

Storytelling for personal connection: A pedagogical strategy to localise fashion education

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ABSTRACT

The 2015 student protests, #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, gave rise to the call to decolonise curricula and end the dominance of Western ideologies in South African higher education (HE). The argument put forward in this paper is the need to shift from a traditional approach to a humanised pedagogical approach, wherein students frame knowledge around individual experiences to construct personal and shared understanding. Although limited scholarship around decolonising South African fashion HE exists, such scholarship does not focus on storytelling and circle learning as pedagogical strategies. To address this research gap, narrative humanism, referred to in this research as storytelling, and circle learning are put forward as pedagogical strategies to integrate student identities for personal connection in South African fashion HE. This paper aims to explore the affordances of storytelling and circle learning to decolonise South African fashion HE. Through qualitative action research, two teaching and learning interventions, termed the pilot and main studies, were designed and applied with fashion students at a South African HE institution. Data collection entailed semi-structured student questionnaires, artefacts, and a reflective research journal. To analyse the data, content analysis was employed. The findings reveal that, irrespective of cultural lived experiences or diverse backgrounds, storytelling afforded a decolonised approach in terms of inclusivity, collaboration, and a safe environment for socially engaged dialogue and peer feedback. Similarly, circle learning seemed to reduce teacher-student power relations and contrasted traditional modes of delivery. Circle learning appeared to encourage meaningful, engaged participation, affording a progressive pedagogical strategy to accommodate student and teacher voices in open dialogue. This paper contributes to the scholarship of teaching and learning in that storytelling and circle learning are suitable pedagogies to decolonise fashion education in the Global South.

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Introduction

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970:84) notes that people are in the “process of becoming - as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality”. Likewise, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1982:5; 1997) coins the term “banking concept” and argues that “to treat humans as an object, thereby lessening their abilities to act to transform their world, is to dehumanise them”. Essentially, the banking concept sees the teacher as the epistemological authority and students as oblivious and passive knowledge recipients (Freire, 1997). Hence, dehumanisation in education is essentially the result of the banking concept (Freire, 1997; Cammarota & Romero, 2006; Moller & Deci, 2009).

To dehumanise and counteract the banking concept, Freire (1970) put forward unconventional pedagogical approaches suggesting that teachers and students are co-learners and argued that teaching and learning approaches include student voice and experience as a valuable tool to build personal connection. These arguments and the need for dehumanisation in education are valuable given the student demographical changes in South African HE landscapes, which drove the call to transform and decolonise HE predominantly positioned in Western-dominated curricula. Such calls emerged from the 2015 student protests, #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, which led to the call to decolonise curricula and end dominant Western ideologies. The implications directly link Freire’s (1970; 1982; 1997) arguments and the need to dehumanise education with decolonisation.

In the HE context, Kronenberg, Kathard, Rudman, and Ramugondo (2015) argue that South Africa (SA) is in an enduring cycle of segregation, and that curricula continue to privilege colonialist viewpoints and discourse. Ramoupi (2014) highlights that such curricula disconnect students from their lived realities. Hence, curricula that lack personal connection and local relevance are a key factor in the manifestation of dehumanisation (Zinn & Rodgers, 2012). Curricula that recognise local knowledge, a demographically diverse student body, and students’ lived experiences, and promote personally connected learning are not only efforts for decolonisation but also a strategy for humanising pedagogy (Connell, 2016; Daniel, 2016; Collet & Economou, 2017; Salazar, 2013). Similarly, Mapaling and Hoelson (2022) state that it is necessary to incorporate decolonial theoretical perspectives shaped by individual social experiences and a commitment to social justice in educational research to humanise pedagogical practices. One approach is to consider knowledge as a shared and distributed resource to empower individuals and to recognise students as bearers of unique knowledge systems to inform and shape educational curricula (Mapaling & Hoelson, 2022).

Such pedagogical practice has the potential to accommodate the diverse South African student body.

South African design teachers (Pretorius, 2015; De Wet, 2017) argue the need to accommodate a diverse student body. Yet, in South African fashion education, scholars (Harvey & Lucking, 2017; Mastamet-Mason, Müller, & Van der Merwe, 2017) argue that theory-based curricula are rooted in Western ideology and lack African theory. Similarly, De Wet (2017:41) suggests that South African fashion teaching environments should consider students' "personal and cultural context". Hence, the argument put forward is the need to shift from a traditional approach to a humanised one, whereby students frame knowledge around individual experiences to construct personal and shared understanding. Although limited scholarship around decolonising South African fashion education exists, such scholarship does not focus on storytelling and circle learning as possible pedagogical strategies.

In response to the aforementioned research gap, narrative humanism, referred to in this research as storytelling, and circle learning are put forward as pedagogical strategies to integrate student identities for personal connection in South African fashion education. Storytelling is a dialogical tool to include student identities and potentially foster a shared society (Goodson & Gill, 2010; Hammack & Pilecki, 2012). Circle learning aims to encourage an educational space that not only nurtures student voice but also provides platforms for students to respectfully explore and collaborate (West, 2004; Veloria & Boyes-Watson, 2014).

In this research, storytelling is utilised to allow for shared narratives and personal views between the teacher and students. Likewise, circle learning relates to the physical classroom space whereby individuals form part of a collaborative and inclusive circle to support storytelling. Storytelling and circle learning were chosen to encourage students to frame knowledge around individual experiences and co-construct personal and shared peer understanding and knowledge to counteract the passive delivery of Western, theory-based curricular content. Using these strategies implies an intentional shift from the cognitive learning theory. Yilmaz (2011:205), drawing on the work of other scholars, argues that with cognitive learning theory, emphasis is placed on "how knowledge is acquired, processed, stored, retrieved and activated". The implications are that learning relies on external knowledge acquired by students who, through rote learning, recite the knowledge, hence, the banking concept.

