Relatability's role in formative assessment and feedback practices of young Black academics in an access university

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ABSTRACT

Transformation and diversification efforts in South African higher education system continue thirty years into democracy. Access universities play a crucial role in attracting students from previously excluded groups to higher education, specifically Black learners from poor schools with the least resources. Black lecturers in access universities, through shared cultural identities and backgrounds, carry an unspoken responsibility, beyond academic duties, to develop inclusive assessment and feedback practices. This unspoken responsibility must be carried out without compromising academic curriculum requirements and became acutely important during the COVID-19 lockdown period. Through transdisciplinary pragmatism in pedagogical practice, relatability ensures that students engage in meaning-making through participation in the development of solutions that address hyper-localised problems, thus contextualising science in real-world contexts. This study evaluates the role of relatability in the development of inclusive, transdisciplinary, and pragmatic formative assessment and feedback practices for student success in higher education. It does this by comparing the practices and experiences of young, Black lecturers in an access university. Our formative assessment and feedback methodologies and analysis of our teaching portfolios are presented to demonstrate how our personal student experiences have shaped more inclusive practices. In the discussion, we highlight the influence of unspoken responsibilities on Black lecturers to develop student outcomes beyond academic success through assessment and feedback. We seek to highlight how relatability can be leveraged to improve formative assessment and feedback practices towards strengthening inclusive teaching and learning for students' academic success.

Introduction

Transformation and diversification efforts of the South African higher education system continue thirty years into democracy, focused on diversifying both the student and academic bodies. There remains, however, a disproportionate mix of lecturers in higher education by race, age, and gender, with the academy predominantly older, White, and male. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in developing the Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework (SSAUF) admitted that the higher education sector is facing a crisis with respect to academic staff composition, with slow transformation and an ageing and underqualified workforce as some of the key contributing factors to the lack of diversity in higher education (DHET, 2015). Universities provide spaces for their community members, particularly students, to work through their identity construction (Francis, Mills & Lupton, 2017; Sitto & Davis, 2020). Redressing past racial segregation and exclusionary practices, enforced deliberately during apartheid in South Africa, is a key effort of the government in driving transformation of the academy (Hlatshwayo, 2020).

A positive correlation between students' cultural identity and academic success has been shown by empirical studies, making identity such as racial background an unavoidable social issue for lecturers (Codjoe, 2006; Semken & Freeman, 2008). Participatory learning requires significant motivation, particularly for students from poorer socio-economic backgrounds, who need role models that will encourage their academic progress and success and embolden them to pursue a challenging curriculum (Klopfenstein, 2005). With Black students, the expectation of role models falls to Black lecturers, often as an unspoken social responsibility, due to familiarity based on racial background as they do not frequently interact with non-Black people outside the classrooms (Guiffrida, 2005). Thus, representation in higher education matters for relatability, i.e., the degree to which people can connect based on their personal experiences, identities, culture, and backgrounds to the content, pedagogy (including formative assessment and feedback practices), relationships and institutional culture they encounter in higher education institutions (Guiffrida, 2005; Semken, Ward, Moosavi & Chinn, 2017; Thomas, 2022). Students learn more effectively by practically 'doing' through theoretical application; for Black students, academic performance is influenced by the presence of Black lecturers helping them navigate untransformed university spaces (Klopfenstein, 2005). Helping students achieve success in higher education involves the design of assessments that are inclusive and build in room for student diversity with respect to their lived experiences, in their chosen disciplines. Students engage in meaning-making through participation in real-world contexts,

developing solutions, which address the problems, thus recontextualising science (Sitto, Davis & Matema, 2018) through transdisciplinary pragmatism.

