

What does decolonising education mean to us? Educator reflections

Najma Agherdien	Centre for Learning and Teaching Development, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa	najma.aghardien@wits.ac.za
Roshini Pillay	Department of Social Work, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa	Roshini.Pillay@wits.ac.za
Nkosiyazi Dube	Department of Social Work, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa	Nkosiyazi.Dube@wits.ac.za
Poppy Masinga	Social Work & Community Development, South African College of Applied Psychology, Johannesburg, South Africa	poppy@sacap.edu.za

ABSTRACT

The #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student protests accelerated the call for a decolonised higher education space. Much complexity and debate exists around the notion of a decolonised curriculum, how to frame it, describe it and/or enact it. Within this debate, the positionality and identity of individuals who design, implement, and evaluate curricula are important. The purpose of this article is to reflect on how theory-informed pedagogical reflections can assist in our understanding of decolonisation. The four educator reflections include our personal accounts of pedagogical philosophies, methodologies, and practices. A major focus is social work, which aims to enhance the well-being of all persons especially the disadvantaged, the marginalised and the voiceless. Through belonging to a community of practice, we embarked on the process of articulating our voice, positionality, and identity and how this informs our teaching, which is both personal and political within a South African higher education context. We provide our ways of knowing regarding how we (try) to contribute to social justice and equity ideals. We conclude with our consolidated view on an envisioned, decolonised education in the global South context. We recommend an approach that values ongoing, collective reflection, critical questioning, and agitation of how a decolonised curriculum can be envisaged. The contribution that this article makes is in the value of collective reflection, coupled with embracing personal stories/biographies to theorise decolonisation.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to share our stories with the intention of capturing the importance of reflexive practice in making sense of decolonising education. We believe that the decolonisation debate is a complex one, informed by multiple stories, individual biographies, individual positionalities and collective practices. COVID-19 served as an impetus for the decolonisation agenda within Higher Education Institutions (HEI) across the country. The national lockdown – as a result of the pandemic – moved education online exposing the differences in students based on their socio-economic status and living conditions (Czerniewicz *et al*, 2020). However, there is a dispute over exactly what decolonisation means. Tuck and Yang (2012:21) argue that “decolonization specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life”. This statement affirms the view that decolonisation is not just about social justice ideals but requires action resulting in the need for the “curricular-pedagogical project of critical consciousness as settler harm reduction” (Tuck & Yang, 2012:21). The decolonisation project calls on educators to draw on the indigenous, social and cultural heritage beyond that of the settler. This position aligns with Smith’s (2012) view that considers power and the political process. The authors of this paper align themselves with the wider conception offered by Stein and Andreotti (2016:370) as a process that includes a diversity of efforts; decolonisation is:

an umbrella term for diverse efforts to resist the distinct but intertwined process of colonisation and racialisation, to enact transformation and redress...and to create and keep alive modes of knowing, being and relating that these processes seek to eradicate.

Within the South African context, decolonisation has focused on its “curriculum revisionist project” (Kumalo & Praeg, 2019:2). We are critical of this approach because we believe decolonisation is a broader endeavour that encompasses more than curriculum revision, but rather includes a process of interrogating learning and teaching methods and practices, together with associated pedagogies, philosophies, and ideologies. We argue, for a new African scholarly and academic identity, particularly in a world beyond the pandemic.

A story of identity includes stories of lived experiences. We, as employees at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) tell our stories recognising that some scholars refute biographical data and reflections as being too emotion-laden and subjective. Khunou, Canham, Khosa-Shagase and Phaswana (2019:3) contest arguments regarding biographical stories as “unreliable, emotional and libellous”. Like Khunou *et al* (2019), we acknowledge the importance of the biography/context intersection. Lived experiences are narratives that are qualitative in nature but offer to the reader a

lens in time that speaks to the moral and political context of a transforming South African higher education project and this, we believe, is of significant value.

We too, have engaged in this reflective and reflexive process over a period of a year. We shared readings, had email and in-person discussions, and collectively tried to make sense of decolonisation. Each of us reflected on what decolonisation meant to us, our theoretical lenses and/or learning and teaching philosophies. Notwithstanding the value of collective reflection, some of the challenges we experienced was that of the time-intensive nature of this endeavour accompanied by unrealistic workloads and physical distance due to COVID-19. Perhaps the biggest challenge related to a willingness (or unease) to engage with each other's reflections critically and the collective sense making that needed to follow. It is our hope that by sharing our individual and collective reflections and the rather protracted process that we followed, other scholars interested in the decolonial project can get a sense of the complexity involved. We further hope to extend the cultural and contextual situatedness of such a project and convey the importance of individual biographies and intersecting collective thoughts. Essentially, individual/multiple perspectives can potentially inform local/national/universal perspectives in a post-COVID world.

In the next section, we give a brief outline of our context, followed by a cursory overview of social justice. We then share our individual stories and highlight the multiple frameworks employed and reflexivity needed in theorising decolonisation. Thereafter, we turn attention to the similarities and differences in our stories and mention a few remaining tensions. We end with a final argument that both individual and collective stories matter.

Our context

The cohort of black students in 2015 and prior, felt that their linguistic and cultural identities were not recognised and that African knowledge systems remained marginalised. Indeed, Angu (2018:9) states: "universities are still shaped by epistemic traditions of the Global North." This marginalisation led to the eruption of violent student protests across many South African universities (which have come to be called the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall protests), which re-ignited social activism and intellectual debate around the politics of curriculum decolonisation in South African HEIs (Angu, 2018).

