Trust in African feminist teaching and learning practices: Conscientisation and connection

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Abstract

In higher education, trust is possible (or not) based on the dynamic between different components and people in the university. This paper considers the relationship between students and their lecturer in the context of a neoliberal ethos. Using an African feminist lens, the close-up, self-study of a postgraduate course in Political and International Studies at Rhodes University is examined for its intentions and transgressions to determine how trust can be built and ruptured. Two ideas – 'conscientisation' and 'connection' – are theorised and then demonstrated through the reflections of the students and lecturer. Through a variety of mechanisms and processes, conscientisation and connection were intentionally built into how the course was run, and students' reflections reveal their transformational capacity. The final assessment did, however, become a site of unraveling and contestation, and provided an opportunity to look more deeply into how robust these ideas can be in a setting that valorises individualism and competition.

Keywords: African feminist pedagogy; connection; conscientisation; neoliberalism; trust

Context and introduction

Students I teach enter the university trusting that they will pass their degrees and that this will provide them with better employment opportunities. Many come from economically poor communities and are often the first in their families to come to university. The neoliberal ethos prevalent in South African and global society narrows the ethos of the university to individualised marks, degrees, costs, effectiveness, rationalisation, and transaction (Baatjes, 2005; Hlatshwayo, 2022. In the logic of meritocracy associated with neoliberalism, achieving a degree (any degree) should be rewarded with upward mobility. Tragically, as Siphokazi Magadla points out, universities are 'complicit in selling the lie' (2024: 5) that graduates will in fact find employment and financial stability with their degrees if they pass. Unemployment in South Africa, even of graduates, continues to rise (Mseleku, 2022). Too many students fail to realise their dreams

because of pressures inside and outside the university, and I argue that we (as academics, researchers, and lecturers) can do more to reconfigure, understand, and develop 'responsibilities as critical citizens' (Kramm & McKenna, 2023 in Magadla, 2024). Indeed, there are other forces at work in universities that contest and expand what counts as knowledge in the exchanges between lecturers and students in knowledge-making. These can and should inspire and be inspired by intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and the kind of transformational learning that shifts the emphasis from our individual economic concerns to critical solidarities. This aligns with the argument that the university is a public rather than a private good, which, some argue, is a national and continental imperative (Carrim & Wangenge-Ouma, 2012; Mama, 2003).

Against this backdrop, lecturers have a variety of choices and responsibilities. I use an African feminist lens in this paper to imagine alternative possibilities for what counts as knowledge, and building solidarity and community for a more sustainable, collective future. The course I reflect on is a praxis of the kinds of principles that welcome the creative and critical thinking necessary in transformational, liberatory education (hooks, 1994; Tamale, 2020). This paper looks closely at one-semester, postgraduate course I taught in Political and International Studies alongside two core concepts infused into pedagogy and research that hold some promise of re-establishing and sustaining the trust required for this kind of education: conscientisation and connection. These ideas are drawn from African feminist theory, which recognises the ethos of the current university system as deeply ensnared in mutually constitutive colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal legacies (Tamale, 2020). Arguably, the African university system and many of our disciplines remain rooted in Western thinking and practice, which profoundly limits students' potential critical citizenship (Knowles, et al., 2023a; 2023b; Moletsane, 2015; Wane, 2008). This study examines how a decolonial approach to knowledge-making could be more welcoming, transformative, and ultimately more trustworthy. It is, however, a fragile trust, as the neoliberal forces that infuse university systems can easily get the better of us.

Conscientisation is the first step towards transformational pedagogy and research that can inspire trust. Sylvia Tamale (2020) explains the process of 'conscientisation' as a careful awareness of the histories and values that have shaped us, so that we may unlearn them and hone the critical thinking skills so necessary in liberatory education. It is a political process of understanding the inherent power arrangements in a discipline, in a lecture room, or in a research project, that were brutally established over time in raced, gendered, and classed ways, to enable or disable knowledge-making. It requires us to approach the pedagogic and research space with 'vulnerability, reciprocity, humility and time' as essential ingredients for an ethics of trust (Mathebula, 2024).

