Although widely adopted, the meanings attached to criticality varies. This paper focusses on criticality as used within critical pedagogy and argues that it ushers in a humanising classroom pedagogy that facilitates dialogic relationships and promotes student agency and critical social consciousness. Through employing a qualitative case study methodology, this research draws on data extracted from two courses on identity. A critically reflective gaze is adopted to examine the impact of criticality in these spaces. Criticality embedded in dialogic praxis was found to aid the development of agency and raise critical awareness about socially just societies. Teachers' responsibilities for being agents of change, was also highlighted.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, criticality, dialogic relationships, liberatory praxis, student agency, transformative learning,

Introduction

The notion of criticality in the scholarship of teaching and learning occupies a key ideological orientation. It also comprises a fundamental imperative informing the manifold ways in which theory-practice-reflection manifests in the meaning-making and knowledge construction process underlining academic development pedagogy. For academic development practitioners, such as myself, who work primarily with historically disadvantaged students on four-year extended degree programmes in a historically white university setting, the aforementioned notions of theory-practice-reflection are key to how we orientate ourselves in terms of facilitating our students' transition into navigating, challenging, and questioning the demands which academia places on them. Our locations as academic development practitioners require that we create spaces for meaningful dialogical encounters and that we remain constantly engaged in

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the process of negotiating access and equity on behalf of our students. Operating from the basis of such a transformational agenda requires constant vigilance on our part, about the students we serve, their locations within and outside of the classroom, and their encounters with a dominant institutional culture which renders them as other when they are measured against 'the way we do things around here' (Jansen, 2004: 6-7).

It is evident from the above that the rapid increases in historically disadvantaged student numbers at historically white universities (see University of Cape Town, 2021: 40), have unfortunately not always been met with the appropriate levels of preparedness in terms of curriculum redesign, pedagogy, and institutional culture at these institutions (see Scott, 2017a, 2017b). This lack of alignment between institutional offerings and the black student experience, was most recently captured by student protests under the Fallist Movements (see for example, Ahmed, 2019). As a watershed moment in higher education, the Fallist Movements signaled an earnest return to a state of criticality and critical mindfulness. In response, academics are challenged to reaffirm and reclaim their mission in the institution, as critically reflexive practitioners with a deep-seated sense of accountability and responsibility towards their vocation and the students they serve. A prime objective in this paper, therefore, is to grapple with the notion of criticality through the lens of critical pedagogy, as a way of centering students and developing their agency as a necessary condition of transformative learning. Such a stance recognizes that improved access to higher education, as an expression of social justice, has often happened at the cost of not developing the requisite teaching and learning interventions needed to guide, support, and nurture the transition into academia of the non-traditional black student sector. The term 'critical' takes on a particular socio-political character here, grounded in race and identity politics in the South African higher education sector (see also hooks, 1994: 37-39). It seeks to recognise those structures of power and domination within our curricula, our pedagogy, and indeed within ourselves, that continue to marginalize and mark as deficit, large sectors of our student population who are able to gain access to higher education, but who out of necessity, continue to engage in struggles for acceptance and recognition (see Scott, 2013; Nomdo, 2015).

Inextricably linked to issues of improved access, therefore, is the need to adopt a critical lens to interrogate the relevance of curriculum content and the pedagogies employed in relation to the lived contexts of the students for whom such curricula are designed. Such a context foregrounds the dire need for a dialogical process geared towards addressing issues of access, equity, change, and transformation. Through this, concerted efforts are made to locate and align the lived experiences of our students with our teaching, in order to make the knowledge production process meaningfully engaging and relevant, both within and beyond the institution.

Such an attempt at achieving sound alignment between curriculum design, pedagogy, and the communities we serve, is framed within the ambit of critical pedagogy. In this paper I draw on the affordances of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 1983, 1997) as a philosophical and practical orientation within education. I highlight the importance of praxis and show how imperative dialogical and critical reflective practices are for teaching, learning, and scholarship,

particularly in terms of revealing and challenging the contextual layers of domination and contestation that inhabit our social settings. Of concern here is our own coercion as teachers, into accepting and disseminating these inequalities in our own thinking and doing, as a result of not being critical enough of the dominant and disparate institutional and disciplinary discourses upholding 'the way we do things around here' (Jansen, 2004: 6-7).

What is emphasized here is that educators stand at the nexus between university curriculum reform and students' needs. The burdens of taking on proactive and contextually relevant leadership roles, of unbundling and reconciling educational aims and pedagogy in line with issues of social justice and redress, fall on us operating at the interface between students, their communities, and the institution.

As part of answering the question: 'What does criticality mean for us in our various teaching and learning contexts?', this paper also seeks to inform prospective authors wishing to publish in *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning (CriSTaL),* about how a particular perspective on criticality could be adopted and reported on, from within their own contexts of transformation and change.

Unpacking the concept of criticality

Kincheloe, et al. (2017: 237) contend that critical research is synonymous with trying to establish frameworks for promoting and accessing ideals of social justice and transformation. Within this context, the 'critical' component invested in research of this nature, deems it as a necessity to expose and challenge structures that perpetuate social injustices and inequality. There is thus an important political element to critical research, grounded in 'd' (Kincheloe et al., 2017: 237). More recently, critical theory has also taken to interrogating the assumptions that go along with those ideals of democracy, transformation and social justice, that are taken for granted. This adaptation of critical theory to respond to changing socio-political and cultural contexts, ensures that it will remain responsive to its 'critical' nature and maintain an element of relevance in a rapidly changing world (Kellner, 2005: 57; Kincheloe, et al., 2017: 236). As such, Kellner (2005: 59) emphasizes the 'boundary-crossing and mediating' nature of critical theory.