In addition, Wits, a historically-advantaged institution, still uses English as a medium of instruction, despite the increase in the number of enrolled black students and the calls for decolonisation. However, our university is in the process of developing language policies that will see the inclusion of indigenous languages as a bid to push forward the decolonisation agenda. The same exclusion, alienation, and disrespect that students feel now is what we felt then as students of colour. We do not believe that any one theory has all the answers. Like Jansen (2018), we are of the view that curriculum comes to life through our individual biographies and that a multiplicity of perspectives is ideal.

Thus, we present each author's theoretical lenses, to explore how collective philosophical and pedagogical theorisation can assist in our understanding of decolonisation. Even though this is the case, we draw on concepts associated with social justice because we believe we have an ethical responsibility to challenge social structures such as HEIs and their policies that perpetuate injustice.

Social justice

Although each of us has a different theoretical and conceptual understanding of decolonisation, social justice serves as an overall framework for our reflections. This section focuses attention on the concepts of equity, equality, and justice – in particular, the exclusionary practices regarding curricula matters. Pillay and Agherdien (2021:14) distinguish between inclusion, equity, and equality. They describe inclusion as “access to equal opportunities for academic success and (em)powerment” (that is, “relinquishing our power as academics and opening ourselves up to understanding the pain of structural exclusion felt by students”). They describe equity as fairness of distribution and procedure (Espinoza, 2007) that occurs at the level of needs, potential and achievement and that could be useful in examining resources, access, survival, output, and outcomes. In terms of equality, they advance Therborn's (2013) view that speaks to “the capability to function as a human being” and argue that inequality is unjust and detracts from human dignity.

Our argument is that students are knowledgeable and capable of participating equitably since they have valuable ideas to contribute to their own learning. Fricker (2007) confirms that injustice will prevail if students' access to the knowledge they require is obstructed or if they are not recognised as worthy to be heard. Therefore, denying students the opportunities to access knowledge is socially unjust. With regard to equity, Bozalek, Watters and Gachago (2015) argue that equitable power relations between a student and an academic fosters student agency, whilst epistemic injustice is a

consequence of the academy's undervaluing of student agency. Students are not recognised as knowers when what they bring to the table "suffers from a deficit of credibility" (Walker, 2018:561). In line with Moore and Mitchell (2008), as individuals or groups reflecting or acting to bring about change, we intend to use our collective agency to reflect and critically think about how to decolonise the university space in purposeful ways. Our intention is to transform and empower students to challenge unjust authoritarianism with the view to improve the university's conditions that affect their lives. Our agency is goal-oriented and is critical of unjust policies and practices that are prevalent within academic spaces.

To heighten social justice, the marginalised – those often-denied opportunities to engage equally with their peers – must be given the right to represent themselves. We argue that universities have hierarchical structures that make it hard for academics and students to attain justice. Therefore, we make a call for a recognition of harm that is caused by unjust practices. We call for redress in the form of transformative rather than affirmative approaches to teaching philosophies and pedagogies, particularly in respect of those students affected by injustice.

We call for universal principles of justice and fairness. Within such a perspective, we advocate for equal and just distribution so that all members of society get what is fair and/or due to them (Khan, 2020). The focus is on protecting the underprivileged from those in power as well as speaking out against tyrannical rulers. At the heart of our argument is the moral obligation to eradicate all forms of oppression or injustice, whether it be academic, economic, cultural, or political. As academics, our ethical responsibility is to speak on behalf of the voiceless students whose opinions are often ignored or undermined.

According to Dykes (2018), silencing often happens when political boundaries unjustly exclude specific people from participating. The author terms this a form of "misframing" because people are prevented from challenging hegemony, thus failing to challenge their social status in the political landscape. We agree with the author's conclusion that this form of injustice reduces them to non-citizens (Dyke, 2017). Like Swartz and Scott (2012), we call for restitution of personhood if we are to be successful in transforming the academic landscape and, by implication, decolonise curricula. To end this section, we include Agherdien and Pillay's (2018:14) perspective on social justice that advances the idea that social justice includes:

being critical of the unspoken rule that students leave everything they have been taught, believed, and valued behind, to uncritically accept a foreign, western, culture, which exists at many South African universities.

We concur that the social justice agenda has implications for decolonised curricula and we now share our reflections.

Our stories: Towards collective reflection

In our experience and limited engagement, the lack of a clear meaning of decolonisation was made visible on numerous occasions, in webinars, conferences and in the literature. In the absence of a clear definition, we wanted to reflect on what decolonisation meant to us theoretically as well as practically as individuals, how we could enact it and what that would mean for our practice. We reflect on how we grapple with social justice issues in our workplace situations through sharing our reasoning by means of practical examples from our teaching. Thereafter, we wanted to establish a collective conception and nuanced understanding through sharing collective similarities, differences and tensions.

Roshini Pillay's reflections: Ubuntu and authentic learning

I am a South African Indian social work educator and first-year coordinator, teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Most of the educators, in 1985 when I began my undergraduate degree, used a didactic style with content and textbooks mainly from the global North. To counter such injustice, an Authentic Learning (AL) framework (Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2014) provided a pedagogy to support more socially-just educational design decisions. AL suggests that practical knowledge is best obtained in learning settings that have the following characteristics: an authentic context; an authentic task; expert performance; multiple perspectives; collaboration; reflection; articulation; coaching and scaffolding, and assessment (Herrington *et al*, 2014). AL is especially suitable for teaching social work. I design courses so that students should be empowered with knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be able to critically solve complex problems and challenges that South Africa and the world face (Barnett, 2004; Mitchell, Sarfati & Stewart, 2022).