Enrolment of Black students in higher education has increased significantly in post-apartheid South Africa, however, the attrition and underrepresentation rates in key technical fields signals disparities within institutions (Abdul-Alim, 2014). The majority of Black South African students arrive at the higher education space with their own challenges, shaped by the South African socio-political context across diverse disciplines. The inefficiencies of basic education for undergraduate students weigh on higher education, whilst lecturers are expected to maintain high teaching and learning standards at higher education institutions. The basic education schooling system in South Africa is organised into quintiles by the Department of Basic Education Minister to determine non-fee-paying schools, with five quintiles in total from most poor (quintile 1) to least poor (quintile 5) (School Guide, n.d.). Thus, access universities have been able to provide access to higher education for learners, typically from quintile 1 and 2 schools, which are poor, with the least school resources in the country. We define an access university in the South African setting as a historically White university that has a transformed student demographic that mirrors the country's population and invests in initiatives and programmes geared towards attracting Black students and providing higher education to the previously excluded population groups of South Africa. The university initiatives or programmes could be, but are not limited to, diverse offering of qualifications (e.g., degrees, diplomas, and certificates offered full- or part-time), availability of support programmes (e.g., free computer literacy modules), and affordable fees lower than those of other historically White universities.

Developing inclusive formative assessment and feedback practices that are relatable for students coming into higher education from under-resourced backgrounds is made even more challenging because of slow academic staff transformation in higher education. Lecturers, specifically Black lecturers, tend to be the few university-educated people that Black students from poor backgrounds interact with regularly (Guiffrida, 2005; Klopfenstein, 2005), placing an unspoken responsibility on Black lecturers' shoulders beyond academic duties due to their relatability. Institutional and student inequalities became pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a significant number of students at risk of being left behind based on differing levels of access to tools (Foxcroft & Bosire, 2020) for teaching and learning, increasingly placing lecturers under pressure to find ways to be inclusive and limit the number of dropouts. Feedback is typically provided through written comments for each submission, or oral discussions in the classroom or on a one-on-one basis with

the student. It should be prepared or provided in a way that is constructive, inclusive, and promotes student learning and development rather than just the outcome (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Morris, Perry & Wardle, 2021). Effective feedback practices should provide students with opportunities to reflect on their learning, receive constructive criticism, and engage in ongoing improvement (Sadler, 1998). Thus, for formative assessments and feedback practices to be fair and equitable, they need to consider several critical success factors such as language, culture, age, religion, access to technology, and educational background. However, particularly in South Africa, resource constraints plague many higher education institutions (Slonimsky & Shalem, 2006), further challenging institutions to be inclusive of their diverse student body through their formative assessment and feedback practices.

Our paper aims to evaluate how relatability influences inclusive formative assessment and feedback practices beyond academic outcomes to set undergraduate students up for success in higher education by comparing three young, Black lecturers' practices and experiences in an access university in South Africa. Our discussion is framed through transdisciplinary pragmatism in pedagogical approaches in designing inclusive assessment and feedback practices for undergraduate students. We then describe the methodological analysis of our three teaching portfolios as narrated from our learning and teaching experiences. Our assessment and feedback methods, as influenced by relatability with a largely poor, Black student body in an access university, are then outlined. The key themes discussed include common assessment and feedback practices narrated from our experiences as young lecturers, shaped by our personal undergraduate backgrounds, and experiences as lecturers in addressing the unspoken expectations beyond students' academic success. We end the paper with some concluding remarks on lessons for the need to fulfil unspoken expectations of relatability on Black lecturers.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Participation by students in the higher education learning process is critical to their success and to the experiences of their time in higher education institutions, particularly experiences of inclusivity, which can influence student performance (Tinto, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Socially just and equality-promoting education systems take into account education policies and other social justice factors such as representation, including intersections of socio-economic status, and the complex effect they have on educational experiences (Francis et al., 2017). The students in higher education worst affected by inequalities are those from the poorest backgrounds (Archer, Hutchings & Ross,

2002). In the South African context, the worst affected students are those from quintile 1 and 2 schools, as these are mostly non-fee-paying and least resourced schools receiving the most support from government (School Guide, n.d.). Despite the challenges faced, learners make it out of underprivileged basic education environments such as quintile 1 and 2 schools and into higher education, often as first-generation university goers. Having attended similar schools, this background forms a source of relatability with the students we currently teach in an access university environment. Vanderstraeten and Biesta (2006) found that fusing home and classroom education together is a far more enriching experience for students, which our relatability fosters. The philosophical approach to promoting a participatory environment for students requires a transdisciplinary pragmatic approach.

