

## Enlivening pedagogical methods in the classroom through visual arts

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### ABSTRACT

The call for 'decolonising' the curricula by the #FeesMustFall student-led protest movement, in response to an increase of fees at South African universities from 2015, presents educators with the challenge of engaging more relevant methodologies for teaching and learning local content that are appropriate for revised approaches in higher education. Our question in response to this challenge is: how do we enliven curricula and develop pedagogical approaches that can engender a sense of belonging for incoming first-year students and prevent polarising tendencies in the classroom? The visual arts are well positioned to disrupt divisions and stereotypes and offer creative ways to explore patriarchal and colonial power relations. Arts provide safe and empathetic ways for incoming students to gain perspective on their situations from both insider and outsider positions, and to develop a compassionate and enlarged view of the world.

In this paper, we introduce some definitions and theoretical positions of decolonising frameworks in the classroom and present a series of first-year classroom interventions as examples of praxis. It is our contention that the arts create the conditions for equalising a classroom space through directing visual processes to engage issues such as the polarisation of race and class. Students are able to engage with ways of responding to their own understandings of how they see themselves as African students.

## Introduction

The call for ‘decolonising’ the curricula by the #FeesMustFall student-led protest movement, in response to an increase of fees at South African universities from 2015, presents educators with the challenge of engaging more relevant methodologies for teaching and learning local content that are appropriate for revised approaches in higher education. As co-authors teaching in the Visual Art Department at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa, a question we ask in response to this challenge is: how do we enliven curricula and develop pedagogical approaches that can engender a sense of belonging for incoming first-year students and prevent polarising tendencies in the classroom? The visual arts are well positioned to disrupt divisions and stereotypes and offer creative ways to explore patriarchal and colonial power relations. Arts provide safe and empathetic ways for incoming students to gain perspective on their situations from both insider and outsider positions, and to develop a compassionate and enlarged view of the world.

In this paper, we aim to clarify how we understand aspects of decolonising frameworks in the classroom by introducing some definitions and theoretical positions. We also relate these frameworks to how we perceive the arts as well placed to address aspects of decolonisation which, in the classroom context, we consider as creating greater democratisation. We see arts-based approaches as valuable contributions to understanding the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South (SOTL) and present a series of first-year classroom interventions as examples of praxis. Visual processes, in this context, provide useful methods to create the conditions for enlivening the classroom environment to engage issues of inequality and polarisation in a safe space.

The series of first-year classroom interventions are examples of praxis, and more specifically offer ways to introduce issues of identity and critical engagement to the decolonising discourse that has been dominating Higher Education since the start of the so-called Fallist<sup>1</sup> student movement in late 2015. It is our contention that the arts create the conditions for equalising a classroom space through directing visual processes to engage issues such as the polarisation of race and class. Students are able to engage with ways of responding to their own understandings of how they see themselves as African students.

## Theory: Decolonising curricula and SOTL

What do we mean by decolonising the curricula?

This paper offers a number of activities that we as visual art educators have introduced in the classroom to explore ways of reducing polarisation and creating safer and more equal relations among students. While we refer to this as ‘democratisation’ in our classroom, rather than ‘decolonisation’, it is instructive to understand some of the theoretical responses to the question of what it means to ‘decolonise’ the curricula that are emerging in the current literature.

In ‘Decolonization is not a metaphor’ (2012:3), Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang caution against the casual use of language in references such as “decolonising our schools,” “decolonising methods,” or

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Fallist’ is a general name for those supporting the #Rhodesmustfall and #feesmustfall campaigns.

“decolonising student thinking”. They claim that this sort of carelessness with language can function as a recolonising discourse:

... we want to be sure to clarify that decolonization is not a metaphor. When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future.

Tuck and Yang (2012:3) emphasise that decolonisation is not “a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools”. In the light of their analysis, it seems clear that educators need to start using and encouraging precision in the language we use to describe the aftermath of something as traumatic and far-reaching as colonialism. In fact, in the context of teaching in the arts and humanities, the term ‘coloniality’ may be more precise and useful than ‘colonialism’ or ‘postcolonialism’, both of which denote political or economic relations in which one nation’s sovereignty rests on that of another’s. Coloniality refers to more than the aftermath of colonialism. As Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2010:97) explains, coloniality highlights longstanding inequalities of power arising from colonialism that continue to manifest in culture, labour, intersubjective relations and knowledge production. Coloniality refers to the way in which such inequalities are “maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and ... many other aspects of our modern experience” (Maldonado-Torres 2010:97).