Connection, as the second core aspect, allows us to reach across the histories that have distorted our entanglements with each other, our 'life-death inter-dependency' (Jones, 2022, in Magadla, 2024). Obioma Nnameaka explains that working with difference to bring about connection 'compels us to retool ourselves through knowledge', using difference and plurality 'as modes of production for bringing about personal and societal transformation through knowledge' (2005: 64). African feminist theory recognises a broader spectrum of what counts as

knowledge. In contrast to Western individualism, an emphasis on rationality, and the Cartesian separation of the mind from the body, African feminist theory sees knowledge as embodied, spiritual, political, and oriented towards the collective (Moletsane, 2015; Ntseane, 2011; Wane, 2008). I argue that this is the kind of knowledge that can build connections and trust.

This paper explores these concepts through a self-study[1] of the postgraduate course I taught, where students were inducted into Arican feminist research methodology and praxis. It reflects on the work of orienting myself and the curriculum I devised to connection and conscientisation, and how these were experienced. Through my own reflection on the teaching and learning that took place, and the weekly reflections by the students over one semester, the study tests and applies the concepts to determine their robustness in developing a sense of trust, and the critical citizenship that can 'bring about the change we all need' (Magadla, 2024: 6).

Orientating myself and my pedagogy

I am profoundly challenged to sit with my expectations and experiences with African feminist pedagogy and research, given how the course progressed. As an older white woman with fourteen years of experience as a lecturer, this was my first experience of formal postgraduate coursework teaching. The students who selected the course were comprised of nine young Black women and one Black man, four of whom did their undergraduate degree at this university.

Part of my preparation for the course was to recognise my location in the socio-political arrangements of the group, and to find ways to establish connection – between me and the students; between the students and each other; and between all of us and the African feminist scholars with whom we would engage. The focus here was not merely on developing a set of appropriate teaching activities but entailed a pedagogic orientation towards respect for our mutual constitution of each other, and the structural and inherent power arrangements in our encounter. Connection is an active reaching out and reaching in, an ongoing recognition and establishment of a collective that is a praxis of African feminist pedagogy. Importantly, connection is about bringing our whole selves into this meeting – dissolving the binary between mind and body; it is holistic and seeks harmony across differences, to become more human in the context of community (Collins, 2003; Henry, 2005). This implies the development of trust – that we learn to trust each other, and in so doing, affirm our trust in ourselves. Connection is a powerful aspect of knowledge-making because it opens us to each other's experiences and perspectives, and this expands our version of truth.

Naomi Nkealah argues that African Feminism is a theory of humaneness, which 'is definitively a quality of showing kindness, care, consideration, affection and understanding for another human being who is undergoing a difficult situation in life or experiencing a personal crisis' (2022: 4). As much as I was going through difficult situations in my life at the time, so were my students. Recognising experience as generative for new knowledge, Patricia Hill Collins claims

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[1] Ethical clearance and students' consent were obtained for low-risk research (Rhodes University Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee 2024-7613-8425).

that 'the best way of understanding another person's ideas was to develop empathy and share the experiences that led the person to form those ideas' (2003: 57). This was not only my challenge as the lecturer, but also as a facilitator of this way of working as a collective. Palesa Nqambaza explains that part of a feminist classroom is that it is de-hierarchised. Nqambaza draws on the Freirean critical pedagogical ideas of student-as-teacher and teacher-as-student, experience as part of knowledge-making, and that what happens in this kind of classroom is 'not be thought of as mere education for the sake of obtaining qualifications' (2021: 22). Our differences of age, race, class, language, and education must be navigated carefully and intentionally to show how connection operates. Obioma Nnaemeka offers some guidance on this:

> Can we teach as outsiders? Oh, yes, we can. The pertinent question, however, remains: How do we learn and teach as outsiders? In studying and teaching another culture, the teacher finds himself or herself situated at the congruence of different and often contradictory cultural currents. This point of convergence where the teacher stands has its privileges and rewards, but it is also fraught with danger. To survive at this precarious position requires a large dose of humility. (2005: 55)

This point of convergence leads to the second concept of this paper, conscientisation, and my orientation to it. As a scheme of unlearning and relearning, conscientisation is a process, not an event, to recognise oppressive histories and values so as not to reproduce them (Tamale, 2020). Conscientisation is the process of removing 'the scales from our eyes' to 'focus on pathways that re-centre Africa and its people' (Tamale, 2020: 41). My own education and intellectual orientation had been from the default position of the superiority of Western thought, and mostly white men. It has taken the last ten years or so of intentionally not reading or referencing white men as much as possible, to reorientate my thinking, writing, teaching, and activism towards African women. Explaining this kind of process, Sylvia Tamale argues that even though the university is a site of Western norms and values, it is also a site where the transformation of these norms is possible. She draws on Amina Mama's argument that 'conscientization is a dynamic dialectical relationship between radical thinking and action' (Mama, 2017, in Tamale, 2020: 44). Locating this in (neoliberal) university knowledge-making processes such as teaching, research, and scholarship is a pedagogic imperative I accept as part of my privileged positionality as a white person working with young Black people. It means being profoundly aware of my privileges and recognising the legacies of apartheid in the current classroom, for instance with regard to the language, economic, and domestic difficulties I never had to deal with as a student. As I will show, conscientisation influenced the content and methods of the honours course and came a little unstuck in the assessment of the course. Conscientisation is the political activation of connection, in that it recognises the structural and historical power arrangements in society and the university that limit connection, in order to transform them. It is part of a liberatory pedagogy that seeks connection and community that de-emphasises the

hierarchies inherent in teaching and learning in a South African university and enables agency and learning in the lecturer and students.

No matter how rigorously one pays attention to this constant navigation, the harsh realities of life can be a distraction. I taught the honours class as an extra commitment, in addition to my actual job as lecturer of the Extended Studies (ES) group of students that I see every day. It meant working every weekend and waking early every day to keep on top of these (and other) commitments. On the Monday mornings before the honours three-hour seminar in the afternoon, I was in class with ES students from 10:30 to 13:00. Conscientisation requires presence and attention; as much as one can prepare the platforms and content for this process in advance, the exigencies of day-to-day realities challenge the extent to which one is always alert to its opportunities and imperatives (Adomako Ampofo, 2010). The commitment to journal and reflect rigorously and regularly helped me to keep on checking myself, with the intention of bringing my most aware self to each of the honours course encounters. I was excited and energised to be part of the journey.

Orienting and activating the curriculum

Honours students selected their five courses for the year from a range offered by the Political and International Studies Department. The 'African Feminist Knowledge-making: Politics, Principles, and Praxis' course I taught as one of these offerings, ran for a full semester and was comprised of thirteen weekly seminar sessions of three hours each, with individual and group activities taking place in between. It needed to be assessed. My ambitious aim with the course was to facilitate learning about African feminist research methodology in the first six weeks, have students devise a group research proposal in the seventh week, to do a research project collaboratively using these methods and analyse the data in the following five weeks, and work together on co-written papers on the process for the last week (spilling into the following few months). The research project involved a qualitative study to reveal second-year politics students' experiences with and opinions about AI tools in their course assignments.