Textbook and scientific knowledge are dimensions of reality, along with other types of knowledge learned, according to transdisciplinarity. Transdisciplinarity, as a pedagogical philosophy, recognises the engagements between specialised disciplines and develops links without boundaries beyond various disciplines (Nicolescu, 2010) Adopting transdisciplinarity is advantageous because of diverse stakeholder inclusion (e.g., communities, academia, policymakers, industry, etc.), helping to shape more versatile and better skilled students (Sitto et al., 2018). Teaching and learning based on the pragmatic approach should: (1) have a social function; and (2) provide real-life experience to the student (Sharma, Devi & Kumari, 2018). One of the central tenets of pragmatism is therefore self-actualisation.

The pragmatic pedagogical philosophy is a "teaching philosophy which centres on linking theory, research, ideas and actions to multi-disciplinary practical applications" (Klockner, Shields, Pillay & Ames, 2021: 92) and focuses on students being taught skills that are practical for application in real-world contexts, with teaching and learning driven by students' self-discovery. The 'doing' part in pragmatism needs to be structured and to take place in an informed and intelligent way, through established principles and theories of a given discipline (Elkjaer, 2009). There are four principles that underpin pragmatism in curriculum development, namely, utility, interest, experience, and integration (Sharma et al., 2018; Rai & Lama, 2020), which extend to formative assessment and feedback practices. According to the integration principle of pragmatism, knowledge should be integrated and interrelated (Sharma et al., 2018; Rai & Lama, 2020).

Assessments in higher education that foster student participation require preparation by both lecturers and students. "Higher education has been behind the times recently in its ability to be

innovative and keep up with workplace changes" (Lund, 2014: 198). The assessments designed need to take into account the influence of communication technology advances as well as globalisation, as these factors have created fierce job market competition (Akpan, 2016). Assessments need to be designed in a manner that not only assesses the theoretical knowledge, but also helps students develop technical and non-technical competencies that are needed for non-linear career readiness (Fallows & Steven, 2000; Akpan, 2016; Sitto, 2020). O'Flaherty & Phillips (2015) emphasise the importance of student engagement in higher education learning, for which technology-infused learning techniques can be effective.

Higher education in South Africa was not spared by the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in earnest in March 2020 in South Africa, with campuses closed under the Disaster Management Act, and all contact teaching suspended (Maphanga, 2020). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, South African higher education institutions are increasingly using technology to build in flexibility for students by moving to various forms of learning, capitalising on the benefits of technological tools. However, some of the most disadvantaged students from townships and rural areas were found without appropriate spaces to learn, limited access to virtual classes, inappropriate technology, and reduced access to lecturers. The poorest members of society feel socio-economic barriers most acutely, with students coming from those communities experiencing the most exclusionary practices because of a social divide in higher education to which they expect Black lecturers not only to relate, but also to compensate for in their assessment practices. These socio-economic barriers influence student success in higher education, as evidenced by the higher education attrition rates, especially among Black students (DHET, 2015). Collective learning relies on coordination of intellectual, social, and cultural capital to realise deliberate change (Moore, 2015), especially in higher education, by both Black lecturers and students through relatability.

Methodology

We present the methodological approach to this paper by sharing our lecturer profiles, evaluating our respective teaching portfolios, and our experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic to identify common formative assessment and feedback themes in our teaching practices linked to relatability with students. Each of our portfolios was individually analysed and then compared to the others, during a recorded meeting to discuss the observed similarities and differences across all our personal lecturing experiences to develop key themes linked to diversity and inclusion in the implementation of our formative assessment and feedback practices, including COVID-19

experiences. Thereafter, we assessed the assessment and feedback methodologies we each employed, linked to efforts of inclusiveness for our diverse disciplines and students in response to the unspoken responsibility by students of going beyond academic success outcomes, linked to the literature on the importance of relatability in developing inclusive assessment and feedback practices. We detail the types of assessments used, rationale for their development and feedback, mechanisms put in place to improve overall student success through improved assessment performance by students, despite their basic education background.

