

## Community engagement as a liminal space of translanguaging

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### Abstract

Community engagement is, in many ways, a liminal space, in that, while it is a space of teaching and learning and sometimes of engaged research, it is neither fully academic nor 'non-academic'. Liminal spaces can allow for upending of the hierarchies that are characteristic of more closely controlled educational settings. The participants in this study, all of whom participated in a community engagement project, known as the Engaged Citizen Programme, spoke extensively about the translanguaging affordances of liminal community engagement spaces. The data suggests that translanguaging, primarily of isiXhosa, Afrikaans, and English, was central to the community engagement activities. The participants indicated that the usual lines of linguistic privilege experienced in the university were upended in the community setting. The extent to which multilingualism is fostered in the community engagement space is an example of how lessons learned in community engagement could benefit teaching and learning in the classroom.

**Keywords:** community engagement, liminality, multilingualism, service learning, translanguaging

### Introduction

There is a wealth of literature on the challenges higher education students face when studying in a language that is not their home language. Certainly, the difficulties in grappling with complex concepts in a language other than one's most fluent childhood language are not insignificant. Multilingualism has been positioned as a response to such concerns. But increasingly multilingualism is seen to go beyond being simply an educational affordance to being an important social and cognitive asset. Multilingualism, or the ability to engage with more than one language in one's daily life, is powerful for several reasons. In a globalised world, being able to navigate more than one language is an important strength (Okal, 2014; Stein-Smith, 2016). Multilingualism fosters intercultural understanding (Mim, 2023). Languages can be vessels of identity and so being able to move between languages can enable broader views of the world (Drobot, 2022). And so, the list of multilingualism's benefits goes on. Especially pertinent to this study is Guzula, et al.'s (2016: 211) argument that 'learner capacities are enabled when a heteroglossic and multimodal orientation to language practices and meaning-making is taken



up'. Our data suggests that community engagement programmes offer rich insights into why we should value multilingualism and translanguaging in the curriculum more broadly and some indications on how we should do so.

### **Multilingualism and Translanguaging**

As the awareness of the positive role of multilingualism grows, questions are being asked as to how and where it can be nurtured in higher education (Nkomo, 2021; van der Walt, 2016). South Africa has 11 official languages, which are Afrikaans, English, isiZulu, isiXhosa, seSotho, sePedi, isiNdebele, seSwati, Tsonga, seTswana and tshiVenda, but the medium of instruction from Grade 4 to university is English. This means that many students come to higher education with significant challenges related to meaning making and self-expression (Saneka & De Witt, 2019; McKinney 2022).

Since the 2015/2016 #RhodesMustFall student protests demanding transformation of university spaces, there have been increasing calls for more languages to be used in teaching, learning and assessment and for translanguaging to be more readily recognised (Probyn, 2017; Asfour, et al., 2020). Alongside increased awareness of the benefits of multilingualism in education are concerns about the coloniality inherent in the ideological valuing of monolingualism as the norm. Reflecting on Maldonado-Torres' statement that we live and breathe coloniality in all aspects of our lives, McKinney (2022: 157) states that

[t]he continuing marginalisation and invisibility of African language resources, alongside the hegemony of English, and the construction of monolingualism as the norm in a deeply multilingual society, is a powerful way in which we "live and breathe coloniality all the time and everyday" in our education system.

The Language Policy at Rhodes University where this study takes place, (2019: unpagged) indicates that

Rhodes University reflects [South Africa's] multilingual diversity. The policy promotes multilingualism and sensitivity in language usage in a way that creates and fosters a supportive, inclusive and non-discriminatory environment. This policy recognises that language has the potential to contribute to transformation in various ways.

Despite this, many students experience the use of English as the sole medium of instruction to be a hurdle to their studies and a limitation on their ability to enjoy the transformative relationship with knowledge that is at the very heart of higher education (Ashwin, 2020). The Rhodes University Language Policy goes on to suggest that translanguaging can be a powerful way of recognising other languages used by the diverse student body. But there has been limited movement in this regard on campus, possibly because many of the lecturers are monolingual English speakers, who hold monolingual identities.

While it is generally agreed that multilingualism is the ability to understand and move between many named languages, translanguaging has been defined in many ways by different authors, some of whom challenge the notion of autonomous languages. As such, Guzula, et al., 2016: 212 state that 'this ideology of autonomous, clearly separable and boundaried named languages is central to monolingual or monoglossic ideologies'.