In Simpson and Dervin's (2020) insightful edited volume on criticality, Simpson (2020: 1) creates awareness of the various positionalities utilizing and grappling with this concept and foregrounds the importance of the varied contexts in which this takes place. Simpson (2020: 2) traces the origins of critical theory to the Frankfurt School, where the focus was more on a one-dimensional, narrow, singular use of the term. This stands in stark contrast to the way in which it is used today, in a 'much broader sense and always in the plural to encompass different theoretical, methodological, and practical strands of research'. Drawing on Max Horkheimer's (1972) work on traditional and critical theory, Simpson (2020: 2) points to Horkheimer's definition of critical theory as 'rejecting positivism, rejecting objectivity, and rejecting the separation of theory from social praxis', thereby constituting, in essence, 'a form of social criticism' in which the term *critical*, in a general sense, signals a 'challenge [to] the existing social order' (Keucheyan cited in Simpson, 2020: 2). Simpson (2020: 4) summarises as follows:

> Criticality, understood as an adjective rather than a noun—through the suffix *ality* means that the condition of being critical (i.e., Criticality) should be understood as a process in the making, a continuous process of becoming. Criticality cannot be a normative fixed or static state, nor can the notion be an 'end' in itself. Thus, being critical involves contesting normative … values, concepts, principles, and the ways knowledge is produced and reproduced.

This stance aligns with Barnett's (1997) earlier work in which he questions the current application, definition and validity of critical thinking within a changing higher education context. Barnett moves beyond the traditional bounds of critical thinking to incorporate 'critical action, critical self-reflection', manifesting in what Barnett views as the ultimate aim in higher education, namely, to develop a 'critical being' (Barnett, 1997: 2). It is from this critical theory basis, argues Simpson (2020: 6), that the emerging notions of 'critical thinking' and adopting a 'critical stance' in educational research, became aligned with what has come to be called 'critical pedagogy.'

In line with critical pedagogy's mode of questioning and interrogating traditionally dominant ways of thinking and doing, we have come to observe that the terms 'critical thinking' and 'criticality' have become endemic in educational discourses (Barnett, 1997: 2; Simpson, 2020: 1, 3). The concept of critical thinking is well established and traces its origins to ancient Greece, embedded in the work of Socrates, the founder of western philosophy, who developed a systematic way of asking 'clarifying question until his students arrived at their own understanding' (History.com Editors, 2009).[1] However, the meanings attached to these terms and the ways in which they are used, often vary and fall short of the intended mark (Barnett, 1997: 2; Kincheloe, et al., 2017: 236). Put differently, '[w]hat is evident … is that there are privileged voices in this *menagerie* of calls for criticality' (Giroux, 1983: 259, 261). The hegemony claimed by the North with respect to how knowledge is to be interpreted and understood, results in a form of reproduced 'essentialization' that manifests in 'creating educational "utopias" and "dystopias" … about "good" and "bad" systems of education, without being criticized systematically by teachers [and] researchers …' (Simpson, 2017).

Pointing to the failures of reproduction theories, Giroux (1983: 259) points out their emphasis on 'domination' at the expense of 'human subjects' who 'generally "disappear" amidst a theory that leaves no room for moments of self-creation, mediation, and resistance', thereby reducing the element of 'human agency'. This stifling of agency, aptly captured by Giroux's (1983) critique of reproduction and resistance theories developed by radical educators, offers a strong theoretical foundation for Giroux and McLaren's (1986) critique of teacher training reform policies in America, which tended to emphasize mechanistically driven curricula and pedagogies, in which

[1] For an historical overview, see The Foundation for Critical Thinking. 2019. Available online https://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/a-brief-history-of-the-idea-of-critical-thinking/408 (Accessed: 15 November 2022).

teachers and students were decentered and viewed as products of system devoid of the social imperatives of equality and critical participation. Within this educational context of mere technical reproduction, Giroux and McLaren (1986: 219) show that schools were 'redefined through a language that emphasize[d] standardization, competency, and narrowly defined performance skills'. The authors go on to exclaim quite emphatically about this situation, that '[i]n its most ideologically offensive form, this type of prepackaged curriculum is rationalized as teacher-proof … designed to be applied to any classroom context regardless of … historical, cultural, and socioeconomic differences …' (1986: 219; see also Kelly, et al., 2020: 102-103). This type of corporate style management of education tends to lead to the 'closing of the boundaries of critical thought' (Barnett, 1997: 58). This often leads to teachers adopting an overly authoritative position which they use to 'legitimate their roles as professionals through appeals to knowledge and expertise that is highly exclusionary and undemocratic' (Giroux, 1997: 111). These types of situations locate the teaching and the learning environment, as sterile and immutable.