Table 1: Educator profiles of narrative teaching portfolios analysed

	Lecturer 1	**Lecturer 2**	**Lecturer 3**
Sex	Female	Male	Male
Race	Black	Black	Black
Languages spoken	SeSotho, isiZulu, English, isiXhosa	SeTswana, English	Tshivenda, Xitsonga, English, Sepedi, isiZulu, SeTswana
Languages understood	Xitsonga, SeTswana, SePedi	SeSotho, SePedi, Afrikaans	isiXhosa, SeSotho
Undergraduate alumni of teaching institution	No	No	Yes
University studies funding	Undergraduate (including Honours): NSFAS, Masters: Self-funded, PhD: Institutional employee funding, DHET and NRF Grant.	Undergraduate (including Honours): Parent funded, Masters: Parent funded, PhD: Partly funded by the NRF.	Undergraduate (including Honours): NSFAS and Mining Qualifications Authority, Masters: DAAD-NRF in-country scholarship, PhD: DHET and NRF grant.
Years teaching (PT & FT)	8	7	8
PhD obtained	Yes	Yes	Yes
Disciplines	Social science	Physical science	Physical science
Teaching philosophies	"One is never too old to learn, and learning takes place from multiple levels as well as different sources from life". Teaching and learning are shaped through this lens, of remaining open, curious, and building links between various contexts to ensure holistic personal learning.	Teaching must enable graduates to collect and impartially evaluate available evidence and form independent opinions rooted in science; after this, they should be able to expertly describe and explain their understanding to someone else.	Student-centered active learning that is anchored in practical, transformed, and decolonized teaching, with emphasis on scientific and problem-solving entrepreneurship that is based on the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) solutions.

The approach followed for this study was qualitative in nature, in order to evaluate our in-depth assessment and feedback practices through evidence-based self-reported experiences. The narrative research design was employed, proving useful for the collection and analysis of our experiences

(Overcash, 2003), interpreted through our lens as relatively young educators with a combined 23 years of university teaching experience. We purposefully chose to analyse our respective teaching portfolios, which captured our teaching philosophies, and pedagogical approaches, with a focus on our undergraduate activity. Each of us had prepared a teaching portfolio independently in preparation for faculty promotion. Our profiles as educators are outlined in Table 1.

Thematic analysis was conducted on the three teaching portfolios submitted for consideration for promotion, the evaluation of which included the start of the COVID-19 pandemic period, to examine the undergraduate assessment and feedback practices fostering diversity and inclusion through relatability. The coding and thematic analysis of the teaching portfolios was done manually, which was critical to the process, as the context needed to be preserved in order to apply human interpretation (Saldaña, 2015) of each of our assessment and feedback experiences teaching in an access university.

Trustworthiness, in working with the data from the three narrative teaching portfolios, was addressed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). Credibility was achieved by ensuring that the data was not tampered with and that the codes developed were honestly interpreted as understood by all of us. Transferability was ensured through a detailed contextual description of our circumstances as educators, institution, and the period of teaching evaluated as a baseline understanding that may be used to compare future research. Details of the research processes have been shared to address dependability for this study. Confirmability has been addressed through the findings being agreed among us, using our and student perspectives from the portfolio evidence, minimising researcher bias, and documenting the research process, including the decisions made throughout, and a description of the procedures.

Assessment and feedback methodologies of the authors

Lecturer 1

Balancing curriculum outcomes and skills development of students by lecturers is a substantial responsibility, especially in South Africa, a country of inequality, which requires cognisance of the exclusionary boundaries of higher education among an increasingly diverse student population. My personal experiences of being a minority in a student body, taught by lecturers who did not consider

my background in their pedagogical approaches, make me empathic towards my students, understanding their trepidation of being in an unfamiliar university space.

The students I teach in an access university are often from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are first-generation university goers in their families, which makes them typically unfamiliar with the higher education system, similar to me. Coming from a township setting, where many do not to finish school, never mind reach reputable universities, I relate to the weight of the opportunity for students to be successful not only for themselves, but for their families and communities. My unspoken relatability responsibility is to use assessments and feedback to affirm students' space in higher education that they have earned their place and will be able to succeed in spite of their background. This requires recognition of their existing knowledge, through transdisciplinary pragmatism, to promote integration of different types of knowledge from various societal and scientific bodies (Popa, Guillermin & Dedeurwaerdere, 2015) by ensuring students link theory with practical "doing" in a structured way to apply the theoretical principles (Sharma et al., 2018; Rai & Lama, 2020).