The curriculum would be the vehicle for the two ideas: connection and conscientisation – meaning that, while the weekly seminars, assessments, and tasks were scheduled and approved, the curriculum needed to be oriented, activated, and infused with these ideas and their praxis. We knew very little about each other, and trust would need to be established between us all. We started our first seminar with a 'landing' session – bringing ourselves into the class through an introduction of who we were, why we were there, and what we were hoping to get out of the course. We had a landing session at the start of each seminar after that – an intentional moment of bringing ourselves into the space for the purpose of learning about each other, empathising, understanding, and being human. Mary Hames, whose chapter inspired this idea, argues that 'applying a feminist pedagogy when teaching students with whom you are more familiar makes

it easier to ask questions about the self' (2021: 71). I believe that the students' reflections,[2] written and submitted online on a weekly basis, convey more fully what these sessions meant to them and demonstrate that they made this correlation. Their experiences form part of the knowledge I am contributing to the conversation about trust. The first two comments I have selected represent many others which illustrate the sense of connection that the landing sessions established and the deeper self-knowledge they facilitated.

> *At the beginning of every seminar we discuss what has been the worst and best part of the prior week. These sessions sometimes get emotional as we reveal burdens that have been weighing on us heavily. These also create connectedness between the class as we open up to each other and share amongst each other what got us down but also what carried us through the week. As the sessions progressed we as a class began getting comfortable and being open about these, this shows that we feel comfortable with each other and we feel connected to each other enough to be open. (3A r6)*

> *The beginnings of our class have been the best time of my long Mondays. We referred to the check in sessions as 'landings' and this really makes me feel comfortable to share and express some deep thoughts. It feels like checking in to see if I am still breathing and I realised that I need these at least once a week. Two weeks ago, we did a 'visualisation' for what our lives could be in five years. That exercise really put into perspective how I need to manifest and visualise my life goals in clear details. I am a planner however I never really thought about the small details of how I would reach my goals and what this life that I want would literally look like. I am grateful to have a professor who cares for the person's well-being in a course. (4G r5)*

Importantly, the sessions provided a way to think through our other engagements, activisms, and responsibilities, as demonstrated in this comment:

> *I have tried this African feminist methodology in my tutoring sessions. I invite the students to start the sessions to hear their issues and concerns for the weekly tutoring tasks. We have a balance of controlling the sessions so that it is beneficial and caters to their specific needs. Without having learned this in the course, I would have imposed my ways of learning on them and making it an experience that caters to only my needs of relaying the knowledge to them without their feedback. (4G r6)*

> *On a personal level, African feminist thought has pushed me to address my own prejudices and advantages. It has inspired introspection and self-reflection, resulting in a better knowledge of social justice concerns and a renewed commitment to supporting gender*

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[2] The student reflections are presented verbatim and have been coded to ensure anonymity. They gave their permission for their comments to be used.

equality and empowerment. Furthermore, the weekly introductions, in which we exchanged the best and worst things from the previous week, were a vital component of the course for me. This ritual created a space for the group to think and connect, allowing us to share our unique experiences and viewpoints. It instilled in us a sense of camaraderie and empathy, which improved our involvement with the course subject. (2C r7)

It was vital for students to connect to African feminist scholarship in order to understand the women behind the words they wrote and to begin to see how inclusive, relevant African feminist theory is as a lens for African students to research and make sense of their world. There were two or three readings set for each week; students were required to write guided summaries of two of them by the Sunday before Monday's seminar. As much as these readings were a critical part of our collective conscientisation, I also set up this exercise as a way to connect with each other. When the deadline for the submission of summaries passed, each submission was automatically and randomly sent to two other people via the dedicated course site on the institutional learning management system. Students were required to review their peers' submissions, look for similarities to or differences from their own summaries, and comment on what they liked about or learned from their peer's submission. The benefits of this included that they were exposed to each other's thinking, they read some summaries of readings they had not summarised (they could summarise any two of the three set readings), and they could be in continuous conversation with each other about the scholarly work. The three student comments that follow demonstrate the way that this practice deepened connection and self-knowledge, and helped to demystify reading, assessment, and writing conventions.