As a counterpart to the reproduction theorists, Giroux (1983: 290, 293, 260) highlights the extent to which 'resistance theorists', by acknowledging the complexities attached to 'experiences and structures of domination and constraint', were able to 'restore a degree of agency and innovation' to marginalized groupings. Giroux's (1983: 258-259) critique of reproduction theories in the education system was therefore foundational in terms of exposing the extent to which education was political in its tendency to reproduce social dominance within its structures. For Giroux (1983: 290), resistance in this respect, must have as a core principle, namely, the 'notion of emancipation', which fosters critical analytical ability in students and encourages them to participate in the pursuits of social justice (Giroux & McLaren, 1986: 225). Kincheloe (cited in Kincheloe et al., 2017: 239) draws on Freire's critical pedagogical research in this respect, asserting that 'school curriculum should in part be shaped by problems that face teachers and students in their effort to live just and ethical lives' (see also Barnett, 1997: 6). In a similar call to reform higher education, hooks (1994: 29-30) states 'that … a transformation in our classrooms, in how we teach and what we teach, has been a necessary revolution—one that seeks to restore life to a corrupt and dying academy'.

In this sense, the shift from critical thinking to critical being becomes an inherent feature of criticality (Barnett, 1997; Dunne, 2015: 92). Dunne (2015: 92) describes critical thinking as 'internalized cognitive operations' while criticality on the other hand, he argues, encompasses Heidegger's notion of 'critical Dasein in action'. This relates to humans' inextricable connection to the world in which they live and where their search for authenticity is embedded in 'care'. Dunne's unpacking of this notion of care is 'as an ontological maxim, embodied in critical-reason, critical self-reflection and critical-action, collectively referred to as 'critical being' (2015: 92). As such, criticality encompasses an understanding where humans are placed centrally in their educational and life experiences, and where experience only becomes 'learning experiences' through 'critical being in-the-world' (Dunne, 2015: 92-93). Drawing on Barnett's (1997) understanding of criticality in which the limitations of critical thinking are acknowledged, Dunne (2015: 94) asserts that 'Barnett's model of criticality embraces not just rationalism and logic, but

the totality of the person, deeply embedded in a context-specific situation, in-the-world'.

This enriched understanding of critical thinking, whereby students and teachers develop a social awareness of each other's presence and *being*, signals a distinct shift from its traditional Frankfurt School roots, where it was recognised as 'an *individual pursuit*; [occurring] within a subject, in isolation from society' (Kelly, et al., 2020: 106). This socially embedded and emancipatory nature of critical theory was popularized by the proponents of critical pedagogy (see Freire, 2000; Giroux, 1983; Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Kincheloe, et al., 2017). The critiques leveled against essentialized and reproductive forms of education devoid of social justice imperatives come through clearly in the works of scholars like Freire and Giroux. In Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire expresses quite clearly his criticism of a passive model of education, epitomized by the 'distance between the teacher and the taught' (2000: 76):

> This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits … [this] negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. (Freire, 2000: 72)

As part of the shift towards embedding social justice within curricula, critical pedagogy came to develop a strong social constructivist basis, and the location of critical thinking therein, was such that it came to be 'considered a *dialogical activity* … in which "liberation is a social act"' (Shor & Freire cited in Kelly, et al., 2020: 105-106). Put differently, the adoption of an emancipatory pedagogical approach, involved teachers and students entering into meaningful dialogic relationship with each other in order to reduce the strict hierarchy of power and authority traditionally exercised by teachers over students (Freire, 2000: 67-68; see also Giroux, 1983, 1997; Giroux & McLaren, 1986). Drawing on the notion of 'emancipatory authority', Giroux (1997: 103) posits that 'teachers are bearers of critical knowledge, rules, and values through which they consciously articulate and problematize …'. The adoption of this critical stance in the classroom, 'encourages … assisting students in analyzing their own experiences so as to illuminate the processes by which they were produced, legitimated, or disconfirmed' (Giroux & McLaren, 1986: 234).

The bedrock of emancipatory pedagogy hinted at here, therefore, occurs through developing a critical stance towards all forms of domination, where teachers, students and the curriculum (visible and hidden), are all actively involved in establishing an 'alignment … embodied in an ethic of solidarity' (Giroux, 1997: 95; see also Kellner's (2005: 56) and hooks' (1994) insights into Freire's work in this regard).

For Freire, this 'ethic of solidarity' is fostered through dialogue, where the teacher and students enter into a 'teacher-student' and 'students-teachers' relationship (Freire, 2000: 80). In line with this stance, hooks (1994: 21), as a previous student of Freire, refers to the concept of 'engaged pedagogy' which she asserts 'does not seek simply to empower students … a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered'. Within this setting, teachers do not simply relinquish their positions of authority. For Freire, entering into this

dialogic relationship means that teachers take responsibility for, and acknowledge their authorative positions, but that they use that authority in nurturing and supportive ways to facilitate students' development as problem solvers and producers of knowledge (see also Barnett, 1997: 4). As such, for Freire, 'the authority of the critical teacher is dialectical' (Kincheloe, et al., 2017: 240). The goal, therefore, is to create an environment in which 'critical learning incidents' (Soini, 2012: 848-868) can emerge through the process of meaningful engagement and enquiry (also see Espinoza's (2011) concept of 'pivotal moments'). Adopting such a 'humanizing pedagogy' allows teachers to step out of their authoritative and blinkered mode and brings to the fore 'the consciousness of the students themselves' (Freire, 2000: 68) in developing a sense of agency and ownership over their own learning.[2] Freire states:

> Authentic liberation — the process of humanization — is not another deposit to be made in men. Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it. (2000: 79)