While the term 'code-switching' is commonly used to refer to moving between languages, this concept has been critiqued as reinforcing the idea of languages as discrete entities as some authors show in their research. 'Given the deconstruction of the notion of clearly identifiable and boundaried, named languages, and the acknowledgement that language is itself an ideological construction, we can see the potential problems with the code-switching paradigm' (Guzula, et al., 2016: 212). Other terms such as translanguaging and metrolingualism are often preferred as they indicate the fluidity of language.

García (2009: 140) defines translanguaging as the act of 'accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximise communicative potential'. When such a multimodal, heteroglossic approach to language and meaning-making is taken up in educational settings, this enables recognition and enhancement of students' capacities (Guzula, et al., 2016 ).

Flores and García (2013) suggest that controlling languages is a key means of controlling diversity. McKinney (2022:155) argues that in universities 'where African language resources are usually invisible, we needed to convince African language speakers not just of the value, but of the necessity, of their lived experience of multilingualism and of their language resources for teaching young children'. While McKinney is writing about teacher education, we are sure that she would agree with us that this is necessary for all higher education, regardless of the future professions and roles the graduates might take on.

While monolingualism remains the supposed norm of higher education, even in multilingual South Africa, many theorists have posited that the benefits of a multilingual approach to language in education would extend to monolingual speakers because 'there is an urgent need to also recognise the gaps in white, middle class students' knowledge and resources that hinder them from engaging critically at university' (McKinney, 2021: 156). In her critique of the normalised nature of monolingualism, typically English, Anzaldúa (2002) argues that engaging with such challenges requires a willingness to work in liminal spaces.

## **Liminality**

We argue that Community Engagement (CE) emerged in our data as a place of translanguaging because it is a space of liminality, whereby many of the normative expectations of the formal classroom are challenged. The concept of liminality appeared in the field of psychology in 1884 referring to a transitional or indeterminate state between culturally defined stages of a person's life, such as during a ritual or rite of passage. The term is derived from the Latin verb 'limen' meaning 'crossing a threshold'. But Anzaldúa (2002: 1) indicates that a threshold is not simply crossed once and for all, but rather it is an 'in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable,

precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries. She describes the need for spaces whereby 'racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination' (Anzaldúa, 1987: 99) can take place.

Thus, while liminal spaces can be strange and confusing, they offer an opportunity for growth (Thomassen, 2009). Liminal spaces can be a powerful means of challenging the status quo (Hovarth, et al., 2009) because the usual hierarchies and traditions often fail to pertain.

Some have termed such liminal spaces to be 'third spaces' in cases where they do not bridge 'a crossing from one competing worldview to the next but a crossing into a third space doing away with demarcations' (Hwami, 2024: 115). As Anzaldúa (2002: 4) explains, a third space is

about honouring people's otherness in ways that allow us to be changed by embracing that otherness rather than punishing others for having a different view, belief system, skin colour, or spiritual practice. Diversity of perspectives expands and alters the dialogue, not in an add-on fashion but through a multiplicity that's transformational'.

As Guzula, et al. (2016: 214) propose, '[t]he notion of third spaces ... is useful to us in characterising the kinds of learning spaces which delink from monolingual, autonomous notions of language use and which embrace multiple modes for meaning making'. Flores and García (2013) suggest that educational settings need to move away from the fixation on standard English to embrace more fluid use of languages. They argue that we need liminal third spaces to do this. In this study, we look at the possibilities of CE as just such a liminal third space.

## **Community Engagement**

Johnson (2020) states that CE is often referred to as the 'stepchild' of higher education and this positioning overshadows the potential of CE. In several studies, it has been evident that there is a lack of a substantial conceptualisation of CE and its relation to teaching, learning and research resulting in an undertheorising of both its implementation and of research on CE. This article attempts to address such concerns by offering a case study of how language practices emerged within a multilingual CE space.