The peer reviews provide students a chance to comment on each other's work, interact with it, and gain insight from many viewpoints. Along with enhancing the calibre of the assignments, this method helped us feel more connected to one another and supportive of one another. It enables the sharing of thoughts, insights, and criticism, which eventually results in a greater comprehension of the course material and one another's perspectives. (2C r5)

Reading the reading was very challenging for me because it was hard to understand the points Collins was making because of how she wrote. It was through online summaries and reading my peer's summaries that I actually got an idea of what that reading was about. (1A r1)

There are several benefits to thinking back on weekly readings. First off, it makes me grasp the subject matter better because it demands that I engage with it thoroughly, which develops critical thinking and comprehension. Beyond personal development, peer reviews promoted community building among students in the classroom by encouraging cooperation, conversation, and support from one another. A greater sense of

accountability and responsibility was also fostered by the knowledge that my work will be assessed at that time, which motivated me to produce better or higher-quality work (1C r5).

This last comment suggesting that the reviews were a motivation 'to produce a better or higher quality of work' shows the performative nature of writing for peer review and is an unanticipated aspect of the process. Part of their connection to each other was learning to trust and be vulnerable. The landing sessions helped to establish this on an emotional level, and the reviews were a way to establish trust through vulnerability in students' intellectual grappling with the readings. As I will explain later, by the end of the course I mistrusted that they were producing their best work in their individual contributions to me, one of the reasons being that they were relying on feedback from me. The peer review process was a way to demystify assessment as a pedagogic practice and to teach students to write for a particular audience (each other, in this case). The practice of assessing and being assessed by each other was part of the learning to self-assess their work responsibly in the future. I wondered if writing for each other (and mostly they did not know each other well) in the reading summaries and reflections inspired a need to impress each other and legitimise their place in the honours programme. Patricia Hill Collins (2003) perhaps gives some account for this process, when she develops her argument around knowledge-making based on how African American women work with knowledge. There is a synergy between her argument and what seemed to be happening in the various aspects of students making sense of the course. She argues that concrete experience, the use of dialogue, and the ethics of care are the alternative dimensions of African feminist epistemology and validation of knowledge claims. She states that:

An ethic of personal accountability is the final dimension of an alternative epistemology. Not only must individuals develop their knowledge claims through dialogue and present them in a style proving their concern for their ideas, but people are expected to be accountable for their knowledge claims. (Collins, 2003: 65)

The implication of this is that students' immersion into the content and praxis of African feminist ideas in some way inspired a sense of ownership and responsibility in the work they produced. Did it also mean that to build trust with each other, they needed to present themselves as intellectually trustworthy?

Each Monday, two of the students would facilitate a guided discussion on the set readings and the group would engage with them in rich and varied dialogue. In this way, their conscientisation with African feminist thinkers was also the opportunity to connect with each other. One student made sense of it in this reflection:

[T]his course teaches about aspects of African feminism such as ubuntu, but it doesn't only teach it practised these. In the weekly seminars we have, we have group discussions and

co-facilitation. These build up a sense of community within the class as we get to know each other through these co-facilitation and group discussions. There's a very friendly, open, and welcoming feel to these seminars because of this sense of community we have amongst ourselves and this creates connectedness within classmates. (A3 r6)

The African feminists who influenced us all in these encounters are strong, clear, insightful, critical thinkers who expose the traces and traumas of colonialism (Tamale, 2020; Wane, 2008) and convey alternative realities and truths that are inspiring and transforming (Nnameaka, 2005; Steady, 2005). They do the work of conscientisation, helping us to unlearn and reimagine different ways of doing research – ethical and inclusive ways (Mkabela, 2005; Ntseane, 2011) and expanded ways about what counts as knowledge (Collins, 2003; Moletsane, 2015). This student reflection confirms this strategy:

African feminist thought has profoundly transformed my approach to research and my understanding of community engagement. Previously, I held a mindset centered around selfishness, viewing research as a means to fulfill my own needs and perspectives. However, exposure to African feminist thought challenged this perspective, prompting a shift towards conducting research that prioritises the voices and interests of marginalised communities. Through this transformative journey, I have come to recognise the importance of using research as a tool for amplifying the voices of marginalised groups, rather than exploiting them for personal gain. (2A r6)