What does decolonisation mean to me?

This reflexive introspection of teaching in action and on action (Schön, 2011) requires realistic soul searching on how hegemony (power and privilege) shapes the teaching practices I adopt. Some of the theories that undergird my teaching include situated learning, critical social work, feminist theory, family systems theory and narrative theory. Critical for me are the activities that infuse my

teaching using participatory action research (Bozalek, 2014; Bozalek & Biersteker, 2010) and collaboration. Therefore, the value of Ubuntu (which comprises principles based on an ancient philosophical concept which demonstrates the connectedness of people) resonates with my teaching (Sekudu, 2019) as it helps to mitigate exclusionary practices. Ubuntu is locally relevant and situated within a value system that sees personhood located in the community and this links with social justice that considers the broader needs of the community and the fair distribution of resources. However, I am cognisant that a critique of Ubuntu is that it “reflects our aspirations more than reality” (van Breda, 2019:10). The fair distribution of resources is a problem exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that resulted in exclusive use of online teaching. Glaring fractures in our society along racial, class and gender lines have been revealed during COVID-19. It is my hope that the pace of transformation is increased beyond the pandemic.

Learning and teaching philosophy and practice

In learning and teaching, I heed the call by Smith and Nathane (2018:3) urging educators to “break free from historical European domination as it is an act of assertion of the right to repossess dispossessed intellectual spaces”. Biko opposes the view that “a settler minority should impose an entire system of values on an indigenous people” (Biko, 2015:25). Moreover, as Cook (2019:81) advises, to “fulfil its core value of social justice, social work must relinquish its reliance on Western frameworks, values, and models to incorporate indigenous knowledge to improve the fit between theory and the realities of practice”. One example of this is the inclusion of Ubuntu as a value in social work (Rasool & Ross, 2016).

As a South African having witnessed the brutality of apartheid and playing a small role in student protests in the 1980’s, I cherish our hard-fought for democracy. Social justice, for me, is infused with various elements of class, equity, transformation, and a feeling of being at home within the higher education space (Leibowitz, 2012). For many first-generation students, university can be a hostile space.

Furthermore, decolonisation of education is about situating knowledge beyond the global North as the centre. Giving voice and identity to what has not been and honouring oral history from an emic perspective is a complex undertaking that does not tolerate laziness on the part of educators and students (Erasmus, 2019). I adopt a more nuanced view by beginning with the experiences of the student that appreciates their ways of knowing, being, doing and becoming, considering knowledge

from all parts of the globe while respecting the values and traditions of the people of South Africa. This perspective allows me to practice the value of Ubuntu with students and peers. Ubuntu offers a way of making students in higher education feel more at home by providing a sense of belonging and an openness to new and old ways. One activity I have used is the development of personal digital timelines that are shared in a group. This sharing of history is a good opportunity to understand the individual from multiple perspectives. This type of learning and teaching further enables opening myself to the limitless potential of humanness and authenticity grounded in the real world. In the courses that I teach, I strive to engage students in collective and collaborative learning in real-world social conditions that help to bridge the gap between theory and practice. In this process, I hope that my presence in the higher education space allows the development of new knowledge and a greater respect for Indigenous ways.

Decolonisation of education requires me to interrogate both the content and the methods I use to design and implement courses. I need to understand how the pedagogy of discomfort unfolds and to be critically aware of how the content and activities I use will impact on all the students I encounter (Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012). This includes having discomfoting conversations around, race, poverty, inequality, and the slow pace of transformation, for which there will be no simple solutions (Singleton & Hays, 2008). In addition, I need to engage in a manner that fosters advanced empathy (Segal & Wagaman, 2017) and the ethic of care aligned with the values and ethics of the social work profession (Boler, 2005; Dominelli, 1996). Therefore, I try to find new and creative ways of learning and teaching such as the development of writing-intensive courses (Nichols, Erasmus, Ntsepo, Mlahleki, Mabalane, Ngobeni..., 2019) and encouraging peer- and intergenerational conversations.

Nkosiyazi Ndube's reflections: Banking education and systems theory

Located within the social work department at the University of the Witwatersrand, I believe that no one should be stuck trying to memorise to pass a test. Rather, they should learn to develop skills that will help them become informed practitioners. Although memorising can be a useful skill, it should not be the sole focus of education. Inquiry-based learning is important to help improve education, because this makes the student more immersed in the topic and deeply understand the information. This achieves nothing other than encouraging bad habits on the part of students and destroys creative and individual thinking (Jerome, 2018). My reflection focuses on the notion of moving away from the banking education concept to adopting a more socially just, empowering

approach that looks deeper into the various systems that come into play when tackling the concept of decolonisation.

What does decolonisation mean to me?

For me, decolonising education has to do with the gradual shift from solely relying on Eurocentric approaches and theories towards inclusive, critical practice. I recognise that Eurocentric models of practice are resource-intensive and exclusionary of local context. The curriculum should be representative and responsive to the context in which students will practice. I view decolonising education as incorporation of indigenous knowledge foregrounded in day-to-day experiences and within different cultural practices and beliefs. The aim is the development of a curriculum that is relevant, values local knowledge and experiences, and intentional about what is taught. However, this does not mean that one cannot borrow from Eurocentric settings, especially within professional practice fields.