In South Africa, CE is largely framed as an activity wherein students can apply their learning to a specified problem in a community environment or engage in authentic learning through their work with community members (Thondhlana, 2022). It has been stipulated in national higher education policy that CE is part of the higher education mission in that it strengthens the democratic ethos, a sense of shared citizenship and a commitment to the common good in South Africa (CHE, 2020). As such there have been significant moves to ensure that CE is mainstreamed into the core activities of teaching and learning and research (CHE, 2020). CE is positioned in the national policy as a means of advancing transformation and attending to social responsibilities. Despite this, concerns have been raised in the South African literature, and beyond, that some CE initiatives reinforce dominant social divides through

patronising hierarchies of 'providers' and 'recipients' (Bringle & Hatcher, 2006; Butin, 2006; Brunton, et al., 2017). In contrast to this, the university where this case study takes place has undertaken a number of participatory reflections to ensure mutual benefit for all parties involved in CE activities (ECP Handbook, 2020).

According to Ahmed and Palermo (2010), CE can be defined as a process of inclusive participation that supports mutual respect of values, strategies, and actions for the authentic partnership of people affiliated with or self-identified by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of the community. CE creates spaces in which communities can directly benefit from universities through the voluntary programmes in which students participate and whereby universities enjoy mutual educational and social benefits from such collaborations. This paper demonstrates how translanguaging became a central aspect of students' experiences of CE. We argue that there is still much to be done to understand the ways in which the liminal nature of CE can provide spaces that promote translanguaging and multilingualism.

## Methodology

Rhodes University is a small research-intensive university (approximately 8000 students), where about 30% of the student body is undertaking postgraduate level study. The students had all previously, or at the time of data collection, participated in one of the Engaged Citizen Programme (ECP) activities. ECP activities are varied and include running reading clubs in schools, mentoring high school students, as well as assisting various age learners with their homework (ECP Handbook, 2020: 3). These activities offer students the opportunity of enhanced learning, and to evaluate the theories and ideas taught in the university against the realities of the South African context. The programme is intended to offer students the opportunity to learn with and from communities and thereby to nurture personal growth.

The data for this paper was collected through in-depth interviews with 18 students who were or had been ECP participants. The data was analysed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) call for a thematic analysis to go beyond the surface level of data, or what the participant has said, to identify the underlying ideas and conceptualisations that shape the semantic content of the data. To do this we drew on the notion of "essence". Researchers such as Bloomberg and Volpe (2016), Groenewald (2004) and Sadala and Adorno (2001) argue that qualitative research on a phenomenon (such as CE) needs to identify the *essence* or core aspects through the perspectives of those who have experienced it. The thematic analysis suggested that the liminality of CE as being neither an academic nor a non-academic space was central to its linguistic affordances.

## Findings and discussion

Drawing on the rich interview data, it was evident that multilingualism was an asset in the CE context, provided benefits for individual students, and can be promoted as a resource across the institution. The themes that emerged relate to:

- CE as a multilingual space of translanguaging,
- shared languages as a tool for building relationships, and
- how issues of power were shaped by language.

### ***CE as a multilingual space***

Many students (though not all) reported using isiXhosa to a large extent even in the planning stages, before the students entered the community space. This is significant given that the planning took place on the university campus, where English is the medium of instruction (MOI). While translanguaging is common and smaller student study groups often coalesce around language groups, tutorials typically take place in English, as the common language for all students and as the MOI. This suggests that from the start, CE activities were seen to be more open to a variety of languages and possibly suggests that students felt that such activities were sufficiently aligned to their 'isiXhosa identities' that they could chat about CE plans in their home language. Participant 17 and 3 responded:

We mainly use isiXhosa in our planning, though we have teammates who are not Xhosa, they do get help with interpretation. (Participant 17)

It becomes difficult if the group does not have everyone who speaks isiXhosa and this becomes a barrier to communication. (Participant 3)

The multilingual spaces that characterise CE right from the point of planning were seen in the data to provide opportunities for the students to find solutions to communication challenges. The use of isiXhosa in the planning stage also suggests that from the start, the CE activities were positioned as somewhat different to formal academic activities. The participants spoke about "translating on the go" as the planning conversations took place. Participant 3 explained why this could happen:

CE allows for a more comfortable space and there are no authoritative figures that prescribe what must be done and what language must be used as opposed to lectures where you are told what to do and what not to do. (Participant 3).

This highlights on the kind of liminality that the CE space offered participants, one that is less confined and less linguistically bound. The data suggests that even at the planning phase, CE allowed for flexibility whereby participants could move between languages as needed and suggests some evidence of what Flores and García (2013: 255) call the third space where languages are not understood to work as additional autonomous resources but rather as 'fluid interrelations of discourses and identity'.