Communal knowledge-making is an important aspect of African feminist knowledge-making (Ntseane, 2015). The connections to each other, established through the landing sessions and peer reviews, were also established in how we approached the research project. As Queeneth Mkabela argues:

[I]ntimacy, trust, and understanding grow where individuals are linked to one another through multiple bonds in a holistic relationship. This relationship promotes conformity, generosity, openness and consideration of group members' interest over selfish interest. It promotes feelings of ownership that motivates members to invest time and energy, to help shape the nature and quality of the research process as opposed to being merely involved in research. (2005: 187)

Scaffolded by the weekly seminar facilitations, the research proposals that students were required to complete in the first term was a communal project – working in groups of three or four, they had to fashion a question, a context, and a method, and in so doing affirm what they had learned about African feminist research methodology in a praxis of connection. Their individual understandings and expectations of this process became expanded as they worked

with others, to produce a group assignment that counted towards their individual marks. As two students explained:

[A]s we committed to setting aside our individual viewpoints, a transformative shift occurred. We began to recognise the broader vision we collectively aimed to achieve, realising that our differences were not divisive but rather complementary. (2A r7)

The best thing about writing a proposal with other people was really feeling lost, confused and frustrated all together. That I was not on my own and dealing with those feelings alone but that we had each other to look to, to make light of it, to cry about it and then working it out together. The writing of a proposal has proven to be challenging. It requires a certain level of vulnerability and honesty to admit that there is something you are probably uncertain about or that you are not well-versed in a field to add a contribution. Working with other people meant understanding them on a personal level and extending grace. Some days are more productive than others and that is okay. (1D r7)

This mirrors what Mkabela (2005) claims about communal knowledge-making, as members of the group began to appreciate a bigger collective vision and employed empathy and consideration in how they worked with each other. This development of mutual trust is not the outcome of all group work used as a pedagogic approach – but, activated by the African feminist theory in which we were immersed, it became a transformative process that led to a sense of trust in the process. This trust was further tested when each group was invited to assess another group's proposal. Again, the aim of this was an activation of connection (to each other and to themselves) and critical thinking. It worked. Reading a peer group's work assisted them to see their own more clearly. As one student reflected:

When marking the research proposal of another group, I realised that a common issue we all faced was being too vague in our writing. It became clear that we were not specific enough in our explanations, assuming that our readers were already familiar with the topic and discussions surrounding it. This oversight made it clear that we had not considered the diverse audience that research can reach beyond our own department, where the context and background may not be as well known. (2C r7)

I gave extensive written and verbal feedback and the opportunity to resubmit. The process was understood, experienced, and generally welcomed as a meaningful approach, but unexpectedly set up a sticking point around final assessment.

Once the research project was undertaken and analysed, students were required to co-author, in groups, journal articles on their experiences and findings as a concluding component of the course – a final opportunity to practice and demonstrate connection and conscientisation. While publishing can be a notoriously long process, the understanding was that their work

towards these outputs would be part of their assessment for the course. On paper the entire curriculum looked doable, but tight, but in practice the work involved in analysis and articulation of findings spilled a little messily into the final week and included an additional session. Based on each group's proposals and findings, I wrote an abstract for each of the three papers, discussed these and the writing of a paper in our last session, had an online workshop with each group during their holiday period, assigned individual sections to each member through mutual agreement; and recommended that they load their sections onto a google doc which had their abstract and instructions for the final phase of the course. In the last week of the course, in the rush to complete the laborious analysis and draft the papers, there were flurries of activity and communication highlighting absences and gaps. In retrospect, this is where connection became less clear and the distraction from conscientisation as a rigorous daily navigation of power arrangements allowed these to dwindle into their default positions.