Given the above, in the section that follows, scholarly perspectives are deliberated with the intention of contextualising discussion around four main perspectives that have the potential to shift from a traditional approach to a decolonised and humanised one.

Scholarly Perspectives

The scholarship is discussed around four core perspectives: student diversity and social transformation in HE, contextualising Western theory-based curricula, decolonisation for social transformation within the South African HE context, and storytelling and circle learning as decolonised pedagogical strategies.

Student diversity and social transformation in HE

Moahi and Costandius (2018) argue that HE institutions do not exist as siloed entities but function within culturally, economically, and politically varied diverse contexts. As such, today's student intake reflects the diversity of post-apartheid SA (Wingate, 2015; Tkachenko, Bratland, & Johansen, 2016). Turner (2011) suggests that the way students approach learning is culturally reliant. When students experience disconnected learning, an internal debate may take place with respect to whether they should abide by cultural norms at the risk of exclusion, or compromise and align to the HE system (Tkachenko *et al.*, 2016). Cultural disconnect implies that acquiring and constructing knowledge are constricted due to the dominance of the HE culture, which ultimately becomes a driver of inequality (Moahi & Costandius, 2018).

In a culturally diverse society, visual arts education has the potential to transform teaching and learning environments, however, the intent of social transformation lies in nurturing an ethnically diverse student body and valuing the personal and collective identities (Beukes, 2016). Similarly, in fashion education, there is a need for curricula to accommodate the diversified student body through pedagogical changes (De Wet, 2017). De Wet (2017) puts forward a teaching and learning strategy to encourage students to create meaning by utilising both personal and shared perspectives, hence, calling for shared responsibility between teacher and student to foster collaborative thinking. Essentially, visual arts and fashion programmes in South African HE are moving away from teaching and learning practices grounded in Western ideologies, to ones that embrace collaboration and inclusivity centred around the sensitivity of diverse student backgrounds (Collet & Economou 2017; De Wet, 2017). Moreover, the shift from Western to local ideologies

aligns with Ballim's (2018:141) argument that "being locally relevant is not necessarily incompatible with being globally excellent". Hence, an inclusive educational approach may support student diversity through engagement and a sensitivity to the possibilities of curricula from both a local and a global lens (Collet & Economou, 2017; De Wet, 2017; Ballim, 2018).

Contextualising Western theory-based curricula

Manathunga (2018), a Southern scholar, emphasises that Western knowledge continues to dictate the ways in which individuals construct knowledge. Even though HE in Africa has seen the emergence of a culturally diverse student body, Aderoju (2015) acknowledges that scholarship has not emphasised the need for curriculum development in the Global South and, more specifically, the complexities involved when it comes to the integration of multiple cultures. South African HE curricula are essentially Western or Eurocentric in nature, resulting in a lack of knowledge integration and silencing of stories from non-dominant cultures (Ronoh, 2017; Ammon, 2019). Ammon (2019:9) argues for "Southern Theory" in an attempt to acknowledge the diversity of individuals who previously were denied a voice. Curricula should encourage students to integrate their own voices (Rwodzi, 2014; Mashiyi, Meda, & Swart, 2020). Huerta (2011) and Salazar (2013) postulate that curriculum development should focus on the integration of content that may support students' personal lived experiences.

From a visual arts perspective, Berman and Netshia (2018) posit that HE remains dominated by Western traditions and that curriculum changes require integrating African knowledge and students' lived experiences. Yet, from a fashion education perspective, including students' personal experiences may be difficult, given that theory-based curricula are grounded in Western ideologies (Harvey & Lucking, 2017; Mastamet-Mason *et al.*, 2017). Trend Forecasting is one such example of fashion curricula grounded in Western ideologies.

According to Rousso and Ostroff (2018), trend forecasters actively seek out emerging ideas, concepts, and probable trends by constantly observing environments for change to predict a trajectory of potential outcomes. For that reason, fashion trends are often known as the spirit of the times or "zeitgeist" (Rousso & Ostroff, 2018). In Trend Forecasting, fashion movement theories are used to understand how fashion, or time-sensitive clothing, moves and is accepted throughout society (Kim, Fiore, Payne, & Kim, 2021). The trickle-down theory, which is mostly outdated, associates with the notion that fashion disseminates from the upper to the lower classes (Kim *et al.*,

2021). The trickle-across theory sees fashion operating through consumer-driven collective selection, but more recently, street fashion linked to vibrant youth subcultures influences the market with the trickle-up theory.

In some South African HE fashion programmes, teaching and learning of Trend Forecasting focuses on Western fashion movement theories, hence suggesting that fashion adoption moves from the top of social hierarchies to the bottom, nor does it recognise fashions created by radical or counter-cultural communities (Ma, Shi, Chen, & Luo, 2012). Since the West holds more power regarding cultural movement, Reddy (2009) highlights the possibility of homogenisation and remarks that the flow of dominating Western cultures is responsible for what he calls “cultural colonisation”, where dominant cultures threaten diverse or indigenous cultures. To counteract such Westernisation, Rantanen (2005) suggests manipulating the narrative to include diverse local contexts.