Despite its widespread usage, we are reminded that the concepts of criticality and critical pedagogy are not without fault (see Avinash (2015) for a critique of *Pedagogy Of The Oppressed*), and as such, we need to be mindful of the criticisms levelled against it in terms of the danger its adherents possess to generalise and essentialise reality (see Gur-Ze'ev, 2005: 12-13; Simpson, 2020: 11-15; Mancila, 2020: 75). In response to such criticism, the following appeal is made:

> Acknowledging our own limitations as researchers about our criticality means moving away from positions of superiority over others, whereby the researcher is seen or positioned as an all-encompassing truth-bearer. As researchers we do not have complete knowledge about everything. Instead, we need to engender dialogues between the self and others in order to challenge, question, and problematize our own criticality. (Simpson, 2020: 13)

Methodological considerations

This paper employs a qualitative case study methodology, which incorporates critical and interpretive components, inductive and heuristic approaches and the use of thick description for describing real life events (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 2009). Two first year courses were considered as research sites, namely, *Writing in the Humanities* and *Writing Across Borders*. The former is part of the four-year extended degree programme, made up of black students only (Coloured, Indian, and African, as per the racial indicators used by the education department), while the latter is a mainstream course with a mixture of extended degree and mainstream students, across racial groups. The majority of the extended degree cohort were first generation university students, but there was a mixture of economic class orientations present in both courses. Each course offered students a theoretical basis for understanding and problematizing notions of identity, borders,

[2] Also see Freire, P. 2018. *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare to Teach*. New York: Routledge.

and mobility. The teaching and learning outcomes were deemed to be transformative in nature for both courses, and critically reflective tools were employed as part of the course design. Students also made use of blogs to reflect on issues of personal identity in relation to the course content. This type of exposure meant that students could learn more about how they viewed themselves and how others viewed them, as they straddled home and university settings. The critically reflective component, combined with the student profile and nature of the course content, made these attractive sites for analysing the notion of criticality. Ethical clearance for this research was obtained from the faculty's Research Ethics Committee.

Data was collected from blog submissions, assignments, essays, and in the case of *Writing Across Borders*, also a video-recorded focus-group interview. In line with qualitative case study methodology, content analysis was employed for analysing data.

The more established *Writing in the Humanities* course has an average class size of 250 students. I was part of the teaching team on both courses, and discussions amongst lecturers were held about the selection of potential student participants. The lecturers, knowing the research brief, submitted the names of fifteen students based on their interactions with students on the course. The students selected had to have submitted all of the required coursework, including their blog reflections, as shifts in perspective were to be traced chronologically across the course. An oral invitation, followed by a written invitation to participate in the research, was sent to students. By following the ethical guidelines set out by Angrosino (2005), participants were briefed individually about the research project, and were given time to pose questions and to consider if they wished to participate. The participants' right to privacy was assured, and they were given the option to withdraw at any stage. They were also provided with pseudonyms to protect their identities.

All coursework submissions (blogs, assignments, essays) were analysed collectively by lecturers as an initial step to probing and filtering the data. Student data sets were arranged, organized and grouped based on the commonality of themes and issues raised. A further narrowing of the data entailed selecting a 'representative' data set for particular groupings. As part of this filtering process, only four sets of student data were eventually selected in the end, based on the scope and depth of student reflections therein. Permission from the lecturers on both courses was also obtained, for the use of the data for this paper.[3]

The *Writing Across Borders* course was a newly designed mainstream course. Only fourteen students were registered, and all of their profiles were initially recorded and compared. Four of these were purposively selected as research participants. These selections were based on racial diversity in representation across participants, their year of study, and nationality (as there were also international students registered for the course). The data set included student blogs,

[3] The lecturers involved have produced various papers on these courses over the years (see Arend, et al., 2017; Samson, et al., 2018; Hunma, et al., 2019; Nomdo, et al., 2021) and I wish to emphasise here that the specificity of the analytical lens of critical pedagogy that I employ in this paper and the conclusions drawn, is based solely on my perspective as author, since the lecturers on these courses may not necessarily share the same theoretical orientation.

research essays, the course evaluation, and a focus group interview after the course ended, which was video- recorded. The narratives selected for closer scrutiny, offered rich perspectives on race, identity, nationality, class, and a developing awareness of agency and being. While there are drawbacks utilizing such a small sample across the two courses, the focus on thick description (Geertz, 1973) validates this type of selection.

Unpacking the notion of criticality in teaching practice: A self-reflective gaze

Traditionally, students on the extended degree programme[4] have suffered the brunt of negative labeling practices within the institution, from peers and faculty alike (see useful insights by Pym (2013) and Scott (2013) regarding this). Extended degree students, who in the South African context are predominantly black, first-generation, and working-class, have by and large entered privileged higher education spaces fully aware of the stigmas attached to their presence. As an academic development practitioner, whose mission is to improve access and increase equity within the South African university context, part of my job is to facilitate access for these students into disciplinary discourses. Academic development practitioners are extremely cognissant of the deficit discourses plaguing and infringing on the types of supportive, developmental and transformative work that they are called upon to do in the institution. Gholdy Muhammad (cited in Ferlazzo, 2020), in a recent interview on her new book about equity frameworks for teaching literacy, offers an apt definition of 'deficit thinking':

> ...any thinking, perspectives, or ideologies that are negative, false, incomplete, or destructive. It can also be defined as capturing someone's story as a single narrative or starting one's story in false, damaging, or incomplete ways.