For example, the way students are taught the different counselling and interventionist skills in theory is not reflective of some situations they are confronted with in the field. The emphasis in theory is on nuclear families and yet, within the South African context, polygamous families are still common, especially in rural settings. Lack of training in this area may then lead to the student failing to holistically render services as s/he may not be well equipped to handle such situations in practice. Therefore, my understanding of a decolonised curriculum is the incorporation of indigenous systems.

I believe that students' different experiences (representation and agency), in terms of their upbringing and their schooling, needs to be considered and encouraged. By encouraging such conversations within a higher education environment, I believe that I might help students to feel at ease and to share what they bring with them to class. I encourage them to share and critique what they know about a particular phenomenon. I believe that this might be a critical point of departure to the creation of decolonised curricula.

The realisation that students are coming from different environments is emphasised by systems theory, which states that the way different systems interact, misframe, oppress and disempower must be understood. In this context, the students I teach are products of the interaction between themselves and various other systems in which they may or may not be active participants. The role

played by these systems in shaping behaviour must be questioned and analysed as a means towards ensuring an adaptive process of reorganisation and growth. Importantly, the role played by the environment in the learning process warrants equal attention (Shaffer & Kipp, 2009), as with the high school experiences that students bring to class, especially at first year level.

Within professional degrees, before developing a plan on how a client can be assisted to help themselves, it is important to understand the interplay of the systems and how each system affects the client at an individual, family, group and community level. I argue that students need to be drawn into curriculum development at an early stage of their university education as they are not empty vessels. I describe this concept in detail in the next section outlining my learning and teaching philosophy.

Learning and teaching philosophy and practice

My teaching strives to be participatory and inclusive, and not to install the teacher as having to feed their expert knowledge to students who know nothing. Rather students are knowledgeable and capable of contributing to their own learning. Freire (1970) calls viewing students as empty beings 'banking education'. The Banking model of education is a term used to describe and critique the traditional education system and is a metaphor of students as containers into which educators must pour knowledge (Freire, 1970). Freire exposes the flaws in the system of 'banking education' in that it does not teach true skills other than memorising information long enough to pass a test. In addition, Jerome (2018) states that teachers use their authority to control what is being taught, which means that they use their power over the students to make students comply with what the teacher knows. This kind of hegemony disregards the knowledge that students bring to the teaching space and disempowers students.

In contrast to banking education, I create a platform that encourages a two-way flow of information, that is, from students and from myself as the educator. I use presentations and encourage students to work in pairs and/or in groups, which further encourages students to share what they know about the subject. This is especially so during the Human Growth and Development lectures and in Social Development Seminars for 4th year students because humans grow and develop in many ways. If what they bring is incorporated in the curriculum, this represents a decolonised curriculum. For most student presentations, I use peer assessment and feedback. This places the power within the students themselves and encourages agency.

Poppy Masinga's reflections: Towards student empowerment through liberation

I am a Black African social work educator and coordinator of the Master of Arts programme in Social Development, teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. I am a product of Bantu Education – an apartheid education system purposefully designed to exclude and disenfranchise Black students. My peers and I were not allowed to have a voice. We were not allowed to critically engage or disagree with our lecturers. We were expected to be submissive to authority. As such, I internalised this marginalisation.

Oelofsen (2015) asserts that the history of oppression, denial of opportunities, and poverty have affected native Black people's abilities to compete equally with their White counterparts. Hence, Swartz (2010) asserts that to be unable to participate directly in the function of the collective, is to be excluded from full participation as a citizen. I continue to encounter students with low self-esteem, who lack confidence to share their views openly and challenge injustice and human rights abuse. This is an indication of the continuation of the apartheid system within the HE context in South Africa.

My conviction is that total liberation within the academy can only be achieved if all students can engage on an equal footing with lecturers, superiors or politicians (Oelofsen, 2015), and are conscientised about unjust power differentials. In line with Paulo Freire's notion of critical pedagogy, a justice-oriented approach to education should humanize and empower students to question oppression (Breunig, 2009). I believe that a decolonised curriculum could empower students to express individual resistance to subordination, political interference, and hegemony. Contrary to St. Clair and Kishimoto (2010), many academics in South Africa only pay lip service to classroom debates on social inequality.

What does decolonisation mean to me?

A decolonised curriculum means placing emphasis on multiculturalism, decentring knowledge from the global North, emphasizing respect for diversity, encouraging open debate on current socio-economic and political rhetoric, and allowing students to have a voice not only on what transpires in the country, but on the content that is taught. Decolonisation is not only about enhancing factual knowledge about traumatic historical experiences of being colonised. Decolonisation also involves enhancing Black peoples' critical thinking skills and providing them with tools and techniques to

critically analyse situations and engage in advocacy activities that challenge oppression. Moreover, decolonisation means empowering students with context-specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be able to solve the complex problems that South Africa and the continent face. It means preparing students to become critical, ethical, and innovative. It means providing educational content that is context relevant and sharing with them tools and techniques that are relevant to our cultural beliefs, politics and physical environments.

More importantly, decolonisation is about giving constructive input to positively influence students' beliefs and attitudes about their capabilities. It is about changing their negative perceptions of themselves as incapable and powerless. As Oelofsen (2015) asserts, decolonisation is often conceived of as the change that colonised countries go through when they become politically independent from their former colonisers. Decolonisation is much more than changing students' minds and perceptions of themselves. I support the idea that for decolonisation to take place, it is imperative that we decolonise the intellectual landscape (Oelofsen, 2015) of higher education institutions. Therefore, it is imperative that I not only focus on decolonising the curriculum and conscientising students, but also on decolonising the academy.