Furthermore, dominant Western theory-based fashion curricula go against the integration of local relevance, as well as intensifying the existing limitations of a passive teacher-centred approach (Harvey & Lucking, 2017; Mastamet-Mason *et al.*, 2017). A teacher-centred approach fosters disconnect, as it complies with a Western “non-inclusive environment” without consideration of students’ voices (Cammarota & Romero, 2006:19). Hence, the Western-based “colonial curriculum is characterised by its unrepresentative and biased nature” (Aby, 2022:10). In response to student disconnect, scholars (Connell, 2016; Daniel, 2016; Aby, 2022; Madhav & Baron, 2022) highlight the need for HE to recognise indigenous knowledge within curriculum development to align with the international call to decolonise curricula. Integrating student perspectives and acknowledging community-lived challenges can offer diverse experiences, viewpoints, and practical insights to decolonise a curriculum that includes local knowledge and demonstrates a profound understanding of social transformation (Madhav & Baron, 2022).

Decolonisation for social transformation in South African HE

Decolonisation entails an ongoing process of recognising and actively unlearning established models and frameworks that have contributed to the development of biases (Aby, 2022). In 2015, the #FeesMustFall student protests drove the call to decolonise curricula and end dominant Western perspectives within HE (Molefe, 2016). In the same year, the #RhodesMustFall student protest commenced at the University of Cape Town, specifically calling for the removal of Cecil John Rhodes’s colonial statue and demanding the decolonisation of South African HE (Nyamnjoh, 2017).

Shay (2016) argues that the call was for inclusive learning environments to not only focus on global constructs, but to also include diverse African ideologies. The implications of the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student protests brought forward the notion that curricula which embody colonial perspectives foster a disconnect from students' lived realities (Ramoupi, 2014). As such, the global call arose to decolonise curricula by acknowledging indigenous knowledge within HE (Connell, 2016; Daniel, 2016; Aby, 2022; Madhav & Baron, 2022). Supporting curricular decolonisation from the Global South, Manathunga (2018) condemns knowledge structures emanating from existing class struggles and advocates the need for HE to accommodate more Southern knowledge as a strategy for decolonisation. However, Aby (2022) argues that curricular decolonisation involves critically examining the connections between narratives, authors, and their contextual perspectives while challenging the dominance of the prevailing narrative.

Du Plessis (2021) posits decolonisation as a HE process to involve previously disadvantaged individuals and recommends recognising diverse cultures, creating opportunities for students to tell their own stories, using literature written by African scholars, and, most importantly, leading HE institutions with values reflective of African culture. Cassim (2020) maintains that the call for HE decolonisation in SA has become louder over the last few years due to debates regarding social transformation in post-apartheid SA, and, as such, has shifted beyond debates of free education to discourse about inclusion and the politics of knowledge within South African HE. In terms of the politics of knowledge, Jansen (2019) argues that the "knowledge problem" in decolonisation is that knowledge is never neutral and tends to draw its authority from power. Jansen (2019:2) posits that "who produces knowledge, what knowledge is produced and what knowledge is left out" are politically driven decisions and should be at the centre of inquiry for addressing the problem.

Linked to hierarchies of political power and general HE debates, from a South African art and design perspective, Duker (2009:83) argues the need to transform, given that existing Western expectations may drive students to abandon their multifaceted "social, cultural and familial identities" in favour of conformity. Hence, visual arts education should support student diversity and evolve from disciplinary-specific knowledge by creating teaching and learning strategies that consider students' unique cultural backgrounds (Duker, 2009). Similarly, Beukes (2016) argues for a shift from passive transmission of cultural knowledge to inclusion of intricate cultural systems. From a visual arts perspective, Berman and Netshia (2018) challenge teachers to enrich curriculum and teaching approaches to encourage empathetic relationships and, by doing so, support pedagogical strategies which require a deeper engagement with and between students. From a fashion education

perspective, Mastamet-Mason *et al.* (2017) affirm that dominant worldviews in fashion curricula are predominantly structured around a colonial past, and, to counteract this situation, they argue for the inclusion of indigenous African knowledge. Other decolonised pedagogical strategies are storytelling and circle learning.

Storytelling and circle learning as decolonised pedagogical strategies

From the South African HE perspective, Banda and Banda (2017) argue that curriculum relevancy and teaching strategies should accommodate localisation and connection to students' lived experiences and communities. Scholars (Goodson & Gill, 2010; Hammack & Pilecki, 2012) propose narrative, referred to as storytelling, as a possible pedagogical strategy to include student identities. Gill and Niens (2014) postulate that a narrative strategy has the potential to humanise HE through mindfulness of existing inequalities within post-apartheid society. McCully (2012) challenges teachers to utilise and share narratives to enable students to better understand themselves and one another by being considerate of diverse student viewpoints. In the same light, Zinn and Rodgers (2012) argue for student voice and story to reinstate a sense of personal and collective being. Essentially, teachers should negotiate a space where students' lived experiences can be creatively integrated with curriculum design (Bovill, Morss, & Bulley, 2009; Bovill & Bulley, 2011) to enable a sense of personal, collective being and lived experiences.

Jennings and Da Matta (2009) recommend that less focus should be placed on whether students understand or apply information to achieve the expected outcomes, and more emphasis placed on supporting students in understanding knowledge through personal lived experiences or stories. Rowe (2016:95) claims that students accept their lived experiences as relevant to the information being studied, which resonates with the notion of "a continuous state of becoming". Collet and Economou (2017:72) highlight the need for teaching and learning to embody students' personal experiences and lived realities by being considerate of their rich "cultural, social and linguistic resources". From a design education perspective, Myers (2017) maintains that HE should foster a safe and equal human-centred environment that encourages collaboration and empathy to engage in problem-solving from diverse perspectives and better understand one another's lived realities. Costandius (2012:8), writing from a design education perspective, notes that multicultural student demographics should be supported by teachers who understand complexities in the "dimensions of being human".