Our calling is therefore to be fully aware of the deficit discourses impacting our students' sense of being and belonging, and to integrate this discomfort *meaningfully* and *carefully* into our teaching as a way of confronting the 'otherness' that students are exposed to. As part of our pedagogical practice, we ask students to draw on their own experiences and we get them to use these experiences in critically reflective ways so that they are able to recontextualize, re-examine and relocate themselves in the university setting aware of the systems of domination that impact their sense of belonging as a black, (mostly) first-generation, working class grouping in this space (see Nomdo, 2013; Samson, et al., 2018). The *Writing in the Humanities* and *Writing Across Borders* courses have represented as richly textured sites of enquiry in this respect.

Writing in the Humanities

[4] This is a four-year programme, funded by the South African Department of Higher education, and offers additional support to historically disadvantaged students who enter university with lower scores than mainstream students, but who show the potential to succeed. Issues of Social transformation and redress informs the goals of the programme, which shares similarities with the United Kingdom's "Widening access" programme.

Writing in the Humanities is a first-year foundation course on the extended curriculum programme. The theoretical grounding of the course draws on the themes of identity, identity construction and borders, thereby offering a particular lens for approaching and unpacking the prescribed textual content, which includes works from African authors such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chimamanda Adichie, and South African political analyst, Eusebius McKaiser. The prescribed content has purposively been selected to incorporate African and South African realities and knowledges into the curriculum. We all possess identities and are more or less familiar with some of the contexts in which such identities have been forged, and as lecturers, we use this as a starting point in our classes, inviting students to bring along their diverse experiences of the world, into the public classroom space, to be shared, unpacked, compared and contrasted alongside that of their peers and lecturers. Lecturers on the course start off the process of sharing alongside their students. This incorporates, as alluded to by Giroux (1997: 95) earlier, an 'alignment … embodied in an ethic of solidarity'. This invitation for students to participate dialogically in their own learning means that a relationship of mutual trust first needs to be developed and recognised within the classroom, to enable the possibility of surfacing 'critical learning incidents' (Soini, 2012) that become 'pivotal' (Espinoza, 2011) for transforming the ways in which students and teachers, in relationship with each other, come to view, think about and participate in each other's understanding of the world. In this sense, '[c]riticality is dialogue aimed at understanding rather than reaching agreement' (Salvi, 2020: 195). Through this, an attempt is made at establishing Freire's (2000: 68) notion of a 'humanizing pedagogy' grounded in praxis.

In keeping with the tenets of critical pedagogy, the above course also has a strong built-in reflective component in the form of a weekly student blog. Using their blogs as a thinking space, students are guided towards making sense of the weekly teaching content from the perspective of their own lived experiences. This attempt at bridging the teaching and discussion content with students' reflections in the blog space, pushes students to become cognissant of their sense of agency (or lack thereof) and allows for a particular type of introspection to surface, involving 'the consciousness of the students themselves' (Freire, 2000: 68). The recognition of self and others in relation to their grappling with course content, creates an awakening of critical awareness in students through which they gradually develop some agency and begin to take on ownership of their own learning journeys on the course.

In line with developing such critical awareness, the course also breaks with traditional assessment methods through the inclusion of a formal reflective essay as the final examination. Within the framework of this reflective essay, students are provided with the opportunity to reflect critically on their *own* learning through the course, by drawing on their grappling with course content, the class discussions, formal assessments, and their reflective online blogs. The reflective essay aims to get them to interrogate specific shifts in their thinking and understanding about the issue of identity, and the ways in which this impacts their sense of location within the institution and beyond. The reflective essays reveal the various levels on which students have adopted a critical reflexive lens informed by issues of equity and social justice. From this perspective we are able to glean the ways in which students begin to grapple with how their

learning impacts, challenges, and illuminates the processes in which they have been socialized into accepting certain ways of being that have made them complicit in their own experiences of marginalization and victimization. The type of *awakening* alluded to here, resonates with Gholdy Muhammad's take on 'criticality':

> In my work, I discuss the difference between lower case "c" critical, which is just deep and analytical thinking. But Critical with a capital "C" is related to power, equity, and anti-oppression. It is helping youths to be "woke" socio- politically. Criticality calls for teachers to connect their teaching to the human condition and to frame their teaching practices in response to the social and uneven times in which we live. This means helping students understand content from marginalized perspectives. (Gholdy Muhammad cited in Ferlazzo, 2020)

The lower case 'c' in criticality alluded to above, would relate *only* to the act of reflection, which is summed up by Freire (2000: 87) as follows: 'Sacrifice of action = verbalism; Sacrifice of reflection = activism'. This does not result in praxis, which according to Freire needs to satisfy the following formula: 'Action + Reflection = word = praxis' (2000: 87). The above call on educators to engage with criticality with a capital 'c' is, therefore, taken in all earnest in this paper.