Assessment: Back to the real world

Assessment is, of course, part of the curriculum. While planning and orienting the curriculum is an exciting and idealistic activity with relative freedom, the final assessment of the course, with actual marks, to be reviewed by an external examiner, is a jolt back into the neoliberal, individualistic institutional arrangements of the university system. The honours marks are crucial for selection into master's programmes and impact funding opportunities. My schedule for assessment reflected an African feminist inclusive and collaborative model that does not fit neatly into a neoliberal paradigm. Reflections and summaries were peer reviewed; participation was self-assessed; the research proposal was a group project, first formatively assessed by me, before a final hand in; and, finally, writing a specified component of a paper (a different paper for each research group) was individually assessed by me. The weighting of these components was arranged to only give this final, individual contribution 20% of their final mark. The final marks were very high, too high, and in discussion with the Head of Department, the marks were reweighted to make this final individual assignment (which without exception was the lowest of their marks) 50% of their final mark. I alerted the class to the reweighting before I sent them their marked final assignments. There was a fairly muted acceptance of the change. And then they received their marked assignments and final marks, and the trust we had so carefully established quickly unravelled.

Assessment, competition for funding and places in master's programmes are not neutral processes. They are loaded and hierarchical by nature and reduce a whole human being with a background, unique experiences and responsibilities, and dreams of a future, to a set of marks to be compared to others and found worthy or not. Neoliberalism in the university means that it 'operates from the premise that education is primarily a sub-sector of the economy' (Baatjes, 2005: 2) and in a capitalist society, it elevates private good above public good. This infuses everything – students are seen as customers and knowledge is a commodity to be exchanged in transactions with an eye on profit and the assumption of individual benefit. As Desiree Lewis points out:

Neoliberalism in the academy fosters the loss of perspective: losing sight of struggles, power relations and critical knowledge-making that satisfy our radical intellectual and political energies. In joining the race to produce outputs for outputs' sake, or to meet endless auditing and self-regulation criteria, we can quickly lose sight of the vital sources of our critical engagement in knowledge-making that thrives beyond the academy. (2018: 79)

Focused and present as I was on conscientisation and connection throughout the course, I suddenly found myself scrambling to justify the weighting of the marks, alienated from these important imperatives, and instead consumed by imposter syndrome and embarrassed that I had not thought through the implications of the course assessment. I had indeed lost 'sight of our critical engagement in knowledge-making that thrives beyond the academy' (Lewis, 2018: 79). Not only that, distracted as I was by a different set of students in the next semester in a different course who compelled my care, I also lost sight the honours students and our de-hierarchised classroom, and we became alienated from each other. Assessment can be brutal – for teacher and student – as bound as it is to specific criteria and for specific, life-determining ends. I was disappointed in many of the final submissions, which seemed not to align with the multiple submissions until that point. I marked them with half an eye on an external examiner, wanting them to be better, to be able to demonstrate how much the students had learned, but also, perhaps, how well I had facilitated the learning. The values so present in our seminars and the process of running and analysing a research project were compromised. As Nqambaza argues, tragically:

There is no site where the entrenched unequal power dynamic between educators and students becomes more apparent than during assessment time, especially the exam which often forecloses the possibility of a peer assessment model. It is the educator who gets to grade the work of the student, and external examiners are introduced into the equation to guarantee consistency in grading. This complicates the idea of equality of power and ideas in the classroom. (2021: 34)

Connection, conscientisation, and critical thinking are powerful ideas, but can they stand up to the determining conditions of the neoliberal university? Can there be liberatory education where, as Rille Raaper claims, the 'assessment policy in neoliberalised universities not only organises educational processes but potentially governs academics as assessors and students as those being assessed' (2019: 156)? It is complicated. Katherine Natanel suggests that:

In drawing attention to power, structure, agency and resistance in our classrooms, yet remaining entangled within their tensions, we effectively undertake a mode of bargaining

that positions us both inside and outside the system – in this, we are poised to disrupt. (2017: 15)