The community engagement centre at Rhodes University prepares students to engage in the languages of the community with whom they work by putting short introductory isiXhosa and Afrikaans courses in their programme in a bid to promote multilingualism (ECP Handbook, 2020: 41- 43). The basic conversational nature of the language courses entailed a focus on enabling relationships to be formed, rather than on allowing for ongoing conversations to take place in that language, as Participants 10 and 1 reflect below:

Thanks to ECP for organising an isiXhosa course, I took that one and it was interesting to learn the language and I picked up a few things from that. There are a lot of words that you can use with the kids and helps you understand what they will be saying and be able to respond. (Participant 10)

I think the CE office has done an incredible job by introducing isiXhosa for volunteers so that they can bridge the language gap. (Participant 1)

Machimana, et al. (2018: 188) acknowledge that 'in a culturally diverse environment, language can be a barrier in CE partnerships'. Rhodes University Community Engagement's implementation of the short course was a bid to mitigate the drawbacks that can be brought about when language is a barrier. Although the short course was beneficial to some, others had reservations about it, referring to the initiative as just addressing the tip of the iceberg. Participant 5 and 15 responded:

... it covers the basics only and when you get to the sites, it's not about the basics only, there is need to interact with the people, so I don't know how there could be a way to bridge that gap. (Participant 5)

... these basic phrases are not enough to sustain engagement when you get to the sites. You get there and you say 'molweni' or 'môre'<sup>1</sup> then what? I think more should be done to equip students language wise. (Participant 15)

The course was experienced as useful by some students, but given the complex relationship between language and identity, it seems evident that a basic course cannot overcome the extent to which language is a challenge. It is possible that what is needed, alongside the introduction to useful isiXhosa and Afrikaans phrases, is explicit engagement with notions of translanguaging and the ways in which if we want full participation by all, 'including those who are linguistically different, we have to let go of the static definition of acceptable language use that has been part of the European colonial project' (Flores & García, 2013: 255). It was evident from the data that while English competence was considered vital for participation

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<sup>1</sup> These are greetings in isiXhosa and Afrikaans respectively.

in formal learning, it was competence in isiXhosa, the main language of the community, that was most valued in CE activities and played an important part in enabling students' engagement.

### ***Shared language as a tool for building relationships in CE activities***

The extent to which language played a role in forging connections and enabling personal growth in the CE activities under study cannot be overemphasised. The students repeatedly referred, in their reflections on their experiences, to connecting through shared language, or conversely to struggling with connections because of a lack of shared language. Those students who felt embattled with language related issues in the English as MOI university context, now found themselves engaged and valued through their isiXhosa competence. The liminality of the CE space upended the usual lines of privilege and challenge between groups of students who had English and those who had isiXhosa as their home languages. In many ways, the liminal CE space enabled the disruption of Anglonormativity that is so pervasive in the academy by 'making visible, embracing and enabling the use of students' full linguistic repertoires as well as their meaning-making across a range of modes as legitimate resources for learning' (Abdulatief, et al., 2021: 138).

I would say the highlight for me was being more aware of a lot of things particularly language. I feel like I have been using the three languages that I know all at once with different set of kids. (Participant 13)

The students noticed that the closest bonds forged during CE activities were formed between those with shared languages. The connection between language, identity and relationship formation was strongly evident in the data as shared by participant 14 and 7:

I believe that without the ability to communicate there is no engagement and you can only build a partnership through communication and using a language, and if the language is not mutual, you end up not forming good relations or partnerships whereas if you are using the same language, you bond, and trust is formed. (Participant 14)

I needed to relate to local communities in terms of their language, culture, and social context and I feel that this is my biggest challenge. And if I can't speak the language that is spoken in the community that will also be another challenge as I can't really work with them without an interpreter. Even with an interpreter, I can see that am not connecting with them the way that I want to. (Participant 7)

It was significant that though most conversations on campus would have been in English, the connections forged between the students going off in teams to undertake ECP activities involved significant translanguaging, and in particular, a large amount of isiXhosa and Afrikaans, with some English blended in. The data showed that this entailed some students having to ask



their peers to translate for them into English, and potentially this meant a sense of exclusion or alienation by those students who would have usually had few language challenges in class discussions, given their English competence. However, it should be noted that data was also collected from students for whom neither English nor isiXhosa was their home language and they did not express concerns about being excluded from conversations with fellow students, though they did express concerns in relation to their communication with community members.