Cheryl Hendricks and Brenda Leibowitz recall a comment made by Maldonado-Torres during a panel discussion at the University of Johannesburg that demonstrates the continuing attachment of people and systems to the inequalities that colonialism has entrenched. They note that “the very act of decolonisation generates anxiety. It unsettles one’s sense of well-being and belonging” (Hendricks & Leibowitz 2016:n.p). The debate about coloniality captures this sense of anxiety and entrenchment in a way that postcolonialism does not, and this uncertainty and ‘aliveness’ opens possibilities for exploration and questions that postcolonialism or decolonialism may not.

There are good reasons for the authors, as educators, to problematise decolonisation as a ‘lens’ through which to represent the scope of the debate surrounding curriculum change. Curriculum change affords us as academics in the Visual Art Department with opportunities to insert or fit African content into the curriculum. We agree with the position asserted by educationalist Ahmed Essop (2016:n.p) who also recognises that decolonisation is too narrow and limiting a lens through which to engage the debate surrounding curriculum change. Decolonisation refers to the historical process whereby countries that were ruled by foreign powers obtain their independence. According to Essop’s understanding in the context of Higher Education, decolonisation seeks to affirm African knowledge and cultural traditions in universities, which remain dominated by western traditions. This is a more useful premise to engage practically with what knowledge is taught and how it is presented in the classroom.

The debates brought to the fore by Hendricks and Leibowitz have also been very instructive to educators looking for ways to improve their curricula. They argued that decolonisation of knowledge demands that “universities revisit their curricula and include – not in uncritical ways – epistemologies,

texts and scholarly work that have been previously excluded or marginalised". They confirm that "students must play a central role in the decolonisation of knowledge" by participating in the attempts to revisit what is taught, and how it is taught (Hendricks & Leibowitz 2016:n.p). The consequence of students not participating in the decolonisation of knowledge, they warn, "is to continue to be complicit in the reproduction of social and cognitive injustices and to condemn students to be perpetual consumers of knowledge," and they suggest that students should become "creators and authors" of knowledge (Hendricks & Leibowitz 2016). In agreement with this position, we present classroom activities in which students engage creatively and responsively to the notion of 'consumed knowledge'. Artmaking entails that students become agents and co-creators through their integration and responses to 'received' knowledge.

In this paper, we adopt the perspective of Achille Mbembe (2015), whose manifesto on decolonising knowledge can be used as a guide for educators concerned with decolonising the classroom as a site of engagement. Mbembe's work inspires consideration of several persistent challenges, which include:

- How we might reinvent and attempt to reduce power relationships in the classroom;
- How we can create safe spaces in the classroom so that everyone feels a sense of belonging;
- How we disentangle ourselves from obsolete pedagogies and look at teaching and learning as co-creation; and
- How we might change the paradigm of measuring achievement through quantitative assessment.

This framing of decolonising seems to serve aptly as 'a metaphor' for our use of the meaning of teaching and learning in the classroom situation, which is closer to enhancing a greater democratisation. Tuck and Yang's (2012:3) comment that decolonisation is not "a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools", could refer to their challenging of the centrality of whiteness and Western hegemony. However, we use 'decolonising' in this paper rather as a term that calls for inclusion, recognition and affirmation in the university, and an association that fits more closely in the social justice framing of SOTL toward a greater sense of equity and expressions of invisible voices in the classroom.