To support storytelling, circle learning is a strategy to respectfully explore and collaborate by nurturing student voices and narratives (West, 2004; Veloria & Boyes-Watson, 2014), hence supporting the world students embody by considering their existing knowledge, individual experiences, and personal backgrounds (Veloria & Boyes-Watson, 2014). The value of circle learning is that each person belongs to and forms part of a collaborative and inclusive circle, thus ensuring that every individual actively participates (Veloria & Boyes-Watson, 2014). Bovill *et al.* (2009) maintain that teachers and students should be co-learners who mutually construct learning experiences through collective inquiry and dialogue. Therefore, within circle learning, Pather (2011) notes active student participation and inclusive learning that adopts student diversity and eliminates exclusion. Hence, teachers should allow students the opportunity to actively participate in their own learning and, through facilitation, teachers may support the goals of inclusive environments (Lake, 2010).

To that end, storytelling and circle learning align with student-centred learning, rooted in the constructivist and humanist theoretical framework, where students build on their experience to construct their understanding and meaning through active participation, which accommodates an environment for self-actualisation and participation in creating new knowledge. The following section deliberates on the research design and methodology, which embeds the teaching and learning intervention guided by circle learning and storytelling pedagogical strategies.

Research Design and Methodology

Action research design

A qualitative, action research design was employed. Action research addresses educational problems with the intention of improving learning strategies, bringing about innovative thinking, and enabling teachers to develop an understanding of student social problems (Merriam, 2009; Bruce & Pine, 2010; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Nieuwenhuis, 2010). Action research is essentially about collaboration between the researcher and participants (Yin, 2011). Accordingly, the main author adopted the researcher and teacher functions in the design, application, and facilitation of one, over-arching teaching and learning intervention comprising of two parts which we refer to as the first and second cycles.

Teaching and learning interventions

The first cycle was guided by the pedagogical strategies of circle learning and storytelling to support active student participation at a South African HE institution. One unit, revolving around fashion movement theories, forming part of a theory-based module known as 'Trend Forecasting', was selected. The module Trend Forecasting draws on Western-based trickle-down, trickle-up, and trickle-across fashion movement theories that focus on fashion acceptance across societal structures.

The teaching and learning activities were designed to encapsulate four assessment instruments, namely: 1) a photograph; 2) a personal narrative taking the form of a written story; 3) a storytelling session; and 4) peer feedback. Students were required to identify one family or community member as a participant, and to obtain a photograph of them attired in time-sensitive clothing as per Trend Forecasting. Thereafter, students were required to interview the participant to explore personal connections with the time-sensitive clothing worn in the photograph. Students then wrote a personal narrative, contextualising and interpreting the participant's story and the meaning attached to the clothing. Subsequently, corresponding with circle learning, the main author and students placed themselves in a circle to share their stories related to selected photographs and students' personal narratives, thus aligning to the third assessment instrument of storytelling. The main author began by communicating a personal photograph and narrative, followed by student stories and photographs. The rationale to begin with the main author's photograph and story was to create a space of mutual vulnerability and inclusivity between teacher and students and to eradicate teacher-student power relations. These personal stories led to the fourth assessment instrument, namely peer feedback, whereby students and the main author offered perspectives on incorporating the clothing worn in the photographs to contextualise, localise, and draw linkages to the Western trickle-up theory. From the first cycle, a second cycle was refined.

The second cycle was designed and applied in the same theory-based module, with the same group of students, and at the same institution. The unit selected focused on how fashion moves through society and intended to inform the practice-based module called 'Design Concepts' through the application and incorporation of personal stories for enhanced knowledge of the trickle-up theory. Hence, the assessment instruments differed slightly from those of the first cycle and comprised of: 1) concept boards; 2) storytelling; 3) peer feedback; and 4) a written component in the form of a design narrative.

For the first assessment instrument, students developed a local and global concept board which comprised of a collage of visual images to reflect their personal narrative drawn from the participant's clothing worn in the photograph, as was required in the first cycle. These local and global concept boards were aimed at setting the backdrop for design-practice inspiration, to direct the design process and inform practice in the module 'Design Concepts'.

For the second assessment instrument, namely storytelling, as in the first cycle, the second cycle was also designed such that students and the main author sat in a circle. The main author began the storytelling session by relating the story of the selected photographs and personal narratives that formed part of the first cycle, and how these informed and linked to individual design narratives. Subsequently, students told their stories relating to their personal narratives and photographs, extracted from the first cycle, and how these enlightened and connected to their individual design narratives. The storytelling led to the third assessment instrument, namely peer feedback, whereby students presented their personal design narratives and concept boards for constructive peer feedback. The peer feedback session enabled students to reflect constructively and include such responses in the fourth assessment instrument, namely the written design narrative, before final assessment submission. The intention of the written design narrative was to foster a personal connection with the theory-based Trend Forecasting module through individual encounters in terms of localising the trickle-up theory for application in design practice. In conclusion, following the application of the first and second teaching and learning cycles, participants were sampled to gather data.

Sampling

A purposeful sampling method, underpinned by pre-determined selection criteria, was employed. Participants comprised two sub-sets. The first participant sub-set involved demographically varied fashion students at the South African HE institution where the research was conducted. Additionally, these fashion students had to be registered for the theory-based module known as 'Trend Forecasting', seeing that the first and second cycles were designed and applied in this module. The second sub-set included the main author in entwined roles of researcher, research participant, and teacher. As a researcher, the role was that of data collection. As a research participant and teacher, the main author designed, applied, and facilitated the first and second cycles. With the purposefully sampled participants, data collection began.