The types of shifts in students' thinking alluded to above, have emerged as an outcome of utilising critical pedagogy in the *Wring in the Humanities* course. This has revealed an important and necessary tension between 'assimilationist and disruptive approaches to teaching' (see Hunma, et al., 2019). The data reveal how the discomfort experienced by students in the negotiation of their identities within a historical white university, come to be used intentionally and practically in their reflections as an attempt to establish alternative possibilities for being in and participating in the world. For lecturers entering into dialogue with students' reflections, means that the possibilities for change become mutually constitutive. Reflecting on the vital importance of this dialogic lecturer-student relationship, Hunma et al. (2019: 112) states:

> Engaging with our students' narratives serves as a reminder for us to be vigilant of our own locations within a previously white university space, and the ways in which we may have been co-opted into dominant discourses that continue to add to our students' sense of marginalisation.

The following student reflections from the *Writing in the Humanities* (WitH) course, are insightful in terms of trying to make visible the impact of the critical pedagogical approaches employed in this space.

> Discussing the work of Ngugi and problematizing his argument has opened my eyes··· our oppressors found a way to forever keep us subjugated. The best example I can use is that of the Extended Degree Programme ... people of colour are still unable to escape the socio-

> economic issues that we have been dealing with since the colonial powers first made their appearance … boundaries are no longer physical, the boundaries have become subliminal, and you will only notice it if you are truly conscious. It is epiphanies such as these that I had throughout the course and that has reawakened an anger inside of me. (Dineo, WitH student)

> As much as a big part of me wanted to hold onto the comfort of what I've always known – even if it was wrong – a much bigger part of me could no longer deny the truth as I read more of the course work and re-examined my own life. … When I finally understood what a social construct was, … I began to see how this had affected nearly every aspect of my life without realising it … mental, emotional and social boundaries. I had no idea to what extent they had been controlling my life, choices and the roles I played … feeling like outsiders and often being silenced due to their Cape Coloured accent was a situation that I was all too familiar with. It was at that specific moment that the information and concepts I had been reading about for weeks became real. (Linda, a mature WitH student)

> Being a product of a mother who was seen as "white" and a father who was seen as "Indian", I have always had an issue with identifying myself …. I constantly find myself being asked "So what are you?" Before coming into this course, the mere thought of being asked this question upset everything inside of me … I believe I felt this way because I did not have the knowledge required, to feel any different. All I knew was what my parents, grandparents and others had told me …. I was told that who I am was dependent on me and only me. I know this not to be the truth. (Safia, WitH student)

The above student reflections, makes evident the element of 'critique' that begins to surface more prominently alongside the students' engagement on the course. Dineo's critique of her location on an extended degree programme comes about as a result of her grappling with the decolonial work of Ngugi wa Thiongo (1987), through which she is able to trace and recognise the historical origins of her own subjugation as a black female subject within the South African socio-political context. This recognition is a disruptive force in Dineo's life and surfaces the anger that she gives voice to. In Linda's case, we witness the initial representation of a more established, inflexible outlook of someone seemingly grounded in her sense of self. Her grappling with the debates around course content and discussions, brings her to a crossroad where she is forced to shine the lens on newly acquired knowledge and interrogate the meaning thereof, in her own life. In a similar fashion, Safia's critique of her origin story, becomes evident when she is confronted with other possibilities of 'being' revealed through the theoretical components of the course, including 'The danger of a single story' (Adichie, 2009), which enables her to critique the dominant views upheld thus far, about her racial classification within a highly polarized democratic South African setting. This aspect of paying attention to students' contexts and the ways in which they voice and share their biographies, is an important component of critical

pedagogy (Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Giroux, 1997; Freire, 2000). The notion of student voice is also signaled as a core consideration here, as it 'represents the unique instances of self-expression through which students affirm their own class, cultural, racial, and gender identities' (Giroux & McLaren, 1986: 235; also see Kincheloe, et al., 2017: 240).

Writing Across Borders

This is a first-year level African Studies course and comprises extended degree and mainstream students. The course employs a transformative approach to teach students how to conceptualise and conduct research, in preparation for the demands of second year study. The core question posed is: What happens to the identity of individuals as they cross borders? Since the core themes underlining the course content are identity, borders and migration, the course employs a flipped classroom model[5] in the first half of the course to teach and engage critically with identity and migration theory and concepts. In keeping with the pedagogy of discomfort approach, lecturers and students draw and reflect on their own experiences of identity and migration. These experiences are used to interrogate the theory and to reflect on the impact and consequences of migration with respect to how individuals and groups are positioned through structural relations of power and powerlessness in various social contexts.

In the second half of the AXL course, students get to apply the understanding of the theory that they have accumulated until then. They are divided into groups and sent out into the field to interview a migrant[6]. Lecturers do not accompany students to these interviews. As part of taking ownership of the research process, students meet in their groupings, via prior arrangement, to discuss the nature and purpose of the interview questions they have drawn up, how feasible those questions are deemed to be, which ones will be prioritised, who will pose questions and the order in which this will take place. After some class discussion about the practicalities of conducting fieldwork, students have to take it upon themselves to contact the migrant, and to explain the research brief and the confidentiality clauses therein. They also have to request an interview and seek permission from the interviewee whether the interview can be recorded, and where permission is not granted (which has happened for various reasons, making students more cognissant of the precarious nature of migrancy), decisions need to be made about alternatives for recording information. As part of the interview process, students must

[5] The 'flipped classroom' model means that students first engage with the course material online, and then bring their ideas, questions, challenges and responses to the course materials, into the physical classroom space where it is unpacked and discussed with the class as a whole.