My intention when designing assessments is to provide an opportunity for students to bring in their own experience and knowledge, applying it practically to the theoretical underpinnings in a transdisciplinary manner, trying to balance between individual and group assessments. My industry experience also allows me to understand how to design assessments that begin developing certain competencies for students, matching the module outcomes to the vocational skills. The assessments are sometimes co-designed with industry collaborators to ensure a transdisciplinary aspect to the assessments that are also pragmatic in delivering solutions for students' immediate communities. I enter excellent student work from the assessments evaluated into industry awards to demonstrate to students the calibre of their work, through industry feedback, thus affirming their capabilities.

When planning the assessments, I am compelled by relatability to consider the types of resources that the students have access to in their immediate environment, drawing on my own personal experiences of township and rural life. Most students in access universities are financially needy, and have limited resources, thus requiring assessment outputs that apply the theoretical aspects to their immediate environment to empower them to benefit their communities. During COVID-19, for example, I designed an individual assignment, focusing on solutions from small businesses in their communities, to limit connectivity and travel costs for students, and they were expected to find solutions in their immediate environment. I design the assessments around their immediate context,

using themes related to their lived experiences, and this includes the choice of local case studies for assessments, for example. During the COVID-19 pandemic, technology played a significant role in delivery of module content, assessments, and feedback, with communication channels I selected in consideration of digital access privilege, understanding of jargon, as well as means for submission of assessments, in addition to access university guidelines. Lecturers in higher education may be hesitant to introduce various forms of online learning to their traditional pedagogical methods because of a lack of institutional help, support, and training (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010); however, my responsibility not to leave any students behind reduces the hesitancy.

The transdisciplinary pragmatic aspect of the assessment is to demonstrate to them how their qualification will be able to benefit their communities, a question often asked by students about what they will be able to do with their qualifications once they graduate. At times, the pragmatic transdisciplinary nature of the assessments raises alarm in students who struggle to connect their activities with the theoretical underpinnings and requires feedback for me to draw the links for them. Feedback is a loop between students and academics, in order to improve relations and assessment practices, and I adjust my assessment practices in response to feedback from students, e.g., deliberately using more simplified language to reduce the English non-first-language barrier getting in the way of students understanding what is being asked of them.

Most students are afraid to consult with lecturers, and this fear prejudices them from understanding their assessment performance as well as finding areas for improvement in their studies. Drawing on my personal experience of only ever unsuccessfully attempting to consult once, I had to find a way to engage inclusive, accessible, and beneficial feedback practices to most students. When marking assessments, I take note of common issues across the student cohort for that particular assessment and then provide a list of overall feedback on common mistakes among the cohort, so as not to make any particular student feel singled out. I then take time in class to be pragmatic in my feedback by breaking down the assessment questions or briefs completed by students, for discussion in class. Sometimes, in order to demonstrate practically what was expected of the students, I share anonymised scripts of students who performed well, which promotes peer learning.

There are some challenges with the respect to relatability, particularly in how students personally relate to me because of an ingrained historical social representation, especially in higher education, that paler colleagues are more knowledgeable and experienced. These challenges, however, do not overshadow the professional and societal expectations I know from personal experiences these

students will bear, which they need to be prepared for through the assessments I design and my feedback in empowering them to improve. Thus, relatability informing creativity in my assessment practices remains key to ensuring meaningful participation of students, considering differing relatable socio-economic circumstances, and working to keep dropout rates to a minimum through avoiding perpetuating existing inequalities among students.

Lecturer 2

I did not do my undergraduate and postgraduate studies at the university where I currently teach. One of the things that struck me when I first arrived where I work was the general lack of diversity in the student population, compared to my alma mater. The student population is mostly Black, perhaps related to my employer being an access university. On the other hand, the academic staff, particularly at the professorial level, is mostly White, similar to other so-called research-intensive universities around the country. In addition, I grew up and did my primary schooling in a village like most of the students I teach, having also matriculated from quintile 1 and 2 schools. These schools, located in and servicing the rural areas, generally lack the resources and infrastructure that may be taken for granted in more affluent schools, including teachers for specialist subjects (e.g., STEM), libraries, science laboratories, etc. Owing to the way in which villages are organised in South Africa, largely as a legacy of the bantustan system of the former apartheid government, growing up in these areas means your interactions are mostly restricted to people of the same nation. Upon entering university, you are thrust not only into an unfamiliar space that includes people from other nations but other races as well. To add to this, the overwhelming overrepresentation of White people in the teaching staff creates a feeling of unease and discomfort (perhaps fear) for Black students from these areas when it is time to consult and seek additional help; emotions I am well familiar with from my time as an undergraduate student. These similarities in backgrounds between myself and my students, as well as racial and cultural similarities, are a source of relatability, which in turn create the unspoken expectations.