Data collection

Following the application of the first and second cycles, multiple data collection methods were utilised, namely: open-ended questionnaires; a reflective research journal; and artefacts. After the first cycle, 11 student participants completed hard-copy, open-ended questionnaires, with the purpose of exploring their views, experiences, and feedback regarding the pedagogical strategies of storytelling and circle learning.

For the second cycle, the data collection method changed to artefacts. Yin (2011) remarks that artefacts can encompass student work to enable researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the educational setting. Therefore, artefacts comprised of participating students' written narratives aimed at exploring the affordances of storytelling and circle learning regarding student experiences and evoked personal connections between Western theory-based content and localisation. 10 student participants presented their artefacts, and one student did not submit.

Moreover, for both the first and second cycles, data collection entailed a reflective research journal aimed to record the researcher-cum-teacher's (main author) personal insights, thinking, and reflections regarding teaching approaches. As mentioned earlier, the researcher's role was data collection and research participation, but as a teacher, the role was to design and facilitate the first and second cycles. For the duration of the first and second cycles, self-generated field notes were methodically recorded in the reflective research journal to capture student perspectives or in-class feedback around the pedagogical strategies of storytelling and circle learning. As a researcher, the role was that of data collection. As a research participant and teacher, the main author designed, applied, and facilitated the first and second cycles.

Data analysis

All data were analysed by way of content analysis guided by Saldaña's (2013:14) "streamlined codes-to-theory model". Data analysis was attained via first and second coding cycles. The first coding cycle applied in vivo coding, which Saldaña (2013) posits as assigning codes to participants' exact words or phrases. For this reason, raw data were read line-by-line multiple times to allow the researcher (main author) to become acquainted with the data and subsequently flag, tag, and assign codes to raw data segments. The second coding cycle comprised of selective coding, which Saldaña (2013) mentions as aiming at finding relationships, arranging into categories, or even merging categories to

ultimately move categories into research themes. Through this process, storytelling and circle learning emerged as overarching research themes and pedagogical strategies.

Ethics

Prior to the application of the first and second cycles, a pre-drafted information disclosure and consent form were presented to the South African HE institution where this research was conducted. The HE institution granted full permission to: 1) implement the first and second cycles and execute the research at the institution; 2) gain access to student participants; and 3) utilise artefacts in the form of student-written narratives. To maintain confidentiality, the name of the HE institution is not mentioned.

Subsequently, student participants were invited to participate in the study by way of pre-drafted information disclosures and consent forms. Student participants were informed, in writing, that their written narratives (artefacts) would form part of the data collection but would not impact assessment results should consent not be granted. Beyond that, student participants were informed, in writing, that the researcher (main author) would serve the dual function of researcher and teacher. All participating students gave informed consent. To maintain confidentiality, student participants were assigned pseudonyms in the form of numbers.

Findings and Discussion

The findings that emerged from the data collection and analysis are presented in two overarching research themes, namely, storytelling and circle learning. The research theme of storytelling comprises three categories, namely: 1) inclusion, diversity, and lived experiences; 2) localising Western theory; and 3) conceptualisation. The findings are supported by cited raw data extracts presented within quotations. Raw data extracts emanating from the first cycle are cited as, for example, SP9:Q10. The letters SP imply student participant, nine is the pseudonym in the form of a number, and Q10 is question number ten in the open-ended questionnaires. Raw data extracts emanating from the second cycle are cited as SPW1:1. The letters SP imply student participant and W implies the written narrative (artefacts). In addition, references to field notes in the reflective research journal used the alphabetical code RRJFC (reflective research journal first cycle) and RRSC (reflective research journal second cycle), and the numeric indicates the page number, such as RRJFC:1 and RRJSC:1.

Storytelling

Inclusion, diversity, and lived experiences

Following the teaching and learning interventions, the storytelling session appeared to have transformed the conventional, passive teaching and learning strategies to a more humanised approach, in that students were not only given the opportunity to share their personal narratives with peers but also to frame knowledge around their individual lived experiences. This approach may have enabled and enhanced the conceptualisation and integration of local ideas with existing Western ideologies by way of peer feedback and interaction, consequently, possibly, paving the way for personal connections shared by way of student and teacher conversations. In addition, irrespective of cultural lived experiences or diversified backgrounds, storytelling, as a pedagogical strategy, appeared to have afforded an inclusive, collaborative tool which, most importantly, seemingly fostered trust and a safe environment. These findings are evident in the following student participant quotation: “the sharing supports inclusion as peers have similar stories which create a personal connection” (SPW9:2). Student perspectives align with the researcher’s view in that “the sharing of personal stories created a safe environment considerate of everyone’s diversity and cultural experiences, which eventually assisted in the explorations and conceptualisation of students’ personal ideas and their alignment to the trickle-up theory” (RRJSC:21).

Furthermore, through integrating lived experiences, diversified backgrounds, and localised personal connections to Western theory, storytelling afforded open dialogue because of the teaching and learning interventions. To that end, students had the freedom to voice their unique and personal views, participate in the teaching, and co-learn, whilst gauging the reactions of peers. Interpretation is drawn from student participants’ verbatim quotes such as: “it [storytelling] gave us an opportunity to explore other facades to the given Western content and encouraged topics that are more relative to each individual” (SP1:Q10) and “listening to their feedback sparked ideas in my mind of how I could apply the same and/or similar ideas” (SPW4:1). Furthermore, storytelling brought forward an inclusive, socially constructed teaching and learning environment fuelled by the mindfulness of others and an opportunity to explore not only different perspectives or ideas, but also ones that are relevant to students’ lived experiences. These student views corroborate the researcher’s observation that “most of the participants feel that the opportunity to share their voice makes them feel included in a sense that there is an acknowledgment of their personal backgrounds and thinking” (RRJSC:21). The findings align with the scholarship presented earlier in that storytelling

fostered a safe and human-centred environment, one that is inclusive of student voices, their lived experiences, and localisation for a personal connection that enables better understanding and consideration of diverse viewpoints (Banda & Banda, 2017; McCully, 2012; Myers, 2017; Zinn & Rodgers, 2012).