[6] The course lecturers approach the university's Law Clinic to enquire if any of their migrant clients, would agree to be interviewed. Ethical considerations regarding research, are discussed upfront with students, as part of protecting the identity and the rights of the interviewee. The course convenor receives contact names and numbers from the Law Clinic of those migrants/refugees who would potentially like to be interviewed. These contact details are split up between the various student groupings, who then take it upon themselves to establish contact with the migrant. The interview takes place on campus, in safe and private spaces that lecturers have booked for such purposes.

gather information on identity and migration for their individual research projects for the course, and this becomes the driver for their working together in groups, and for reaching agreement on the questions that will cover all interests for the individual research projects. Such peer engagement offers them insights into each other's research projects about a real and practical social issue, thereby broadening their immediate awareness around notions of identity and migration. Lecturers on the course are not part of the interviews, but 'check-in' with the students regularly as part of classroom practice, to ascertain where they are in the research process and to help them think through the issues that they are grappling with in the pre- and post- interview process. The students need to bring the collected interview data, observations and questions back into the classroom space for discussion. Lecturers act as facilitators and 'offer anchor points' to nurture and guide students' progress, thereby allowing students to take on more agency in their own learning (see Nomdo, et al., 2021).

Enabling students to take responsibility and ownership of their own learning, through active and engaged participation in the knowledge production process, is in line with critical pedagogy's focus on developing dialogue with students and their contexts, and in the *Writing Across Borders* course, this includes the contexts of the migrant research participants (Giroux, 1997; Freire, 2000; Kincheloe, et al., 2017: 241-244). Dialogue is used as a way of creating meaningful links between lecturers and their students brought along capital, and the teaching content. Commenting on the process of lecturers co-constructing knowledge alongside their students, through engaged dialogue, Nomdo, et al. (2021: 4) assert that:

> … we distance ourselves from the idea that students need to first assimilate knowledge to fit into the university community, and … embrace the view that all students can be contributors of knowledge.

This foregrounding of the students in the teaching and learning process, allows for the recognition and unpacking of discomfort (theirs, their peers, the migrants they interview, as well as the lecturers) in productive, meaningful, and caring ways. Placing students in the position of student-researcher-interviewer, allows them the opportunity to navigate, confront and confirm their own views and assumptions of the world in relation to the first-hand information they gather from their migrant interviewees. The interview space sets up a particular dialogical encounter where the students begin to learn as much about themselves as they do from the interviewees, especially in the sense that they learn first-hand about the experiences of refugees in a democratic South African context.

The act of bringing the fieldwork data back into the classroom (with chairs arranged in a circle)[7] to be shared, discussed, and interrogated in an open forum, builds up a sense of community engagement and collaboration amongst lecturers and students about migrant

[7] The circular arrangement of chairs produces what is called "a writers circle" and is an attempt at reconfiguring the spatial arrangement of traditional lecture theatres so as to flatten the power hierarchy between lecturers and students.

identity and what constitutes discomfort, acts of discrimination and violence, but also resilience, perseverance and success in the lived experiences of migrants. The embedding of criticality cues within this community enquiry space, signals a recognition of individual and group voices (Giroux & McLaren, 1986: 235), including those of the migrants and refugees that were interviewed. Shifts in perception, attitude, behaviour and belief, around the issues of identity and migration are good indicators of learning outcomes geared towards creating an acute awareness of promoting the ideals of equity and social justice. An indication of this shift in perception was visible in students' reflections in their individual research projects, where they acknowledged how the narrowness of their own thinking changed upon meeting an actual migrant. One *Writing Across Borders* (WAB) student sums this up quite aptly:

> I created a single story about this migrant before I even met Mr. J.L. … Going into the interview I had preconceived ideas about … my migrant. I imagined him to be a person who was illiterate and with no formal schooling … a scared person who spoke little to no English. … Upon entering the interview and meeting my migrant and hearing him speak I realised that my single story that I've created was wrong. … He was not illiterate. In fact, he was brilliant. He had a master's degree in law. This links up with what Adichie said about single stories creating stereotypes … There cannot only be one story … I realised that I have … generalized…. It implicated my mind because I was expecting him to be a certain way… made assumptions of the types of answers I would get in my interview. (Bronwyn, WAB student)

A white international student on the course grappled with issues of privilege and access in her interactions with the migrant interviewee in her group:

> I think the fact that I am a foreigner in SA as well will build some communality between the participant and me, therefore we share an outsider position … but my foreignness is perceived and experienced differently than the one of the refugee. (Angel, WAB student)

Another student reflects quite emphatically about the indifference to the plight of others that many South Africans are guilty of. His encounter with the migrant interviewee assigned to his group makes him realise, upon reflection, the commonality of 'otherness' and displacement which he, as a 'non-binary body … who cross-dresses' (Anthony, WAB student) shares with the migrant experience:

> I thought that the … government had a grip on things like xenophobia. I also had an attitude of "it doesn't affect me, so I won't worry about it". … we do not know their stories [and should be mindful of] how we engage with them. (Anthony, WAB student)

This attempt at trying to understand migrants' cross-border experiences, makes the

criticality dimension very visible in the WAB pedagogy, ushering in socially just practices that foreground the nature of the dialogues that develop and grow between students and educators (Bayat & Mitchell, 2020). Such a humanizing pedagogy (Freire, 2000: 68) finds precedence in the WAB course referred to here, in terms of surfacing the notions of 'being', 'becoming' and 'knowing' (Natanasabapathy & Maathuis-Smith, 2019: 373) occurring in the co-production of knowledge between teacher-student and students-teacher (Freire, 2000: 80). This co-production is significant, since students, through their own field research, are able to add to and change lecturers' perceptions of migrants through the interrogation of the data.