My theoretical lens is based on transformational education. I provide students with opportunities to apply theory to solve real societal issues to change people's lives. This is in line with Sayani's (2015) idea of students as critical thinkers rather than rote learners. My decolonised curriculum epitomises a transformative education, with content designed to empower students to deal with complex socio-economic, political, cultural and environmental issues prevalent in diverse South African and African communities. I believe I need to integrate and not prioritise indigenous knowledge systems in my curriculum. Particularly as, as Maringe (2018) argues, when we prioritise indigenous knowledge systems, we will be emulating the colonisers. My belief is that indigenous knowledge will facilitate local-level decision making in rural communities, because there is value in maintaining cultural practices that inform social work practitioners and policy makers who are striving to bring about context-relevant change.

Learning and teaching philosophy and practice

In my teaching practice, I position myself as a coach and as a co-learner, because I believe students bring significant personal experience and knowledge obtained from the different communities they belong to. They bring to the classroom profound learning experiences, which enhance their personal

and professional growth. I provide students with safe spaces to engage in in-depth, peer-to-peer learning and dialogue. My focus is on transforming students into critical, thoughtful global citizens. In this manner, I believe my decolonised teaching practice educates students to be leaders and creators of the change they want to see in the communities they belong to. I do this by creating safe learning environments where students' voices are recognised, and in which they can represent themselves. I endeavour to "transform perspectives" whereby an individual undergoes change in understanding the self, revises one's belief system and makes behavioural and attitudinal changes (Khabanyane, Maimane & Ramabenyane, 2014:453). As Mezirow (1991) argues, transformative learning occurs amongst diverse groups of students when they critically reflect on their values, assumptions and beliefs and consciously make and implement plans to change the status quo and bring about justice in the world (Meesuaisinta, Pathumcharoenwattana & Boonprakob, 2014).

Despite all my efforts, I battle to transform the power relations at institutional and political levels. As Smith and Nathane (2018) note, South African social work education is still situated in Western modernism and broadly within racist capitalism. Hence, I include critical thinking in my course design so that students have opportunities to challenge unhealthy power relations and social injustice. In decolonising the educational and political systems, students engage in mock policy-making exercises where they learn skills such as advocacy and lobbying by compiling policy issue papers or policy briefs.

Najma Agherdien's reflections: Towards a values-based education and critiquing negative moments

I am a Curriculum and Teaching Team Leader and Education Lecturer located in the Centre for Learning Teaching and Development (CLTD). I grapple with addressing decolonisation in my daily interactions with academics and students. Writing this article, opens space and opportunity for conscious reflection on my positionality and how that directs my way of working towards a decolonising project.

What does decolonisation mean to me?

The debate around decolonising the curriculum is one spurred by historically-accumulated negative moments. Mbembe's (2015) notion of negative moments relates to emerging and unsettled aversions, characterised by uncertainty. This has been true of the decolonising debate. Apartheid

has left an undesirable legacy that remains with us. One recent moment is the controversial study titled: Age- and education related effects on cognitive functioning in Coloured¹ South African women. This study found Coloured females to be cognitively challenged (Nieuwoudt, Dickie, Coetsee, Engelbrecht & Terblanche, 2019). A national outcry against this perpetuation of colonial and stereotypical othering of Coloureds followed. In terms of my own position, being a Coloured female academic myself, this negative moment brought back many unpleasant memories. An even more recent moment relates to the article written by an academic at a prominent South African research university that questions why Blacks are not 'greener' or are less likely to consider studying biological sciences. In my view, critically interrogating 'negative moments' in education is central to the decolonisation project and positions the call for transformed curricula as critical.

Besides the White/non-White divide and the global North/global South divide, there is also a South-South (elite and non-elite) divide that remain with us despite rigorous debates and efforts (Soudien, Reddy & Woolard, 2019). Opportune moments to decolonise present themselves to me during curricular renewal efforts and when engaging in initial teacher education. The closest I would get to a definition of decolonisation is that it involves a consistent and explicit commitment to infusing curricula with the timeless principles of equality, equity, and justice.

My positionality in regard to my religious conviction directs my way of being in this world. Social justice outlines my life journey. This theoretical lens informs my methodologies, practices and scholarly identity. Enacting decolonisation includes a concern with eradicating social ills through a values-based pedagogy that foregrounds an authentic learning methodology. My practice and course design involve students' active engagement in activities that require challenging existing norms, ideologies, and practices. The process warrants embracing each other's agency and freedom of choice. However, this is problematic. Students find the idea of expressing their agency as challenging partly because of the power imbalances in hierarchical university structures, and partly because of how they have been socialised in their secondary schooling. Our ethical and moral obligation is to teach with tolerance and respect and reject all forms of injustice.

In my teaching, tolerance coupled with respect is valued. Two of the most mentioned words in the Quran are knowledge (*ilm*) and justice (*qist*). The word *ilm* appears more than 800 times in the holy Quran (Malik, 2019:6) pointing to the significance of seeking and contributing to knowledge. The

¹ In southern Africa, the term 'Coloured' has a specialised meaning in that it denotes a person of mixed racial ancestry rather than one who is black, as it does in most other parts of the world (Adhikari, 2009:viii).

