

# Afterword

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This Special Issue uses the African concept of *ukuzilanda* to reflect on the authors' experiences of 'becoming an academic' at UWC. Central to this experience is the writing retreat, in particular one held in May 2022, during which the authors engaged in a reflective writing session, which gave impetus to this volume. This retreat was followed by a second one in November of the same year, during which the focus of this volume took shape. Both were facilitated by myself, Zannie Bock, as current Deputy Dean of Learning and Teaching in the faculty of Arts and Humanities, and Marijke Du Toit, the faculty Learning and Teaching Specialist.

The writing retreat is an annual event in our learning and teaching calendar, funded through our University Capacity Development Grant. To date, we have been able to book into a pleasant hotel, which allows participants to get away from their usual busy campus and home lives, and enjoy the comfort and conviviality of the setting. Because the three days include much talking, eating, laughing, sharing ideas, telling stories, and having fun, in addition to reading and writing, the retreat opens up a space in which new and emerging academics can interact with each other, myself and Marijke, and get to know each other and the faculty in a holistic way. The following quotations from the participant feedback from these retreats attest to their value in creating a space for

sharing, socialising and networking (and this was particularly important given that in 2022 we were emerging from two years of Covid lockdown):

"The writing retreat provided a space where we could write and interact with peers without inhibitions. It is a space that helps us to overcome our personal inhibitions as well as resource limitations. As PhD students, we were socialised into writing in isolation. However, the T&L space enables us to draw on collegial strength. The informal and unstructured approach provides a peer feedback framework that enables us to gather to write with each other and provide informal feedback on how to improve our writing or teaching. Overall, it provides a sense of fun and support without the added pressure of working against deadlines. Thank you!"

"Thank you, again, for the wonderful retreat. It was a much-needed break away from my family. It afforded me an opportunity to complete my portfolio as well as start the article. It was also great seeing the colleagues that I haven't seen for a few months. I think some real friendships are starting to form."

"The opportunity to network with fellow lecturers was a welcome relief after a long period of online teaching

and meetings. I've gained so much from other colleagues."

"A lot of early career academics develop imposter syndrome and lack relationships that nurture them - The T&L retreat fills that gap - it's our home. Colleagues we meet on this platform and the networks or friendships we forge at the T&L retreat are embodied in the ways we openly share and receive feedback. We are not shy or afraid of sharing our vulnerabilities, scars and shortcomings with colleagues."

"Each time we get together, we learn new things about each other and there is something incredible about that space that makes us vulnerable and creative. It is also comforting to know that we face the same challenges as academics and otherwise. In IsiXhosa we have a saying, *inyathi ibuzwa kwabaphambili* (you seek guidance/information/knowledge from those with experience). I use the retreats as a space to not only write, but to consult and gain insight from senior colleagues. I appreciate their openness and willingness to share their experiences in how they overcame certain obstacles in their journeys in academia, parenthood, relationships the list is endless."

In line with the theme of this volume, we would argue that the writing retreat creates a space in which we (as academics) can 'fetch ourselves' as whole, 'embodied', human beings, as we craft our new and evolving identities as academics – as people with histories, bodies, social and emotional needs, as well as professional responsibilities and aspirations. Given that colleagues felt they could show up as themselves speaking with their own voices, the retreat serves as an antidote to the 'imposter syndrome' discussed by Van Heerden (this volume) and noted in the feedback above. It also creates the nurturing and safe space in the professional context that Jonas (this volume) credits her parents, grandparents and a significant teacher with creating when she was growing up. It was this support, she argues, which enabled her to discover and realise her dream of becoming a cognitive and comparative linguist. Based on the

feedback cited above, one could argue that the writing retreat enabled a number of colleagues – in the words of Mpuma (this volume) – to "collect, fetch, bring or recall ... themselves or something about or related to themselves." In other words, it enabled participants to 'render' themselves whole, by making space for both their communal and individual histories, as well as their socio-emotional and academic well-being. In this sense, the writing retreat enables an act of *ukuzilanda*, as emerging academics are able to 'fetch' themselves as 'whole people', and 'bring' this into their academic and professional spaces themselves as 'whole people'.

Writing retreats have a longer history in the institution than my own experience, which is limited to my last few years as the Deputy Dean of Learning and Teaching. In the next section, Marijke reflects on the emergence of writing retreats over a decade of institutional initiatives, as a means to build engagement and communities of learning and teaching practice. Her contribution is another act of *ukuzilanda*, of reaching back into the institutional memory to capture the impetus and thinking behind the reflective writing activity that spawned this Special Issue:

"Institutional commitment to pedagogical transformation can sometimes seem oxymoronic, with deeply embedded contradictions built into the structures and administrative practices created to enable dynamic approaches to how we enable students to learn. I arrived at UWC in 2015, scarcely a year after incoming lecturers were first informed of a new probationary requirement, namely the creation of a 'Teaching and Learning Portfolio'. My early impression was that the first cohort of lecturers were relieved to be done with it and still viscerally frustrated, having sat through a series of largely conventional slide presentations that introduced relevant learning theories. I also soon learned that the initiative to integrate 'developmental' workshops and courses into probationary activities could be traced back to a project articulated via the university's first 'Strategic Plan for Teaching and Learning', starting in 2010 and that had been conceptualised as a collaborative process. The institutional

structures created during this time included a new Directorate of Teaching and Learning, the establishment of formal, faculty-based structures focused on 'Teaching and Learning', and the creation of academic positions for 'T&L Specialists' such as myself. 'Excellence in teaching and learning' was now explicitly 'valued in probation and promotion processes', and policy frameworks outlined relevant 'competencies required for academic staff'. Love of teaching and learning together with relevant expertise would now also be introduced through formal opportunities for staff development (O'Connell in Bozalek and Marshall, (2020:102)).