Discussion

Present in these students' critical reflections is a shift into 'analytical mode',[8] which enables them to interrogate and reflect on issues of dominance alongside new and emerging views that present other possibilities for being in the world. This self-reflective dialogical affordance of critical pedagogy opens the space for more meaningful grappling with 'the lingering effects of troubled knowledge' (Jansen cited in Duvenage, 2022; see also Zembylas, 2015: 10) that persist in perpetuating various forms of violence and discomfort in a democratic South Africa. The South African higher education context is by no means exempt from this 'troubled knowledge' (see for example, Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2016; Cupido, 2022), as witnessed by watershed student protests in the form of 'Rhodes Must Fall' and 'Fees Must Fall'.

This raises the question of whether there is still a role for critical pedagogy in a democratic South African context that is nearly thirty years old, given the slow pace of change? Mason (2005: 301) offers an interesting perspective on this and asserts that the nature of resistance against apartheid education is evident in both critical theory and critical pedagogy. Drawing on the discourses present in South Africa's Freedom and Education Charters and other prominent struggle literature which formed part of the struggle to liberate education from apartheid's stronghold, Mason (2005: 302) contends that 'the roots of Freire's "pedagogy of the oppressed" in Critical Theory, existentialism, humanism, and Catholic liberation theology are evident in much of the language of South African Critical Pedagogy'. Mason (2005: 305) makes clear links between the 'emancipatory' nature of 'educational language in Critical Theory and Critical Pedagogy' and the ideals of 'People's Education' in the struggle against apartheid. While illustrating the widespread emancipatory impact of critical pedagogy in the downfall of apartheid, Mason (2005: 305-306) also concedes some of the 'non-emancipatory' results, where large numbers of students and educators, referred to as 'the lost generation', were severely impacted by the long boycotts and states of unrest. Mason (2005: 309), however, contends that beyond postmodernity and the attainment of democracy in South Africa, there remains a strong need for 'Critical Pedagogy in all forms of education'. The Fallist Movements referred to earlier, which signals ongoing resistance to the reproduction of dominant positions of privilege, power and

[8]For more insight into the development of the 'analytical mode', see Arend, et al. (2017). The analytical mode is where 'messiness is welcomed, and students grapple with ideas without being held accountable for them, enabling a deep, invested process of meaning-making' (Nomdo, et al,, 2021: 3).

exclusionary knowledge production systems within the higher education landscape, is a case in point.

The merits of Mason's (2005) argument are acknowledged here. In line with this, the two courses examined in this paper, therefore represent a concerted effort to raise critical awareness about the role that education should and *must continue* to play in a South African society that continues to struggle with the strained nature of their emancipation. Centering students and engaging in pedagogical practices which make student realities, and their voices present in the classroom, must be the starting point to meaningful and transformative engagement, in which the element of care is taken seriously. Having said that, it is also acknowledged here that so much more needs to be done in terms of training and preparing teachers for the task ahead, as indicated by Giroux and McLaren (1986). This means breaking down the silos and reflecting in, on and for action. The merging of theory, reflection and practice is a core expression of criticality, and enables 'intellectual emancipation' involving 'the care of subjects ... their wellness and ... their expression in education' (also see Tronto ,1993, 2010). This is the 'humanizing pedagogy' that Freire (2000: 68) reminds us of.

Concluding remarks

The need to be vigilant, cognissant, responsive and sensitive to the contexts in which we apply our trade, must inform the ways in which we think about and employ praxis. As such, the teaching and learning context cannot be static and one-dimensional, where the teacher alone takes centre place as carrier, producer, and transmitter of knowledge. The classroom cannot be limited in this way. The ideals of equality, social justice, reflection and transformation underlined in critical pedagogy, must be developed and harnessed collaboratively as tools for navigating classroom discourses in which students are given the space to develop their sense of agency and social consciousness.

Within these teaching and learning contexts, the imparting of critical thinking skills forms a huge part of creating an awareness of how and why we are positioned in society in the ways that we are. Empowering students to take responsibility for, and to participate in their own learning, is key here. This results in students developing agential qualities and a critically reflective awareness of their own social positionalities in relation to others, where issues of social justice and equality are taken seriously. Here, the recognition of difference comes to be viewed not in terms of deficit, but in terms of adding meaningfully to our own knowledge about the different ways in which we can contribute meaningfully to each other's sense of *being* in the world. The shift towards developing this type of transformative and liberatory praxis, sets in place a critical foundation for engaging with the need for societal change and the ways in which this can be achieved. It is evident from the discussion above, that the call to become agents of change is not a seamless process. As shown, it is one grounded in criticality and which recognises the complexities informing processes of change and transformation. This comes with discomfort, but a discomfort grounded in an ethics of care, which takes seriously the nurturing aspect of the humanising and liberatory praxis outlined here, which out of necessity, is always in the process

of 'becoming'. As mindful practitioners who take up the call to become agents of change, it falls on us, therefore, to ensure that the criticality informing our praxis remains student-centred, visible and relevant.

Author Biography

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