In this paper, we argue that the arts, when used for transformation practices, can achieve the kind of new imaginative possibilities, responsiveness, relevance, resilience and robustness that this field of scholarship and practice calls for. This can provide a counterpoint to the recognition of the increasing lack of humanness infiltrating the Higher Education system. For example, Michael Samuel in his 2017 article 'Developing a Syntax for SOTL' argues that current education systems perpetuate violence by refusing to recognise the difficulties inherent in negotiating competing expectations – the structural and personal – and by devaluing trust, honesty, compassion and justice. For Samuel (2017:23), this creates a situation in which both academics and students are valued only in terms of output. He argues for academics and disciplines to engage in "boundary crossing" and urges scholars to "exhibit epistemic disobedience" (Samuel 2017:33-34). As visual art educators, we support and are comfortable with these notions of "boundary crossing" and "epistemic disobedience" and propose that the arts can support a "bridge-building force" (Samuel 2017:34) as one of the methodologies of practice in higher education that we agree is needed between disciplines and specialisations for real transformation to occur. Keeping academic learning in silos of expertise can be seen to promote

elitism and dominance, which perpetuates notions of colonial power through Western hegemonies.

### **The arts as scholarship and practice to enhance SOTL**

In the context of using the arts as transformational practice, coloniality becomes a valuable lens through which to envisage a more democratic space. Given the widespread colonial history of Africa, an understanding of coloniality is necessary to any engagement with the diverse classroom. It is therefore important for educators, when teaching students, to be cognisant of the need for inclusion. If this is not the case, the higher education system will continue to perpetuate the injustices of excluding black, indigenous, queer or poor African voices as less legitimate alternatives to European ones.

Hendricks and Leibowitz (2016:n.p) comment that students have pointed out that “if knowledge isn’t decolonised, academics, too, will remain perpetual consumers rather than creators and authors”. They argue that “part of the purpose of a university is to think through these broader societal challenges and to provide students with access to alternative ways of envisioning the world and interpreting their experiences”. In addition, they argue that students have to “play a central role in the attempts to revisit how and what is taught” (Hendricks & Leibowitz 2016:n.p).

Methodologies of teaching, or the “how and what is taught”, need to be revised from the instructional or delivery mode to allow greater participation by students. Arts practices are relational and can be instructional in this regard. The relationship extends beyond the medium to collaborators, such as those from whom inspiration is gained, as well as audiences, and ultimately it is extended to wider communities. According to Michelle LeBaron, a conflict resolution scholar, understanding the relational aspect of a conflict to be addressed is essential to knowing how to engage those involved. She maintains that arts practices can contribute to transformation in that they accent relationships; they are based in them and are focused on shifting them (LeBaron 2003). This can also refer to supporting learners and teachers stepping out of established patterns and becoming more active participants in exchange. As educators, we adopt the position that the kind of learning that values qualities of aesthetics and reciprocity which are embedded in engaging with art practices enhances capacities for communication, deeper learning, pride and increased self-esteem (Berman 2017:18).

Our challenge as educators is to enliven research, curricula and teaching approaches that can engender more ethical and empathetic relationships and to do so by introducing methods that require a deeper engagement with our students. From our perspective, the arts are well positioned to disrupt and cross the binaries created in the distinct and established disciplines of knowing and learning and to offer creative ways to explore the messiness of patriarchal and colonial power relations. The remainder of this paper focuses on introducing participatory and reciprocal arts practices in the classroom which, we argue, deepens the critical capacities of staff and students. These practices enable the classroom to become a safe space in which to take risks, and enhance empathetic qualities among and between members of the group.

### **An example of practice**

The practical work under consideration comprises a series of classroom strategies in the Visual Art

Department at the University of Johannesburg. Some of these strategies were introduced as an experimental classroom approach to mitigate risk and build cohesion among the incoming first-year students. We facilitated a series of workshops between 2014 and 2017 which, in our assessment, have contributed to modest but significant improvements in our capacity to support students, and in providing additional coping strategies.

As initiators of the workshops, we were motivated to draw on approaches such as appreciative inquiry (Hammond 1998), creative arts-based strategies (Berman & Allen 2012; Berman 2017), a capabilities approach (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2002, 2011) and whole-brain learning (De Boer, Du Toit, Bothma & Scheeper 2012). The methodologies we introduced into the classroom were experimental and spontaneous, but the principal philosophical approach used was asset-based or appreciative inquiry. This is an approach that begins by asking students about their strengths, and the positive experiences and stories that they bring to the group, rather than focusing on deficits or problems.