Prophet ﷺ is narrated to have promised prisoners of war their freedom in return for teaching 10 children to read and write (Malik, 2019). Further, Muslims live in the light (*nur*) of the Prophet ﷺ, hence the high regard for teaching from an Islamic pedagogical perspective. Since the pursuit of justice is the driving force, I propose this as a way of being in the world. Nevertheless, not all students and/or colleagues are religious beings. Rather, I propagate values such as respect, dignity, care for others and collective wellbeing (whilst Islamic oriented, these are also universal principles).

Learning and teaching philosophy and practice

Thinking deeply about how students learn and/or how we teach is central to my work. Views of knowledge and knowing shapes the way one designs learning experiences for and with students. In essence, learning entails a process of identity formation (Wenger, 1998), collaboration and reflection, core to the decolonisation project. I encourage students to question what needs to transform and who will benefit from such transformation. In partnership, I design and develop learning experiences that align with Vygotsky's (1978) socio-constructivist principles (for example, collaboration, articulation, reflection, and knowledge [co]construction). Coupled with Critical Theory and a Socratic approach (learning to question everything), socio-constructivism makes for powerful learning experiences and is critical in decolonising curricula. Essentially, it is not enough to understand the world but to critique and question everything in it. To encourage critique, I pose questions and prompt staff and students to pose some of their own (valuing their experiences and agency). Assignments include solving problems faced by the societies in which they are located.

Viewing education as a public good implies embracing transformative, and socially just pedagogies. In my view, transformative learning involves critically interrogating the root cause(s) of 'negative moments' in education and actively seeking representation and change for the good of all. To this end, students and I engage in collaborative sense making, so that we find our place in this world. Decolonisation thus encompasses methodologies that value self-representation and communicate to students and staff that they deserve to be in this space. My assumption is that given opportunities to exercise their agency (question and critique), students have access to equitable outcomes. However, what remains challenging are the structures (policies and unspoken rules of engagement) and cultural practices (existing beliefs and values) that influence how students and colleagues exercise their agency.

Discussion: What decolonised curricula mean to us

Viewing our stories through multiple lenses and as a collective was an attempt to illustrate our way of knowing what decolonisation meant to us. We achieved some successes but are also left with some constraints. We now explicitly identify similarities and differences in our reflections and the inherent tensions of our teaching practices.

Similarities

Our stories reveal slight attention to shared material resources. In all four stories, mention is made of the marginalised, without any detail as to how to address unequal access to resources. Perhaps our context (working at a well-resourced, historically white university) means that we have less of a struggle to provide resources to students in need. Nevertheless, we are all aware of the unequal nature of the society we live in. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the need for the redistribution of pedagogical tools, infrastructure and software if the poor are not to be left further behind. The digital divide, need for academic literacies and related support issues that accompany economic reform are systemic, beyond individual or university reform efforts, and perhaps form part of a political aspect regarding passivity towards oppressive forces. Still, we agree with Bozalek and Boughey (2012) who intimate that social justice cannot be achieved if any of the dimensions (economic, cultural and political) are neglected and material redistribution is thus a clear gap that needs closer attention.

All four reflections focus heavily on student agency (embracing what students bring to the table), questioning and/or critique and having a collective voice in curricula development and design. We agree with Soudien *et al* (2019) that transformation of wider society is necessary and both personal and political. We further agree with these authors that South African universities can ill-afford to be so 'disconnected' from society (Soudien *et al*, 2019). Hence, all of us argue for a re-envisioning of the entire system, evidenced in words such as transformation, change, disrupt and shift. We draw attention to equitable participation of all students towards shifting away from a fractured, divided, and unequal system. It is not so much that one cannot exercise agency until one has identified one's own. Rather, we all recognised the need for student agency (to voice, critique, question and challenge) all aspects that affect them. Essentially, we call for an authentic representation of the self.

Differences

Where we differ in our views on decolonisation is in our approaches and practices. Roshini uses an approach that values Ubuntu and authentic learning, Nkosi proposes a shift away from a banking model towards a systems' thinking approach, Poppy proposes transformation through empowerment and conscientisation for total liberation from colonialism and internalised oppression, and Najma calls for simultaneously understanding and critiquing the world. While our pathways to decolonisation differ, we see this collaboration as indicative of our own histories, cultures, and biographies which is the strength that lies in diversity. Our individual learning philosophies, associated theories and conceptions did not offer a full picture of decolonization but are a good start to better understand the learning experiences we create for students and consider how a stronger link to student identity could aid the decolonization project.

Recognition of our own voice, cultural differences, and acknowledgement of individual agency was core. The challenge for us is that we could be "insulating national bodies as well as the education system as a whole from critique" as Bozalek and Boughey (2012:700) argue. We acknowledge that within the confines of this paper we have not interrogated the political aspects associated with achieving justice. The broader fight for transformation is necessary and requires greater collective action. In this paper, we have confined ourselves to focus on the spaces where we have agency.

Remaining tensions

In our pedagogical theorisations to facilitate our understanding of decolonisation, some tensions remain.

Firstly, regarding a strong version of decolonisation as advocated by American scholars Tuck and Yang (2012) who calls for a political movement for restitution, we are concerned that we might be calling for a weak version of decolonisation as captured by terms like multiculturalism and diversity in our stories. Suggested is a stronger focus on equity as fairness of distribution and procedure, as espoused by Espinoza (2007) and student agency through equitable power relations (Bozalek, Watters & Gachago, 2015), and essentially dismantling all forms of oppression viz, economic, cultural and political. We further acknowledge that we draw on American literature that foreground land and downplay intellectual decolonisation, while the Southern African context foregrounds intellectual decolonisation.