A few years of intensive inter-faculty engagement, led by Prof Vivienne Bozalek as UWC's first Director of Teaching and Learning, resulted in the creation of an introductory retreat for new academic staff, followed by the year-long developmental course, focused on the creation of detailed and evidence-based reflective portfolios. I was to act as part of its newly convened team of facilitators. Bozalek soon drew us into a process of intensive curriculum design - the challenge was to transform the course into one that itself put ideals of 'learner-centred' pedagogy into practice. Classroom interactions would be structured so as to invite discussion and debate together with colleagues, valued for their relevant expertise. We would also offer insights drawn from educational theory and research, relevant to UWC as a historically black institution. Above all, we as facilitators wanted to integrate innovative approaches to learning and teaching into the fabric of the course.

As part of this effort, I was privileged to work on an aspect of year-long institutional course with Arona Dison (who later became co-ordinator of the Writing Centre at UWC but then worked alongside me as a faculty-based teaching and learning specialist). Our task was to explain

what we meant by a reflective approach to the teaching and learning portfolio writing and to demystify a central element, namely the Teaching Philosophy. In my view, the fact of having to do a 'developmental', compulsory course and perhaps also the emphasis on the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching (SoTL) as a distinct field of expertise could convey the impression that we as facilitators expected participating lecturers to articulate a philosophy composed of the specific learning theories and pedagogies that we chose to highlight. Instead, we tried to introduce the project of 'surfacing' one's personal philosophy of teaching and learning by reflecting on one's own experience and efforts with regards to curriculum planning, lecturing and so on.

The classroom session that we designed had an exercise in 'free writing' as its central element, presented as 'a starting point for your writing process, particularly as regards the teaching philosophy'. We suggested that 'a personal, narrative reflective statement about past experience and present context is central to this portfolio' and that it was important 'to look inwards, and backwards - to think through and to write up experiences and ideas that ground your practice as a lecturer'. Delving into one's own memory could then 'enable one to think more deeply about teaching practices.'

We invited our colleagues to start by reading a selection of extracts from autobiographical writings. Our choice of texts ranged from published autobiography, such as *The Dusty Road* from Cradock by Norma M Nongauza-Tsotsi, to excerpts from previously completed teaching and learning portfolios. Participants were asked to 'write freely about one or two significant experiences in relation to teaching and learning, using one or more of the narratives as a stimulus'. Colleagues were then invited to share 'something about what you wrote' with a partner. The session ended with plenary feedback 'about ideas that came up and discussion about how

they could be used in the teaching portfolio’.

This exercise in ‘free’ and ‘reflective’ writing was an important catalyst for the essays contained in this special edition of *Multilingual Margins*. In turn, these authors have taken it further by using an African language concept to theorise their narratives. This opens up new possibilities for developing this exercise in the future, towards a multilingual practice of ‘ukuzilanda’. We look forward to inviting future participants of our writing retreats to read these reflections and to discover what new turns of thought and conversation they open up. One can only imagine the potential for bringing different languages into this space.”

Threading through the above account, as well as the papers in this volume, are acknowledgements of the centrality of reading and writing for the reflective journey, the importance of collegiality and belonging, of vulnerability and the willingness to open oneself to others, the challenges of translating concepts and using African words for theoretical ends, and the over-riding significance of being able to ‘fetch, bring, recall or collect’ oneself or something about oneself in the process of rendering oneself whole. This self-making, the authors argue, is both the outcome of one’s own family lineage as well as the

broader context which has shaped us. Importantly, as all accounts attest, it is a process which is contested, complex, messy and incomplete.

Significantly, all these different contributions point to the centrality of social relations in this ‘fashioning of self’, to the central role played by significant and caring others – whether family, previous teachers, or current colleagues – those who create a context within which the emerging person and academic can grow. It is these networks of human relations which have enabled the individual authors the ‘relationality of being’, or the ‘gathering of self’, such that they can now appear to themselves and each other on their own terms and speak with their own voices. Central to the creation of this space, we have argued, is the writing retreat and reflective writing practice, which creates a transformative space in which new social relations can emerge, new knowledge can be constructed, and new subjectivities can take root and grow.

## REFERENCES:

- Bozalek, Vivienne & Marshall, Delia. (2020). Reconfiguring teaching and learning at UWC. In Bharuthram, R & Pokpas, L. (Eds). *From Hope to Action through Knowledge: the Renaissance of the University of the Western Cape, 2001- 2021*. Stellenbosch: UWC Press.