Innovative arts-based approaches for community engagement have long been a strength of the Visual Art Department at the University of Johannesburg,<sup>2</sup> yet those strategies had previously been applied outside the formal classroom environment, with senior students involved in community engagement programmes. The decades of community engagement in arts and social activism have provided valuable lessons to share in the process of addressing the issue of 'intersectionality' and greater equality in the classroom.

Our specific intervention consisted of a number of first-year classroom workshops, which were formulated to create a safe environment in order to raise awareness of issues and challenges facing students, such as transport, health, funding and family circumstances. The aim was also to use a peer-driven approach to change the dynamics in the classroom, to help the students to identify their strengths and to learn how to use them. The themes we wanted to address were asset-based, such as building confidence, creating equality in the classroom, enabling collaboration that encourages students to look out for each other, as well as animating a deeper experience of participatory citizenship. Students signed consent forms to allow us to document the process and use their contributions anonymously.

### **Introductions and ice-breakers**

The first workshop – gradually adjusted and refined from the first intervention in 2014 – introduced empathetic listening skills and teamwork to incoming first-year students. The initial workshop in term one was about getting to know each other. The first exercise required students to introduce themselves to each other in pairs, and each listener had to then introduce their partner to the class. In pairs that changed five to six times in the first hour, students were given two minutes each to talk and listen in response to a series of questions that had to do with their goals and dreams, passions and interests, early good and bad memories, and fears and hopes for their first-year at University (Figure 1). Our incoming art students, who come from racially and economically diverse backgrounds,

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<sup>2</sup> This includes a national poverty alleviation programme, implemented from 2000 with government funding, called Phumani Paper that established hand-papermaking craft projects across the country. Other projects involving art students have extended to partnering with community initiatives in rural sites in Limpopo Province and the North-West Province.

shared with the group some of the revelations that delighted or amazed them about their peers and discovered more commonalities than differences. In many ways some of the educational, racial and economic disparity still perpetuate marginalisation and polarisation in the classrooms.



Figure 1. First-year visual art students in dialogue with each other. Photograph: Author 1, First Semester 2016.

An example of one of the team-building exercises is using the students' combined bodies to make a human sculpture that could visually communicate a word. The possible words for this exercise included colonisation, racism, stigma, democracy, *ubuntu* and privilege. This exercise was conducted with groups of six or seven students who had 15 minutes to discuss their understanding of the selected word and agree on how they could represent that word. During reflective feedback after the session, they identified some of their learning experiences, stating that their ability to understand the body sculptures of the words reflected good teamwork, collective identity and the value of strong visual communication.

Another arts-based approach to enhance reciprocal dialogue and connection required the students to have non-verbal engagements with each other. First, in response to the question: "How are you feeling this morning?" they engaged in a visual conversation with each other in pairs. They could use paints, markers or crayons on a shared sheet of paper, but were not allowed to say or write words. They then moved into groups of five or six, and worked collectively on a group image in response to a question related to their first-year experience as Visual Art students (Figure 2). The last exercise required them to paint or draw a passion in their life and share something of the image/expression with which they felt comfortable.

The reflective verbal discussion, after the students shared their visual or embodied voices, was presented as an animated conversation that expressed commonalities, and shared confidences and narratives, that surprised and made connections between non-predictable pairs. By the end of the session, during one-on-one and group sharing, the energy in the room had shifted from nervous, quiet and restrained to loud, energised, engaged and excited. The ice in the room melted as new allies were formed.

## Whole-brain learning

In the second series of the workshops, usually held at the beginning of the second semester, we adapted a model of “whole-brain learning” that viewed the class as a system that required both sides of the brain to function as a whole. While this is not an arts-based exercise, it provided the groundwork for the intervention. This approach was influenced by an article written by a cross-disciplinary team at the University of Pretoria. In 2012, Anne-Louise de Boer, Theo Bothma, Pieter du Toit and Detken Scheepers from the Faculty of Education, Information Sciences and Health Sciences developed what they call a “comprehensive model” of learning style flexibility, in order to facilitate information literacy. De Boer *et al.* (2012:193) convincingly present a case where all four brain quadrants are included in teaching and learning strategies. The idea of presenting the classroom as a system in which all four modalities are represented, and together make up a whole, appealed to our idea of creating an egalitarian space in the classroom, where the diversity of perspectives can be seen as complementary and necessary for the optimum working of the whole.