For that reason, storytelling, as a pedagogical strategy, may be valuable in supporting socially engaged dialogue and peer feedback for personal connection, and a deeper understanding of Western fashion movement theory from a local perspective. Students seemingly understood better when considering the relevance of their personal narratives within Western theory-based curricula. Supporting this finding, student participants commented: “hearing my personal story has definitely supported my understanding of the trickle-up theory because I was able to understand the concept in a more in-depth way, in a more personal way” (SPW6:2) and “learning theory that is relevant and theory that I can apply to a real-life scenario, I ultimately understand it a lot better” (SPW3:2). Ultimately, storytelling appeared to counteract the lack of student involvement and participation that the main author experienced with a teacher-centred approach prior to the design and application of the first and second cycles.

Despite the affordance, the researcher noted that “when it came to students providing their peers with feedback, student participants appeared reluctant to participate.” The researcher had to “prompt student participants for their additional input” (RRJFC:17). Corroborating the research perspectives, one student commented: “maybe students can ask each other more questions” (SP5:Q3). It might be that students were not accustomed to socially engaged teaching and learning strategies and were, therefore, possibly reluctant to engage with conversational peer feedback. Despite the minor drawback in terms of promoting student feedback, sharing personal narratives and peer engagement seems to have fostered an environment that encouraged constructive, participatory learning, which may have the potential to decolonise fashion education by shifting away from conventional Western theory-based curricula.

Localising Western theory

Through connecting local perspectives with Western theory-based curricula, it appears that storytelling allowed students the opportunity to make linkages to the theory-based content, as they found shared local stories, similarities, and personal connections with one another and with the teacher through the act of sharing a story. Furthermore, students valued the teacher sharing their

personal stories and lived experiences which seem to have created localised and contextually relevant, meaningful, relatable, and student-centred learning, as opposed to the passive delivery of Western theory. This finding is supported by the following student comments: “I’ve personally always been more interested in theory content when it’s been further explained by the teacher/lecturer through personal stories and experiences” (SPW8:1) and “I tend to attach images and create stories in my mind by the lecturer sharing personal stories and that helps me better understand and remember the core western [Western] dominated theory” (SPW8:1). As such, storytelling supported student-centred learning, which is uncommon with Western theory-based fashion education. The findings align with the argument (Harvey & Lucking, 2017; Mastamet-Mason *et al.*, 2017) that dominant Western theory-based fashion curricula go against the integration of local relevance and intensify a passive teacher-centred approach which, Cammarota and Romero (2006:19) argue, fosters disconnect without consideration of students’ voices or stories.

Consequently, the sharing of stories fostered a sense of deeper understanding of Western theory-based curricula through collegiality which encouraged out-of-the-box thinking. One student participant commented: “I feel this way of learning encourages you to have an open mind about your concept and how others may see it instead of just being stuck on your own ideas” (SP9:Q1). As a result, the students and the teacher became co-learners in developing a multi-angled, personalised, and relatable outlook on Western-based theory, as the experiences or viewpoints of their peers provided a different perspective or approach to learning. Meaning creation is drawn from student participants’ comments such as: “I could learn from other students and other students could learn from me” (SP11:Q5) and “in many ways, our stories were able to link up relevance to the theories we learn” (SP7:Q13). Furthermore, the researcher noted: “it is interesting to see how their story has developed through personal reflection and their peer’s input on the conceptualisation of their story” (RRJSC:18). These findings align with Freire’s (1970) call for personal connection and for teachers and students to be co-learners in an inclusive environment that supports student voice and experience.

The implications are that decolonising fashion education by localising Western theory may not be possible with traditional passive pedagogical strategies whereby the teacher is the authoritarian knowledge holder and disseminator. Rather, students and teachers hold unique knowledge and can co-construct knowledge through reciprocated vulnerability and inclusivity, which can break down the barriers of teacher-student power relations. As Keet, Zinn and Porteus (2009) advocate, mutual

vulnerability is the interdependence between teachers, students, and the educational setting to challenge and disrupt.

Conceptualisation

Storytelling set out with the initial purpose of peer engagement to encourage refinement of ideas. However, conceptualising personal design narratives and design ideas that were perceived to be original turned out to be the driver of the design process, as opposed to the conventional way of drawing inspiration from Western-based fashion trends. Seemingly, storytelling allowed for original design ideas to be refined through peer feedback. These findings are supported by student participant comments: “[storytelling] required us to look inward and create concepts that were unique to us” (SP10:Q10) and “drawing raw inspiration from something extremely personal really changed the way I usually begin a design process” (SP7:Q8). Corroborating student views, the researcher observed that “it appears as if going through the process has allowed students to develop ideas which seem completely unique and conceptual” (RRJSC:18).