Secondly, we hope to move beyond the binaries of, for instance the West vs Indigenous knowledges; North vs South; colonised vs coloniser; Black vs White. Instead, we want to draw attention to moving into transmodernity, pluriversity, differences-in-common, etc., which links to the philosophical paradox between the particular and the universal. We call for universal principles of justice and fairness.

Thirdly, while our stories imply that the modern Western university can be reproduced and transformed to become a 'decolonised' institution, we do not pretend to know how far this is possible. We do believe that collective sense making and/or reflection as Foong, Nor and Nolan (2018) call for, could aid in getting us closer to the transformation agenda. We can only but work within our pockets of agency.

Final word

We acknowledge that our stories reflect each of our respective worldviews, experiences, and life worlds. As Jansen (2018) intimates, curriculum is interpreted through teachers' own biographies and we thus cannot hope to decolonise without "coming to terms with our own colonial heritage". Both individual and collective reflections matter.

References

- Adhikari, M. 2009. *Burdened by Race: Coloured Identities in Southern Africa*. Cape Town: UCT Press.
- Agherdien, N. & Pillay, R. 2018. Enabling transformation through socially just critical pedagogies in a health and wellbeing course: A South African case study. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*. 28(3): 338-354.
- Angu, P. E. 2018. Disrupting Western epistemic hegemony in South African universities: Curriculum decolonisation, social justice, and agency in post-Apartheid South Africa. *The International Journal of Learner Diversity and Identities*. 25(1-2): 9-22.
- Barnett, R. 2004. Learning for an unknown future. *Higher Education Research & Development*. 23(3), 247-260.

- Biko, S. 2015. *I Write What I Like: Selected Writings*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Boler, M. 2005. *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bozalek, V. 2014. Reframing social work ethics through a political ethic of care and social justice lens. In Banks, S. *Ethics*. Bristol: Policy Press. 37-44.
- Bozalek, V. & Biersteker, L. 2010. Exploring power and privilege using participatory learning and action techniques. *Social Work Education*. 29(5): 551-572.
- Bozalek, V. & Boughey, C. 2012. (Mis)framing higher education in South Africa. *Social Policy & Administration*. 46(6): 688-703.
- Bozalek, V., Watters, K. & Gachago, D. 2015. Power, democracy and technology: The potential dangers of care for teachers in higher education. *Alternation*. 16(Special Edition): 259-282.
- Breunig, M. 2009. Teaching for and about critical pedagogy in the post-secondary classroom. *Studies in Social Justice*. 3(2): 247-62.
- Cook, S. 2019. Social work ethics and values within the context of South African social work education and practice. In Marson, S. M. & McKinney Jr, R. E. *The Routledge Handbook of Social Work Ethics and Values*. London: Routledge. pp. 73-82.
- Czerniewicz, L., Agherdien, N., Badenhorst, J., Belluigi, D., Chambers, T., Chili, M., de Villiers, M., Felix, A., Gachago, D., Gokhale, C., Ivala, E., Kramm, N., Madiba, M., Mistri, G., Mqgqwashu, E., Pallitt, N., Prinsloo, P., Solomon, K., Strydom, S., Swanepoel, M., Waghid, F. & Wissing, G. 2020. A wake-up call: Equity, inequality and Covid-19 emergency remote teaching and learning. *Postdigital Science and Education*. 2(3): 946-967.
- Dominelli, L. 1996. Deprofessionalizing Social Work: Anti-oppressive practice, competencies and postmodernism. *The British Journal of Social Work*. 26(2): 153-175.
- Dykes, G. 2018. Exploring participatory parity in higher education: Experiences of social work students. *Social Work*. 54(2): 163-178.

Erasmus, Z. 2019. Oral presentation on decolonisation of the curriculum, Teaching and Learning Writing Retreat (March, 2019), Foxwood House, Johannesburg.

Espinoza, O. 2007. Solving the equity–equality conceptual dilemma: A new model for analysis of the educational process. *Educational Research*. 49(4): 343-363.

Foong, L. Y. Y., Nor, M. B. M., & Nolan, A. 2018. The influence of practicum supervisors' facilitation styles on student teachers' reflective thinking during collective reflection. *Reflective Practice*. 19(2): 225-242.

Freire, P. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos). New York: Herder and Herder.

Fricke, M. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Herrington, J., Reeves, T. C., & Oliver, R. 2014. Authentic learning environments. In *Handbook of Research on Educational Communications and Technology*. New York, NY: Springer. pp. 401-412.

Jansen, J. 2018. Inaugural Africa Day Lecture: Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0II9QoXkGHk> (accessed: 24 October 2019).

Jerome, C. 2018. *The Disadvantages of Banking Education*. London: Rebus Press.

Khabanyane, K. E., Maimane, J. R. & Ramabenyane, M. J. 2014. A critical reflection on transformative learning as experienced by student-teachers during school-based learning. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*. 5(27): 452-459.

Khan, N. 2020. Divine duty, Islam and social justice. Available at: <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/nazir-khan/divine-duty-islam-and-social-justice/> (accessed 10 February 2020).

Khunou, G., Phaswana, E., Khosa-Shangase, K. & Canham, H. (eds.). 2019. *Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience*. Cape Town: HSRC.

Kumalo, S. & Praeg, L. 2019. Decoloniality and justice a priori. *Journal of Decolonising Disciplines*. 1(1): 1-10.

Leibowitz, B. 2012. *Higher Education for the Public Good: Views from the South*. Stellenbosch: SUN Media.