In order to adapt this approach for presentation to the class we, as the facilitators, adapted the description from De Boer *et al.* (2012) and separated and defined the four different brain functions which we wrote up on flipchart sheets. We itemised all the qualities in each modality that consisted of a diagram of quadrants A, B, C and D (Figure 3). The A quadrant reflects a strong preference for thinking analytically and logically and for quantifying. Students in this mode favour working as individuals and not in groups; they prefer working on solving challenging problems, particularly in cases where the purpose of the project is clearly spelt out. They like fact-based lectures and presentations of well-researched topics.



Figure 2. First-year visual art students having non-verbal visual conversations. Photograph: Author 2, 2016.

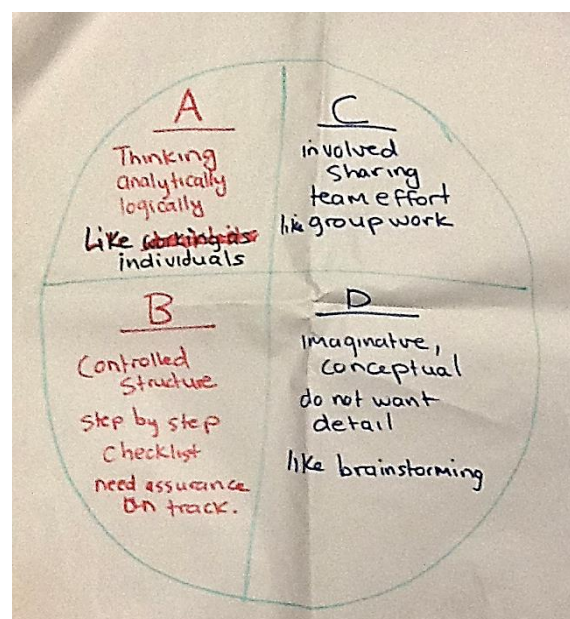


Figure 3. Whole Brain Learning Second Semester workshop. Chart used to divide the class according to modalities of brain functions. Photograph: Author 2, 2015.



The B quadrant similarly displays a strong preference for controlled, structured and organised thinking modes. Students in this mode might struggle in an environment that does not embrace order and structure. They prefer detailed lectures that explain topics step by step with checklists, in order to ensure they are on the right track.

The other quadrants present a different picture. What motivates those with a C-quadrant preference is being involved and able to share experiences with others. These individuals prefer to work in groups, enjoy team efforts and favour hands-on activities. They struggle with data overload, analysis and restricted time for expressing ideas. They prefer group discussions, role-play and sharing personal experiences.

The preference for the D quadrant is also holistic, involving the big picture. Students in this mode are imaginative, and do not want detail. They thrive on discovery, experimenting and synthesising parts into a new concept. They do not like lectures in the traditional form; they prefer brainstorming ideas, playing games or drawing mind maps (De Boer *et al.* 2012:194).

We then asked the students to stand next to the quadrant characteristics that they felt best described themselves, or with which they identified most closely. For example, in simple terms: left – organised; right – experimental. Interestingly, the class divided themselves quite evenly. We then blindfolded students and they met in the middle of the room to find a partner from the opposite group.

As the two lecturers involved in the facilitation, we made sure the students were grouped in twos and in some cases threes; those placing themselves in between quadrants were placed in a group of three with two students who had distinct preferences. They then “interviewed” each other, and shared and recorded all the individual strengths that each was bringing to the partnership. They also shared some of their weaknesses, and discussed between them how the different strengths in the combination could contribute to and complement the liabilities in the partnership. These small groups became accountable to each other in and out of the classroom for a limited period over the next term and until the next group meeting.