The reflections point to the need for trust for CE initiatives to succeed. The participants indicated that having a shared language with community members, in this case learners from different primary and high schools, had an effect on their participation because community members preferred to interact with participants who were fluent in their home language. While interpreters were available where needed (often in the form of other students), this made developing a personal connection challenging. The link between language, identity and connection was evident across most of the data as shared by participant 3:

If there is someone who speaks isiXhosa, the children are more inclined to go to someone who speaks the same language as they do. So, language becomes a barrier between the community member and the volunteer.

The challenges in working with children where the volunteer student does not speak the language in which the child is fluent, may seem self-evident. But what was important to note is that much of the data pertained to language not just as a means of communication but as a means of establishing a rapport, of building trust, and of forging a connection. It was the affective issues and concerns about trust and connection that permeated the data far more than experiences of logistical problems in communication or being unable to understand each other from a practical level. This explains why even where an interpreter could assist in ensuring that the meaning of the conversation was communicated, the lack of shared language emerged repeatedly as a key issue in the experience of the ECP. That most students had not been exposed to educational contexts that legitimated the use of translanguaging meant that monolingual students may not have been adept at coping in situations where they were not fluent in the language being used.

### ***Language and power***

The university students' reflections pointed to the existence of asymmetrical power between them and the school children at the sites. It appears age difference and status created potential divides which could work against a productive educational engagement. This was exacerbated where the student and learner did not share a language as is evident in the experiences of participant 18 and 12:

... the children would withhold because they were afraid and the fact that they would be speaking to Rhodes [University] students. ... the school children would look down upon themselves, they become shy. (Participant 18)

... if children are not able to communicate in the learning space, they start feeling ashamed and won't be willing to learn, they close off and are not willing to engage. (Participant 12)

In both of these quotes and others like them, the students link the problems with communicating to feelings of inadequacy amongst the school children with whom the students were working. This had implications for the extent to which the students could interact with these children. Most significantly, in both of the examples above, Participants 18 and 12 went on to link this to issues of language:

... they become shy and put isiXhosa words unless there was someone who would translate their answers then they would engage willingly. (Participant 18)

... are not willing to engage because they think that there is someone who is better than them so language plays a crucial role in enabling student learning. (Participant 12)

Language problems were experienced as far more than challenges of communicating meaning. They were experienced as being about identity, values, and trust. If the school children at the various CE projects with whom students engaged felt alienated by the language of participant volunteers, they could feel ashamed. This speaks to the ways in which English proficiency is often seen to be connected to levels of education and social class in South Africa (Vandrick, 2014; Gordon & Harvey, 2019). Anglonormativity affected the children in the CE programme as much as it affected the students. The liminality of the CE space and its openness to translanguaging arguably offer a small countering of such Anglonormativity.

Even where the participants were not fluent in isiXhosa, their attempts to speak it were highly valued by the children and still went some way towards fostering connections. Such attempts, in which the participants had to risk mispronunciation or incorrect grammar and vocabulary, served to make the participants vulnerable in front of the learners in ways which enhanced connections. Participant 3 shared their experience of this as follows:

I tried to use some isiXhosa, I am not really good but I tried a few phrases and I think they could tell ... I was trying to make the environment more comfortable for them. It made me a little uncomfortable because I could tell from their reaction [that I had made some mistakes] but they appreciated the fact that we were trying. (Participant 3)

It was interesting to note that both the status of the university and the alienating nature of English served as power divides between the school children and the university students. The students entering the various ECP project sites were entering as 'others' from the university at the top end of town, in many ways far removed from the day-to-day realities of the children at the other end of town. Furthermore, the students spoke English, a language which many of the school children may have found alienating and associated with the world of business. The students' reflections on their experiences indicate an awareness of these power differences and the need to connect across them if a meaningful relationship was to be forged. The participants were explicitly aware of the othering at play and seemed to embrace the liminality of the CE programme as a means of undermining it.

While the use of English in the academy has been shown to often act as a constraint on students' sense of self-esteem and competence (Mayaba, et al., 2018; Ama, 2019,), this was not the case in their ECP engagements at all. In the ECP activities, the tables were turned, and it was proficiency in isiXhosa that allowed for a strong sense of self-competence. In both cases, those students who battled with the relevant language had some sense of exclusion, but there were also notable distinctions in the essence of the experience. In the academy, being unable to cope with the MOI was experienced as impacting negatively on students' self-esteem, especially as this had implications on their ability to access the information needed to succeed in their studies. But in their CE activities, being unable to speak isiXhosa – the dominant language in the various ECP projects – was experienced as making it challenging to connect with the children. While this was a hurdle, this was not experienced in the same affective manner as impacting negatively on their self-esteem.