The findings also show that students used the storytelling session not only as a foundation to refine and simplify the conceptualisation process, but also to clarify the symbolic representation of their design narrative. Essentially, the personal approach encouraged individual student creativity by drawing inspiration from a unique or personal point of view, and not by relying on the expected Western ideas or fashion trends. Interpretation is drawn from students’ feedback: “from hearing all my peers’ personal and local stories, as well as how they planned to conceptualise and formulate a collection from their narratives, broadened my perspective on how I could create my own designs from my narrative” (SPW4:1) and “I believe it [storytelling] had assisted in conceptualising my personal story and more importantly integrating it into contemporary ideas” (SPW8:2). Hence, “every single student approached their inspiration from a unique point of view, and much more conceptually, which appears to reflect a personal connection” (RRJSC:18). These findings support Jennings and Da Matta’s (2009) recommendation that more emphasis should be placed on supporting students’ knowledge through personal lived experiences or stories.

The findings show that conceptualising a design narrative from multiple perspectives allows for a possible broader market reach. This was noted by the researcher in the field notes: “it appears as if reflection on not just their own, but their own personal narrative, has assisted them in better conceptualisation of their design-narrative” (RRJSC:21). Additionally, student participant quotations

corroborate this finding: “storytelling did help with the conceptualisation of my personal story into a Western brand” (SPW2:1) and “it helped me realise that my personal story can be sold within a global market because of the way I have interpreted it” (SPW3:2).

On the other hand, the findings also revealed that a decolonised approach may not suffice if the emphasis is placed only on local contexts. Rather, decolonisation may require a more balanced approach where localisation is integrated with the Western perspective. One student mentioned that “I believe you cannot have local without global and vice versa, they support each other to create something unique and interesting in this forever changing market” (SPW8:1). These findings align with the call for an inclusive educational approach to support engagement and sensitivity of curricula from both a local and a global lens (Collet & Economou, 2017; De Wet, 2017; Ballim, 2018).

Nevertheless, with a contextually relevant and personal approach, students showed fewer instances of referencing or subconsciously copying Western-dominated fashion trends or existing fashion designers. As such, storytelling seemingly encourages original African design ideas, and if design students are educated in such a manner, as future fashion designers they might be able to contribute to strengthening African fashion within the global contexts to counteract the generally adopted dominant Western fashion trends.

Circle learning

The findings suggest that storytelling has the potential to contrast the traditional delivery of knowledge and possibly break down the barriers of teacher-student power relations. The same can be said about circle learning as a supportive, pedagogical strategy for storytelling. The findings showed that, as a teaching and learning strategy, circle learning may be seen as a progressive strategy as it created the opportunity for students to openly articulate and participate. The implications are that circle learning may support a student-focused approach that is considerate of students’ voice.

These findings are corroborated by student participants, who stated that “the teaching and learning strategy was unconventional” (SP10:Q1), and that it “made the words come more naturally” (SP10:Q5). Similarly, the researcher’s view corroborates that of students as reflected in the comment: “the student participants were comfortable throughout the entire session, and the

sharing of ideas came about naturally” (RRJFC:17). Hence, circle learning supports storytelling as it fosters more comfortable and relaxed discussions.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that circle learning may be suitable to encourage meaningful, engaged, and active participation, hence affording a progressive pedagogical strategy to accommodate the inclusion of student and teacher voices, which created an opportunity to participate in open discussions. These findings are supported by students, who stated that the teaching and learning strategy “encourages engagement” (SP9:Q10) and “voicing of our opinions and sharing of ideas” (SP1:Q1). The researcher’s field notes corroborate student views as “students were consistently engaging, with not one student not included in the conversations” (RRJFC:17). These findings support Pather’s (2011) argument that circle learning encourages active student participation and inclusive learning by adopting student diversity and eliminating exclusion.

The implications then are that circle learning unfolded “as the sharing of ideas came about naturally” (RRJFC:17). The natural flow of sharing ideas is the result of the teacher and students sitting in a circle, facing one another, and co-learning through discussion and participation, which appeared to encourage student comfortability without the fear of being judged. This finding aligns with Bovill *et al.* (2009), who claim that teachers and students should be co-learners who mutually construct learning experiences through collective inquiry and dialogue. To that end, circle learning affords the opportunity to strengthen teacher-student relationships, in contrast to traditional forms of knowledge delivery and learning which tend to create a more dominant teacher role. Meaning creation is drawn from the following raw data extracts: “circle learning allowed me to have an input and an opinion in what we learn” (SP11:Q5) and “hearing the other students be vulnerable too, helped me stress less” (SP7:Q1). This finding corresponds with Vandeyar and Swart’s (2016) argument that, within circle learning, there is a need for vulnerability within the teacher-student relationship to construct knowledge through co-participation, which Keet *et al.* (2009) posit may empower the vulnerable.

In addition, the findings revealed that circle learning afforded a relaxed and conducive learning environment in which students could actively participate. For some students, the informal nature of circle learning also provided a less pressured learning environment as opposed to a traditional classroom setting where teachers may simply deliver theory-based content by adopting a passive approach to teaching and learning. Meaning creation is drawn from student responses: “the theory taught in an informal manner, created a more relaxed environment” (SPW1:1); “circle-learning

created a more open environment in which everyone could share their personal stories comfortably” (SPW7:1); and “the environment made it easier and informal, therefore there was less pressure” (SPW7:1). Student views are supported by the researcher, who noted that “it appears as if the informal aspect of the environment has made it a comfortable and open space for students to share and collaborate with their peers” (RRJSC:19). As such, circle learning appears to afford not only an open, comfortable, and safe space for further exploration and deeper understanding of students’ shared stories, but also the theories of fashion movement, which is an integral part of the curriculum. These findings collaborate with scholarly views (West, 2004; Zinn & Rodgers, 2012; Veloria & Boyes-Watson, 2014) that circle learning creates opportunities to respectfully explore and incorporate student voice and story to restore a sense of personal and collaborative being.