It was important for this exercise that each student understood their responsibilities. One of these responsibilities addressed the expectations of their group. These expectations were agreed upon between the members of the group. Should one of them be late for class or fail to hand in an assignment on time, for example, that student’s partner/s would be held responsible. Different strategies were agreed on by the group as to how they would hold each other accountable, including implementing a fine for no, or late, delivery of work.

We then assessed the success of the workshop with the assistance of the staff who teach these students. The feedback from a first-year theory teacher was that she was amazed by improved attendance, and the fact that someone in the class always had an explanation for a missing student; she understood it to be because they always covered for each other.<sup>3</sup> The theory results also improved as peer partners supported each other with research and writing skills.

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<sup>3</sup> This observation was documented in notes made in 2015.

## Reflexivity

Another workshop we implemented with different groups of first-year students toward the last term of their academic programme focused on self-reflection and evaluation. In this workshop, the students were asked to write a short reflective essay on “Getting to [an] A”. They were given the following two quotes by Benjamin Zander, an educator and conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, whose book *The Art of Possibility* (2002) explains the notion of individual transformation through music, in which he uses his experience of working with individuals through the arts to achieve excellence. We asked each class member to respond to Zander’s thesis by writing a personal reflection. This exercise sets out to question the established practice of top-down assessments that determines value of work by a numerical mark and asks the students to instead to start from the position of giving themselves an A.

The practice of giving [yourself] an A transports your relationships from the world of measurement into the universe of possibility ... This A is not an expectation to live up to, but a possibility to live into (Zander 2000:26).

In the measurement world, we set a goal and strive to achieve it. In the universe of possibility, we set the context and let life unfold (Zander 2000:22).

Each student was invited to express an aspiration to find their own level of excellence and a sense of agency with regard to the group. Some of the students’ responses included: “... by setting goals for myself I create a path and opportunities where I can better myself as an individual”; and “... it is not enough just to have abilities, we must learn to recognise them and use them appropriately.”<sup>4</sup>

Colleagues and tutors commented on generally good morale, improved performance (and pass rates), and stronger motivation and cohesiveness among the second- and third-year classes who had done the group workshops in their first year.

## Who is (not) an African?

This final presentation of a curricular intervention in the final term of the first-year class demonstrates how a visual art project can apply these claims for creating a safe and dialogical space in order to deepen critical reflection and take creative risks. By the end of 2016, the #FeesMustFall national student movement and calls for decolonising the classroom had caused renewed tension and polarisation along race lines in the classroom. The class under scrutiny consisted of approximately 40% white students and 60% black and mixed-race students. This project was adapted from a printmaking class project titled “Who is (not) an African?” which used the medium of drypoint<sup>5</sup> to respond to current debates. Our project was led by a recently graduated (white) master’s student who, as a new lecturer, had a close working relationship with the students who she was able to engage with as both peers and students. Students signed a consent form for the use of their anonymous statements and images in this project.

<sup>4</sup> These quotes are from two of the reflective essays written by the students.

<sup>5</sup> Drypoint is a printing method in which an image is engraved into a plate using a pointed metal tool.

The purpose of our printmaking project was to confront aspects of diverse identities in the classroom using multimodal approaches. To introduce the research and engagement with the project, students participated in multiple methods of pedagogical approaches which included team exercises, group discussions in and out of the classroom, PowerPoint presentations and video presentations by senior students. First-year students were able to engage in debates with senior and postgraduate students who deal with themes of ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ in their artworks. They were also able to attend a discussion with a (black) doctoral student on Post-African studies.

To learn the technique of drypoint, they were tasked with doing a series of exercises by researching and then imitating the style of an old master such as Rembrandt (in order to encourage them to understand the value of the past) and then they were tasked to take a ‘selfie’ with their phones and use the old master’s drawing style to reinterpret an expression of the contemporary self. The final component of the project required the students to interpret the theme “Who is (not) an African?” by composing a self-portrait set in a specific context. Students’ reflections on their own learning from this project as well as a visual analysis of individual works revealed how they saw themselves in a process of becoming in a decolonising political and educational landscape.