The participants' experiences echoed Abdulatief, et al.'s (2021:135) comment that by 'changing the normative language practices of the classroom, power relations are shifted and previously marginalised multilingual students are given opportunities to move to centre stage'.

Significantly, there were other differences in the experiences between campus, where English was the expected language, and the ECP, where translanguaging was the norm and isiXhosa was dominant, but was used alongside various other languages. Chief among these differences were that the students experienced CE as providing multiple spaces for more comfortable movement between languages and a flexibility in language use rarely found in the classroom.

If we make a mistake, we laugh. It's not the same thing in a serious environment like the university where you don't just laugh when you make a mistake. But when I am with the children, I just laugh. They hug me. (Participant 4)

The learning space in CE was seen to be flexible, such that it allowed for translanguaging during the activities, and this was noted as a powerful means of enhancing understanding:

The main language that I picked up that needs to be emphasised at my [ECP] site is English so I teach English and read English to some of my smaller kids, and I noticed that they don't understand what I will be saying, then I code switch to other languages to accommodate them. So, a lot of times me using isiXhosa and Afrikaans is to get their attention and make them see. For example, I am talking to a kid, and I ask them what colour this is and they say its 'rooi'<sup>2</sup>, I tell them they are right and in English it's red. (Participant 16)

The ability to switch languages in the ECP space was also often connected in the data to the experiences of a general lack of hierarchy in CE activities. Having more freedom to express themselves enabled more interaction of many kinds by providing a space without rigid expectations around language use; something that Participant 2 reflected upon as follows:

CE is less structured, ... I go there and learn something from the kids and this might actually change my perspective and I think there is more space to learn from one another in CE, the process is reciprocal and less structured, and you don't have to sit there and listen to the same thing over and over again. Each party gets to express themselves more freely. (Participant 2)

The students experienced CE as a liminal space that is neither entirely a social setting nor entirely academic. The discussions around translanguaging were closely connected to experiences of freedom and engagement. The experience was of an interesting space for interaction including and going beyond issues of language.

If I were to put formal academic learning on a scale of 0-100, I would say there is 40% engagement and with CE there is 70% engagement. That makes learning in CE a lot more insightful even though you don't have tests or assignments but what you learn becomes engraved in you... In CE you understand what you are learning, you unlearn and relearn. So, for me learning through practicals and making mistakes, this makes a difference and solidifies the learning process. (Participant 10)

The extent to which the English MOI was a hindrance to formal class participation was evident in the data, but the reflections on the students' experiences of interaction and engagement in the CE context suggest that it is not only English competence *per se* that constrains classroom involvement. The language flexibility, reduced hierarchy, and sense of self-worth associated with CE all functioned together to produce their experiences thereof. The students repeatedly reflected on the value of having an authentic, engaged learning space in CE. Several of them spontaneously went so far as to make the connection to their experiences in the

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<sup>2</sup> Rooi' is the Afrikaans word for 'red'.

classroom and suggested how the culture of CE could be of benefit in formal academic spaces for enriching development. Participant 2, 4 and 10 expressed this as follows:

... for me I feel like being able to talk and discuss things that are bigger than the curriculum is something more important. We go to our sites to discuss Shakespeare but so many times we begin to discuss about the issues that are not in the curriculum, ... to broaden people's knowledge and to learn from each other. While we [are] discussing Shakespeare, I feel that there are issues that come up from real life and this helps the school children to view and change their perspective on life and that makes a difference because you have that kind of impact on their lives. (Participant 2)

When it comes to CE, it's more like you are dropped in the ocean and you have to use your brains on how you can get to the land. It's unlike in formal academic spaces where I feel that there is too much theory and none of it is equipping me for my reality or my future. If I had a broken pipe now, I would still not know how to fix it because all that I have been taught is what the pipe is meant to do but not how to fix it. I am supposed to write essays in class that are not constructive for my reality. (Participant 4)