At same time, relatability also renders me more sympathetic towards my students in their struggle to successfully navigate the university space. It is for this reason that I include comments such as "come see me" when providing assessment feedback to struggling students. In this way, students do not feel victimised, singled out, and exposed in front of their peers. During subsequent one-on-one consultations (for those willing to take up the offer), it is easier to identify gaps in their learning and they are themselves more comfortable asking questions than in a class setting. Language is another

barrier to overcome for effective learning for these students; to most Black people in South Africa, English (the language of instruction in universities) is at best a second language. It is for this reason that I find myself having to communicate with individual students in SeTswana/SePedi/SeSotho, especially during the consultations. This 'unspoken expectation' would not materialise for colleagues who are not proficient in these African languages. As someone now fluent in English in addition to a few South African languages, the ability to accommodate students lacking English proficiency encourages their learning, improves familiarity and their ability to relate with the content, ultimately rendering it more accessible.

Pragmatism demands practicality and inclusion of students' lived experiences in the design of assessments. According to Mosher, Bralower, Huntoon, Lea, McConnell, Miller et al. (2014: 9), natural science graduates

> need to understand how the Earth works, that it is a complex, dynamic, open, and coupled system. They need to understand deep time, present-day processes, and future impacts. Moreover, they need to be able to communicate effectively with other scientists and non-scientists. The key is to integrate these skills, competencies and concepts into the curriculum at multiple stages.

This aptly summarizes the wide range of skills and competencies that the natural sciences graduate must develop during their studies, which cannot all be covered in any single undergraduate curriculum. Within the natural science discipline, mastery also requires knowledge of the historical context of a site and the ability to make own observations (King, 2008: 44; Semken et al., 2017: 65), hence the need for field-based experiences rooted in the place-based teaching modality.

Inclusion of the 'place' in an online environment requires bringing the physical environment into the classroom, using video recordings, specimens, and/or co-designing teaching practices and assessments with industry professionals. Even prior to the lockdown imposed in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was becoming increasingly difficult to take students to field schools due to increasing logistical expenses (Semken et al., 2018), and the use of virtual field trips became common (Klippel, Zhao, Jackson, Femina, Stubbs, Wetzel et al., 2019: 57). In 2019, my institution awarded funding to facilitate field-based teaching experiences while minimising expenses. As a start, two industry specialist experts were approached to co-design practical assessments while adhering to the existing curriculum learning outcomes. Using authentic case studies, rooted in scenarios encountered during their working lives, the industry experts prepared several calculation-based assessments. It was important that the assessments incorporate knowledge acquired during the theory classes with real-world examples. Each assessment began with natural science information

about a specific site in order to situate the teaching and assessment in terms of place-based education. Questions on the scenario presented then probed and engaged knowledge gained by the students in the theory lectures, bringing together theory and its practical application. Due to the inability to travel and conduct field-based teaching, these scenario-based assessments became invaluable during the COVID-19 lockdown period. Opportunities for practicing pragmatism in teaching in the natural sciences are plentiful, sometimes presenting themselves in the most tragic ways. As an example, the KwaZulu-Natal Province experienced extreme flooding in April 2022; this triggered geohazards in the form of mass movements around the province (Grab & Nash, 2023). This tragic event provided further opportunities for teaching students about how certain rocks and soils behave when over-saturated for prolonged periods, using scenarios that are topical and with which they are likely to be familiar, at least through the news media.