Natanel explains that neoliberalism fashions lecturers and students in universities into 'good subjects', and that this 'breaks and precludes solidarities, compounding the shift from education as a collective endeavour to knowledge as an (individualised) economy' by intensifying competition and 'undermining the attachments and relations that make collective action possible' (Natanel, 2017: 9). She recommends that as lecturers we need to bring our vulnerabilities and contestations with the system into the classroom, inviting students into discussions about transgressing the ideology of neoliberalism, to be simultaneously insiders and outsiders as 'bad subjects' of its doctrines. To do communal work in the face of individualised conventions, to expose the power dynamics and interests in ways that destabilise the hierarchy, to employ care and connection as radical strategies in knowledge-making, are some of the ways we did this in the honours course. And, arguably, it is how we can continue to work despite a temporary unravelling. The students were mostly deeply unhappy with their final marks, and I was deeply unhappy with their final assignments, and embarrassed that what looked like a wonderful course on paper did not materialise into the rigorous and critical kinds of submissions expected at that level. We had individual and group discussions about this and in retrospect I noticed how the lack of regular contact with them (and perhaps them with me) meant that we struggled to find each other, to hear each other, in these discussions. Finally, a meeting with the Head of Department to resolve the issue resulted in an additional task being set: a reflective essay on the relevance and usefulness of African feminist theory for pedagogy and research. I am eagerly anticipating these as a generative opportunity for us all to rethink the course, as I too reflect on my own complicity versus transgressions in the teaching and assessment of it. Nqambaza concludes her discussion on critical and liberatory pedagogy in a neoliberal space by recommending that 'this process of re-imagining and re-building must be accompanied by an honest reflection on the strategies we employ towards a new future, are they breathing possibility to this liberatory project or are they merely repressive tendencies cloaked in a liberatory guise' (2021: 35). I believe that our experiences in this course fell prey to neoliberal repression at the end, but that African feminist pedagogy continues to breathe possibility into our collective liberation.

Conclusion

Can African feminist-inspired pedagogy build trust through conscientisation and connection? This paper has scrutinised the various phases of an honours course in Rhodes University's Political and International Studies Department where this pedagogy was employed. African feminist theory expands what counts as knowledge and promotes the ideas of connection (through pedagogic techniques and an orientation towards each other) and conscientisation (the unlearning and reimagining of brutal colonial histories and neoliberal futures). These two ideas are inherent in the kind of liberatory education that can build trust and solidarity to make

communal knowledge that transgresses the narrow focus of neoliberalism on the individual benefits and economic viability of a university degree. As demonstrated by students' reflections throughout the course, these concepts of connection and conscientisation shifted how they thought about research, knowledge, activism, and community engagement. It strengthened their understanding of the course and of themselves.

The university is, however, embedded in a neoliberal ethos, which promotes competition and thinks of knowledge-making and teaching and learning as transactions to achieve individual benefit and employment. The final assessment for the course exposed ways in which African feminist pedagogy could lose its footing in the externally reviewed, standardised, individualised, competitive criteria for what counts as legitimate learning. It was a reminder that connection and conscientisation, while powerful ideas and very much part of how the course progressed, are not events, but ongoing necessary processes that can be lost in the individualistic environment of the university. It does not have to be this way. African feminist pedagogy brings hope, it engenders trust in each other and in ourselves, and it provides ideas and imperatives that run contrary to the neoliberal ethos. Because of this contrariness, it requires us to be mindfully on guard for when we slip into neoliberalism's narrow views. Our mutual reflection, our agency in developing strategies to find each other even when we fail, and the recognition that this kind of knowledge-making reaches beyond the boundaries of a neoliberal university are ways to strengthen connection and conscientisation.

Author Biography

Dr Corinne Knowles was part of the Extended Studies Unit, Rhodes University, South Africa, until her retirement in 2024. She teaches courses in Sociology, Politics, Drama and African feminist knowledge-making. She has published academic articles, a book of poetry, an award-winning play, and continues to write, teach, and think about education for collective liberation. 🆔

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