In CE just like in formal academic classes you meet different people but it's much easier to relate with people in CE. In CE, you are put in different groups to interact with people who don't have the same beliefs, you realise that there is a lot that you can learn from the different people. There is need to acknowledge our differences in order to work towards a common goal. If that could happen in formal academic classes, knowledge creation could be much easier. I love that CE gives you space to be you and think for yourself, and it would be nice if that were to be brought to the classrooms because every time that you are in a class you are being taught and you can't think outside the box. You can come up with an idea in CE and no one can shut you down. And you can have fun whilst learning, but in formal academic classes you just learn to pass. (Participant 10)

The experience of CE was very different to the students' experiences of formal teaching and learning. Much has been said about the 'performativity' of higher education, whereby students are expected to memorise and transmit knowledge – that is they must 'perform' their learning (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). This might be implicated in the extent to which students' described experiences of formal classes and assignments from the perspective of figuring out what needed to be done to 'get through' and less about their engagements with knowledge and the extent to which this impacted on identity or led to personal growth as reflected by participant 14:

When something is seen as academic it means there should be a wrong answer or correct answer but when we meet for CE, the environment is different mainly because of how we

feel and because of the fact that it's a free space you can express yourself whereas I feel that academically you are more inclined to stick by rules and thereby you feel afraid to say something that might be wrong and appear as not so smart and intelligent and I feel that is the biggest challenge. (Participant 14)

While the normative goals of CE are explicitly stated in the orientation and the RU ECP handbook, the normative aspects of higher education are arguably less explicit. Various authors, for example, Case, et al. (2018), Boughey and McKenna (2021) and Ashwin (2020), have argued that there is a need to make the purposes of a higher education more explicit to students. Students may arrive with fairly instrumentalist ideas of having to learn some knowledge or acquire some skills to pass their courses and they may not have considered the extent to which a higher education can be about personal growth and transformation, or about taking on the responsibilities as a critical citizen, or about participating in a public good. Conversations about reciprocity and respect abound in CE activities and in research about CE, but similar conversations about the ideological nature of undertaking higher education studies is arguably often neglected in the university classroom. The essence of students' experiences of CE suggests that there may be much from which higher education spaces and curricula could benefit.

## Conclusion

Abdulatief, et al. (2016: 16) argue that translanguaging as an explicit pedagogical approach can enable students 'to recognise (and often recover) their own linguistic resources and gaps as well as their own language ideologies' and can enable students 'to develop strategies to use these resources (i.e., their full linguistic and semiotic repertoires) for their own learning'. We would suggest that the liminal space of community engagement reflected on here allowed for just this.

The essence of the data around language use in CE was about connecting with others. Language was seen to be central to communicating meaning but was also seen to go beyond this to be a necessary tool for forging connections. Even where the students only shared some basic greetings in the children's home language, this was seen to enable some sense of trust to be developed. Because English was positioned in the data as superior, there was often an added power differential between students who could only speak English and the children with whom they worked. Where students were willing to make themselves vulnerable and try out phrases in the learner's home language (mainly isiXhosa), this was a powerful means of reducing these power differences.


CE was experienced as being explicitly normative in nature and this made the focus on identity formation central to the ECP experience. There seem to be possibilities for formal higher education spaces to reflect on some of the lessons from the CE space around deliberating normative aspects in more explicit ways. Furthermore, the benefits were not only in terms of personal growth, but they were also related to the connections between what was learned in the ECP projects and what was learned in the classroom. While not all learning can be pinned to immediate practice, and access to principled theorised knowledge is fundamental to a higher


education (Ashwin, 2020) the extent to which CE allows for connections to be made between more abstracted concepts and the real world was evidenced in the experiences students shared.

It was evident through the study that CE can be a space for universities to attend to calls for multilingualism. However, to truly benefit, these lessons need to be brought to bear within the mainstream curriculum. The moves to recognising the value of CE as a fundamental aspect of higher education suggest that universities are well-positioned to learn from CE research and activities. Importantly, the liminal space of CE, where students felt free of many of the language and power constraints of the formal classroom, was key to its valuing and nurturing multilingualism.

We believe that this example of translanguaging in community engagement offers much for enhancing translanguaging and multilingualism in higher education more widely. For this to happen we need to reflect on how we can recognise and legitimate the language repertoires of our students. While the teaching and learning spaces of community engagement are spaces of liminality in ways that are less common in the formal classroom setting, they offer lessons for translanguaging that can enrich all teaching and learning.

### Author biographies

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