Through discussions with colleagues based in industry, one of the major criticisms concerning recent graduates is the lack of communications skills. I took this responsibility to infuse writing skills into assessments for students. It is generally difficult to address these skills at the undergraduate level given the class sizes as well as the need to focus on the core themes of a discipline. To compound this, our students, who generally come through the public schooling system, have very limited writing skills contributing to their lack of such skills. Because of this, I made a conscious decision to get the students writing as soon as possible during the course of their university careers. I do this in two main ways: designing theory assessments that require essay-type responses, and a larger desktop study assignment taking place over a period of a few weeks. The essay-type assessments force students to write coherently, avoid contradictions, and to pay attention to sentence construction and grammar. When using this approach to designing assessments, it is important to warn students beforehand through inclusive feedback and to discuss strategies for how they need to structure their responses. This feedback practice allows students to tackle formative assessment questions with confidence. While not necessarily penalising students for poor sentence construction, for example, especially when the content of their responses is clear and not contradictory, I make sure to include corrections to language and grammar in my feedback. I must admit that this assessment and feedback approach is possible for relatively small classes, otherwise the marking can quickly become burdensome and overly time-consuming. By the time they submit their desktop assignment towards the end of the module, there are generally improvements in how the students express themselves.

Lecturer 3

I began my academic journey in the township of Soweto, attending quintile 3 schools for both my primary and secondary education. Subsequently, I pursued higher education at the university in discussion, as the first in my family to attend university. I studied from bachelor's degree through to doctoral degree continuously over a 10-year period at the same university. During my doctoral studies, I was presented with the opportunity to join the faculty of the university, as an assistant lecturer and 8 years later I have progressed to senior lecturer position. Over the 8-year period, I have observed a significant shift in the student demographics within the geology discipline I teach. The student body has become predominantly Black, with some years even witnessing no White first-year students. In addition, the student intake has decreased considerably, mirroring the contraction of the mining industry in South Africa. These changes are noteworthy, especially considering that I was once part of the largest first-year geology class the university ever admitted and even then, the number of White students was substantial. Further, a significant portion of geology students at my university hail from rural areas, likely influenced by the prevalence of mines in areas and the subsequent bursaries awarded by these mines to the neighbouring communities. During my undergraduate years, I found myself popular among my classmates, with most of my class friends coming from rural backgrounds. Although, my popularity was also with most lecturers who taught me, and unlike my co-authors, I recall that I did not struggle to approach my lecturers and consulted outside the class frequently. I attributed this popularity to my multilingualism and my ability to interact seamlessly with a diverse group of students as influenced by my township upbringing. Townships are more diverse in terms of language, cultural or nationality/tribal background, level of education, and social status. Upon transitioning to a teaching role in my mid-twenties, I noticed that my popularity persisted with the students I was teaching. Initially, I believed it was due to the relatively small age gap between my students and me. However, even as the years have passed, I continue to be a sought-after figure by students in the department. Even students not in the classes I teach or those that I do not supervise at postgraduate level often consult with me for advice or help over their designated lecturers, most of whom are White. Reflecting on this, I have come to understand that my popularity stems from a deeper level of relatability that students feel with me, which they might not necessarily experience with my White colleagues. The root of that relatability being racial identity.

Despite my training as a natural scientist, where pedagogical methods were not a primary focus, my teaching delivery, together with assessment and feedback practices, have been shaped by my

personal academic experiences. While over 90% of my undergraduate classes were taught by White faculty members, I have consciously structured my teaching approach to resonate with the unique relatability I share with my students. One significant aspect of this relatability is addressing the dual challenge of teaching both the subject matter and the English language. Given that English, as a medium of instruction, introduces students to numerous unfamiliar terms and phrases concurrently with new scientific concepts, it is imperative to address both. Drawing from my own experiences, I understand that a singular focus on the subject matter may not fully equip students for academic success. Furthermore, this sense of relatability drives me to incorporate examples or analogies that resonate with many Black students, based on their cultural and personal backgrounds. I juxtapose these examples with those presented in scholarly texts, providing a comprehensive understanding. In doing so, I align my teaching approach with the principles of transdisciplinary pragmatism. As outlined by Klein (2015), this framework emphasizes the integration of knowledge across disciplines and its practical application in real-world contexts (including personal, lived experiences), ensuring a holistic and relevant learning experience for students.