Two first-year white male students struggled with being confronted with their own understanding of whiteness and privilege in post-apartheid South Africa. Student One’s<sup>6</sup> drypoint entitled *Of Rags and Riches* (Figure 4) consists of three different depictions of coins. The bottom left coin depicts a Kruger Rand, symbolic of the student’s ancestry dating back to the Dutch and British settlers. In depicting this coin, he has replaced the traditional springbok, which appears on the original coin, with a self-portrait wearing a crown of headphones. He sees the headphones, as well as the car depicted on the third coin, as symbolic of the materiality associated with white privilege. The lion on the coin in the centre of the print represents the pride of his connection to his Dutch/Flemish heritage. The text in all three coins has been written backwards as a metaphor of his world being turned upside down and back to front. He includes an imprint of a shoe at the top and bottom of the work that represents a physical symbol of treading over his heritage. He



Figure 4. Student One. *Of Rags and Riches* 2016. Drypoint and monoprint. 29.7 x 42.0 cm.

<sup>6</sup> While the students consented to the use of their artworks and names, we have chosen to keep all students contributions anonymous in the context of protecting confidentiality. We have referred to the three students discussed here as Student One, Student Two and Student Three, and their perspectives are derived from the artist’s statements that accompanied their work when it was exhibited.

reflects further on his response to “Who is (not) an African?”:

As a white male living in South Africa, I am forced to feel apologetic about the past of my family, as well as constantly being required to have a need to wash away my heritage. I am a born-free [this term denotes having been born after South Africa’s democratic elections in 1994] and refuse to be ostracised for sins of the past that I had no part in. All I once knew and accepted has been flipped on its head: my heritage is now different to what I used to believe, my ability to appreciate what has been provided for me is hated, and the pride I had for my family and place in the world, disrupted (Student One, accompanying artist’s statement 2016).

Student Two’s print *#Privilege se Poes*<sup>7</sup> (Figure 5) also grapples with being confronted by white privilege. In his statement that accompanies his print, this white male student talks about his anger about the stigma he feels as a white male in post-apartheid South Africa.



Figure 5. Student Two. *#Privilege se Poes* 2016. Drypoint. 29.7 x 42.0 cm.

He explains:

In this print I am slaying a Minotaur that is representative of white privilege. By killing this Minotaur I am trying to break away from the stigmas attached to being white, such

<sup>7</sup> A derogatory slang South African term from "Ma se poes" literally translates as "your mother's vagina" and it is used as an insult.

as being placed in a position whereby due to the colour of my skin I am seen as privileged. The fading away of the Minotaur's leg represents this idea that is vanishing slowly, but still he is still capable to get up and attack me. I have placed myself in a position of power where I am a warrior about to defeat my opponent. This alludes to the fact that I am now bigger than my judgements, and that I have a reason to be able to stand tall (Student Two, accompanying artist's statement 2016).

Student Three, a black female, responded to the question "Who is (not) an African?" in the project, by representing herself as an empowered African female figure who embodies qualities of strength and power. Her work, entitled *Victor* (Figure 6) is a self-portrait in which she is wearing an African headdress comprising traditionally male African symbols, such as elephant tusks and the horns of a bull. She incorporates symbols of the cross and Holy Trinity to signify her Christian beliefs as well as the feathers of pigeons and other birds representing both female qualities of peace and the traditional use of feathers by amaXhosa warriors on returning victorious from battle.

She explains her work thus:

In Zulu culture, when the male victor would return from fighting a war he would be crowned with a crown containing elephant tusks. The crown symbolises the warrior's strength. I see myself as a South African woman warrior. I wear a traditional head wrap, and can hold my own power that traditionally belonged to men (Student Three, accompanying artist's statement 2016).



Figure 6. Student Three. *Victor*. 2016.  
Drypoint and monoprint. 29.7 x 42.0 cm.

## Findings

The Visual Art Department at the University of Johannesburg has a diverse group of first-year students and, through this workshop, it became evident that their lived experiences and realities inform their actions, performance and success at university. In the first workshops, students responded positively to having a safe space to communicate with their peers and they came to appreciate differences and diversity in a team. They became accountable to and for each other, felt a greater sense of ownership and belonging, acquired a stronger work ethic as a group and developed a sense of community. Each student's voice was heard by their peers, and as they participated in the workshops, they were able to experience empathetic listening and address issues of privilege and struggle. Furthermore, through their shared stories they became closer. Team-building workshops can be used as a transformative tool or platform to remind students that in order for change to happen they have to be willing to embrace their strengths and weaknesses, as well as to challenge lecturers' perceptions about them (Fisher-Yoshida, Geller & Schapiro 2015:3).