Malik, F. 2019. All that we lost: The colonized mind and the decline of the Islamic education system. Available at: <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/faisal-malik/the-colonized-mind-and-the-decline-of-the-islamic-education-system/#.XbtUKugzZPY> (accessed: 10 September 2019).

Maringe, F. 2018. Decolonising Higher Education Curricula in the University. Booklet Number 3. Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand.

Mbembe, A. 2015. Decolonizing knowledge and the question of the archive. Lecture presented at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER). Available at: <http://wiser.wits.ac.za/content/achille-mbembe-decolonizing-knowledge-and-question-archive-12054> (accessed 5 August, 2019).

Meesuaisinta, M., Pathumcharoenwattana, W. & Boonprakob, P. 2014. The main elements of a transformative learning process to enhance authentic self-esteem of male violent juvenile delinquents: A systematic review study. *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 152: 925-930.

Mezirow, J. 1991. *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Mitchell, B., Sarfati, D. & Stewart, M. 2022. COVID-19 and beyond: A prototype for remote/virtual social work field placement. *Clinical Social Work Journal*. 50(1), 3-10.

Moore, S. A. & Mitchell, R. C. 2008. *Power, Pedagogy and Praxis: Social Justice in the Globalized Classroom*. Leiden: BRILL.

Nichols, P., Erasmus, Z., Ntsepo, N., Mlahleki, L., Mabalane, K., Ngobeni, K. & Ckool, I. 2019. Writing within simultaneity: A reflective progress report through letters from the Wits Writing Programme. *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics Plus*. 57: 131-147.

Nieuwoudt, S., Dickie, K. E., Coetsee, C., Engelbrecht, L. & Terblanche, E. 2019. Retracted article: Age- and education-related effects on cognitive functioning in Colored South African women. *Aging, Neuropsychology, and Cognition*. 27(3): 1-17.

Oelofsen, R. 2015. Decolonisation of the African mind and intellectual landscape. *Phronimon*, 16(2): 130-146

Pillay, R., & Agherdien, N. (2021). Inclusivity, equality and equity: Student (em)power(ment) through ICT mediated learning. In Maguvhe, M., Mphahlele, R. S. & Moonsamy, S. *Empowering Students and Maximising Inclusiveness and Equality through ICT*. Leiden: Brill. pp. 11-26.

Rasool, S. & Ross, E. 2016. The power and promise of group work: Consumer evaluation of group work services in Gauteng, South Africa. *Research on Social Work Practice*. 27(2): 206-214.

Sayani, A. H. 2015. My philosophy of teaching and learning. *Open Access Library Journal*. 2:e2109.

Schön, D. 2011. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Segal, E. A. & Wagaman, M. A. 2017. Social empathy as a framework for teaching social justice. *Journal of Social Work Education*. 53(2): 201-211.

Sekudu, J. 2019. Ubuntu. In Van Breda, A., Dykes, G., Lombard, A., Mbedzi, P., Rasool, S. & Schenck, R. *Theories for Decolonial Social Work Practice in South Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press. pp. 105.

Shaffer, D. R. & Kipp, K. 2009. *Developmental Psychology: Childhood and Adolescence*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Singleton, G. E. & Hays, C. 2008. Beginning courageous conversations about race. In: Pollock, M. *Everyday Antiracism: Getting Real about Race in School*. New York: New Press. pp. 18-23.

Smith, T. L. 2012. *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People*, 2nd edition. London: Zed Books.

Smith, L. H. & Nathane, M. 2018. #NotDomestication #NotIndigenisation: Decoloniality in social work education. *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development*. 30(1): 1-18.

Soudien, C., Reddy, V. & Woolard, I. 2019. Poverty and inequality in South Africa: The state of the discussion in 2018. *Poverty and Inequality: Diagnosis Prognosis Responses: State of the Nation*. Pretoria: HSRC Press. pp. 1-41.

St. Clair, D. & Kishimoto, K. 2010. Decolonizing teaching: A cross-curricular and collaborative model for teaching about race in the university. *Multicultural Education*. 18(1): 18–24.

Stein, S. & Andreotti, V. D. O. 2017. Decolonization and higher education. In Peters, M. A. *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*. Singapore: Springer. pp. 370-375.

Swartz, S. 2010. *Ikasi: The Moral Ecology of South Africa's Township Youth*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Swartz, S. & Scott, D. 2012. The restitution of personhood: An expanded paradigm for social justice and transformation in broken spaces. The restitution of personhood: A theorized framework for social justice action in broken spaces. Available at: <https://repository.hsrc.ac.za/bitstream/handle/20.500.11910/3143/7545.pdf?sequence=1> (Accessed 13 April 2022).

Therborn, G. 2013. *The Killing Fields of Inequality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Tuck, E. & Yang, K. W. 2012. Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*. 1(1): 1-40.

van Breda, A. D. 2019. Developing the notion of Ubuntu as African theory for social work practice. *Social Work*. 55(4): 439-450.

Vygotsky, L. S. 1978. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Walker, M. 2018. Dimensions of higher education and the public good in South Africa. *Higher Education*. 76: 555-569.

Wenger, E. 1998. Communities of practice: Learning as a social system. *Systems Thinker*. 9(5): 2-3.

Zembylas, M. & McGlynn, C. 2012. Discomforting pedagogies: Emotional tensions, ethical dilemmas and transformative possibilities. *British Educational Research Journal*. 38(1): 41-59.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>