Despite the positive affordances of circle learning, some not-so-favourable findings emerged. A few students appeared to either grapple to remain engaged or were hesitant to participate in peer feedback. In such situations, these students depended on the teacher for feedback as opposed to their peers. One student mentioned: “encourage positive feedback more, this way people will be more encouraged to share, and to speak, this [thus] more people are included” (SP9:Q3). From another angle, grappling to remain engaged and loss of focus is perhaps due to the lengthy duration of the circle learning sessions, hence the suggestion of comfort breaks as reflected in the comment: “I personally would suggest short breaks, possibly set out ... I tend to lose concentration” (SP9:Q2). These findings should be taken into consideration for the refinement of teaching and learning interventions to further support an environment for active participation and, at the same time, to ensure that students remain engaged and present. Having presented the findings, the flowing section draws conclusions.

Conclusion

Responding to the call to decolonise South African HE, this research set out to challenge fashion education by putting forward narrative humanism, referred to in this research as storytelling, and circle learning as pedagogical strategies with the aim of exploring the affordances of storytelling and circle learning to decolonise South African fashion HE. Guided by action research, one over-arching teaching and learning intervention comprising of two parts, which we refer to as the first and second cycles, embedded within the pedagogical strategies of storytelling and circle learning, was designed and applied in fashion education at a South African HE institution.

Circle learning, as a supportive pedagogical strategy, seemed to have encouraged students to speak, listen, and participate collaboratively in problem-solving and decision-making. In addition, circle learning provided the space for the development of teacher-student relationships, which created a teaching and learning experience that allowed the researcher to engage with students' interests, needs, and concerns. Circle learning may have the potential to provide teachers with the opportunity to better understand their students by providing them with the space to have a voice. Storytelling is supported by circle learning as it fosters trust and care in teaching and learning.

Storytelling possibly allowed students the opportunity to observe, comment, and reflect on their peers' experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, storytelling and circle learning may create a safe environment which would allow students the opportunity to share their experiences and stories in a supportive and constructive manner, and as a result, potentially foster a better understanding of one another. An approach to decolonise fashion education may then rely on storytelling and circle learning as it seems to prioritise students' realities and link their prior knowledge to new learning, thus allowing teachers and students, in collaboration, to construct locally relevant knowledge.

The key findings also revealed that, irrespective of cultural lived experiences or diversified backgrounds, storytelling afforded a decolonised approach of inclusivity, collaboration, and a safe environment for socially engaged dialogue and peer feedback for personal connection, and a deeper understanding by integrating, linking personal realities, and connecting local perspectives and stories with existing Western theory-based curricula that supported the conceptualisation of African ideas.

Similarly, the findings revealed that a circle learning environment and storytelling have the potential to break down the barriers of teacher-student power relations and shift from traditional modes of delivery. Hence, circle learning appeared to encourage meaningful, engaged participation and co-learning, affording a progressive pedagogical strategy to accommodate student and teacher voices in open dialogue. The implications are that the pedagogical strategies of storytelling and circle learning are ways in which to decolonise South African fashion education. On the other hand, the findings also revealed that a decolonised approach may not suffice if the emphasis is placed only on local contexts but may require localisation integrated with the Western perspective.

As such, a narrative pedagogical strategy, or storytelling, highlights the potential importance of a socially constructed teaching and learning environment which supports people, society, and mindfulness towards others. In a creative discipline such as fashion, education has the potential to

involve students more actively through methods such as exploration, storytelling, discussion, and empathy.

Certain disadvantages, in terms of incorporating a personal narrative into a design narrative, came to light, which included: 1) some students seemed to focus more on the personal story rather than on a tangible product; and 2) stories were personal and unique to students but communicating such narratives could potentially be misunderstood. As such, for teaching and learning in creative disciplines, such as fashion, it might be important to maintain a balance between local and global when design narratives are conceptualised through storytelling. This balance may ensure that the narrative remains personal albeit suitable for the global market.

Although the key findings are acknowledged, to further develop discourse around decolonising South African fashion education, recommendations for further studies emanated. Firstly, given that a decolonised approach requires consideration of both local and Western ideologies, a further study is required to explore the notion of “Glocalisation”, as a pedagogical strategy in fashion education. Secondly, while circle learning, as a pedagogical strategy, allowed a safe space for students to link their personal realities to the content taught, this research did not set out to explore subtle power relations which may be present. Hence, the recommendation for further research is to explore the subtle teacher-student power relations and how culture and diversification influence such relationships, especially in the South African post-colonial and post-apartheid context. Thirdly, further research may explore the effects of teacher-student co-learning and socially constructed knowledge. Fourthly, from another angle, localised original design ideas emanated, and if design students are educated in such a manner, as future fashion designers, they might be able to contribute to strengthening African fashion within the global contexts. Fifthly, to decolonise education, further research is recommended to explore indigenous and current educational strategies used in Africa to assist in finding new innovative ways of teaching and learning. Finally, in keeping with strengthening African fashion, a further study can be done on how the trickle-down, trickle-up, and trickle-across fashion movements are evolving in Africa and whether a new model could be developed based on the African context. With these recommended studies, decolonisation and decoloniality could be explored even further.

The recommendations above may well strengthen debates around decolonisation and further contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning in fashion education as well as African fashion.

Then again, this paper contributes to the scholarship of teaching and learning in that storytelling and circle learning afforded suitable pedagogies to decolonise fashion education within the Global South.

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