In the last project of the year, we argued that the ground was laid for students to take greater risks, confront their own identities with honesty and express their differences, including anger and resentment. Vigorous conversations took place where students could listen to and question senior students' artistic responses and formulate their own positions. It became clear that creating a safe space in the classroom where each voice can be heard and appreciated allows for critical conversations and empathy of diverse positions.

Through the implementation of creative interventions, it is possible to influence students positively beyond the imperative to curb poor pass rates. We believe that supporting students' agency through creating safe spaces for dialogue and exchange can provide a more fertile environment for a more meaningful and reciprocal learning experience. Meaning making is the core of education, for it to be useful. According to Mary Stone Hanley (2013:9), without relevance and usefulness, learning is vacuous and alienating, and resistance becomes a factor as learners try to re-establish their agency.

This loss of agency is reflected in the resistance that students have expressed to the current state of alienation that so many students, who struggle financially, feel in the higher education environment. Lorna Holtman, Delia Marshall and Cedric Linder (2004:185) distinguish between formal access and what they call "epistemological access" — an understanding of the unwritten and unspoken rules which are part of institutional culture — and they note that many students, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, find epistemological access extremely problematic.

These series of interventions conducted in 2016 with first-year students appeared to have had a positive impact on this group's capacities to engage and confront contested identities and their positions. However, when these students entered their second year in 2017 the cracks seemed to show, revealing some of the impact of 'disrupted epistemologies'.<sup>8</sup>

While we agree with Samuel that disruption can be seen as a 'bridge-building force', there can also be difficult and painful fallout. "Epistemic disobedience", as referred to by Samuel, refers to "the colonial wound", "the unveiling of epistemic silences" and the "rights of the racially devalued" (Mignolo 2009:3-4). In this process, the racial power dynamics in the classroom are disrupted; certainty and confidence are replaced by anxiety and mistrust among some students, and a new-found power that sometimes translates into bullying is assumed by others. Essop (2016:n.p) warns against what he terms "racial essentialism – replacing white with black or [Sigmund] Freud with [Frantz] Fanon; and social conservatism, which pits modernity against tradition".

Part of our purpose as educators is to assume the role of what Samuel (2017:23) refers to as "just teachers", which is to collectively think through these broader societal challenges with our students; and to provide them with access to alternative ways of envisioning the world and interpreting their

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<sup>8</sup> A general observation that seems common to other second-year programmes in our faculty is that the students who began studying at the university at the time of the #FeesMustFall movement in 2016 seem to have been specifically affected, and struggle to make commitments to the learning programme. (This phenomenon requires further evidence and research).

experiences. As Alex Broadbent, the Dean of Humanities and co-director of the African Centre of Epistemology and Philosophy at the University of Johannesburg, states, a lot of formerly unvoiced and unheard ideas will come to light in this way: “The process of critical scrutiny is essential to the success of this project – and nobody gets a free pass” (Broadbent 2017:n.p).

The arts with multiple perspectives and modalities are a means to rich integrative education with porous boundaries that allow accessibility. The arts provide students with possibilities for expression, imagination and proficiency. In our experience in working with arts students, they learnt “boundary crossing” and what Samuel calls “epistemic disobedience” though discovering the transformational possibilities inherent in art making. They explore aspects of their own identity and dignity, and discover ways of breaking through divisions and a deeper sense of possibility through becoming.

The challenge of decolonising the curricula presents educators with catalysing opportunities for engaging more relevant methodologies of teaching and learning local content. Arts and design educators are well placed to facilitate radical ways of engaging students and including a range of modalities that expands access and recognises diverse resources for making meaning and learning. Social justice education embraces cohesive connections to educate active and empathetic students as citizens. Diverse approaches go a long way in addressing the legacy of coloniality and inequality.

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