The SOLO taxonomy (Biggs & Collis, 2014) has been a cornerstone of my teaching approach. This taxonomy, which focuses on the depth and complexity of student understanding, aligns seamlessly with the principles of transdisciplinary pragmatism. By emphasizing the progression from unistructural to multistructural, and then to relational and extended abstract understanding, the SOLO taxonomy ensures that students not only acquire knowledge but also develop the ability to synthesize and apply it across various contexts. For example, to ensure that students remain aligned with the course's progression and grasp foundational or unistructural concepts, I administer weekly class tests. This strategy allows for timely identification and reinforcement of the concepts before delving into more intricate or multistructural topics. My adoption of this approach stems from personal academic experiences as a student, where I often found myself trailing behind the prescribed course schedule, particularly in the absence of incentives to revisit and engage with class materials that I might not have fully comprehended. Through the implementation of the weekly tests, I have observed a proactive shift in student behaviour. Students are more inclined to promptly review the content covered in theory classes and proactively seek clarification or pose questions in class. Additionally, when providing feedback on these tests, I do not provide model answers and that encourages the students to actively engage with course materials, prompting them to construct their own comprehensive answers. This not only deepens their understanding but also equips them for subsequent assessments. In addition to the SOLO taxonomy, I have also found Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) useful in my teaching to enhance relatability.

Vygotsky's ZPD delineates the gap between a learner's independent capabilities and what they can achieve with the assistance of a more knowledgeable counterpart, thus, it becomes an invaluable tool, especially for those working with marginalized students. The ZPD ensures that I understand each student as an individual and their unique needs and strengths, which has become easier due to the smaller class sizes I teach. I recall that the 'PD was helpful during the emergency remote teaching and learning imposed by the COVID-19 lockdown. The ZPD helped me in attempts to accommodate all types of students in my class when preparing and providing assessments and feedback, ensuring that I cater to most students to maximise their receptiveness and understanding of the feedback to enhance their learning.

Discussion

Most students in access universities are from the poorest schools (quintiles 1 and 2), which are often in rural areas and townships of South Africa. In developing assessments, irrespective of our different disciplines, we are driven to consider the resources to which the majority of students are likely to have access, informed by some of our own personal higher education experience of having limited resources to participate meaningfully with assessments. Being lecturers who come from townships or rural villages, in addition to being first-generation university graduates with PhD level qualifications, provides demographic relatability with the students we teach. The COVID-19 lockdown effectively pushed students back to their homes and we had to adjust our assessment designs in response to their hyper-local settings. The assessments were designed to accommodate the students' circumstances, with adjustments made where students had found it hard to participate meaningfully due to various personal and institutional challenges. Although our shared experiences and similar backgrounds give rise to relatability, it is incumbent on us, as Black lecturers especially, to ensure that the learning outcomes of our students in access institutions are not compromised. This demands that we ensure that our assessments are inclusive, relatable, and accessible while adhering to the established curriculum outcomes.

Students are allowed to consult with each of us in any of the South African languages they are comfortable with, within the confines of our proficiency, because we are multilingual, allowing them to express their learning challenges or queries in a manner that is clearer because of the removal of the barrier of limited English proficiency in some cases. Multilingual feedback consultation proved especially helpful for us to build rapport with new students during the COVID-19 lockdown, allowing them to share their challenges with us, oftentimes beyond their academic problems. The ability to

converse with students in other South African languages is useful for ensuring comprehension and giving students confidence in their understanding of the subject matter; the same information must then be delivered in the language of instruction (English) which better aids students' ability to tackle future assessments. In addition to using other South African languages, it is important to simplify the language of instruction so that the content is more accessible and easily digestible.

Several of our students struggled with access to technological resources such as computers and laptops, ongoing electricity supply issues, and unreliable internet connectivity. However, their ability to still be able to participate in academic activities required us to rely on our experiences of such home circumstances, by engaging with their feedback from consultations and planning for such scenarios. We extended formative assessment submission dates during the COVID-19 lockdown to accommodate the disruptions to the students' lives, however, some students still struggled with various issues because of their socio-economic circumstances and needed to be accommodated differently, with sensitivity linked to their expectation to which, as Black academics, we could relate.

With respect to feedback, we each prioritise accessibility for consultation and encourage students to challenge us through such engagements. Notes from consultations with respect to student challenges with past assessments help inform and shape future assessments in a co-created manner, alongside industry collaborators' inputs. Some of our personal undergraduate experience of consultation with lecturers left a big gap in our personal student experiences (Lecturer 1 and 2, respectively) and likely also our academic performance. We use our experiences to foster a more inclusive space where students do not fear to approach any of us for consultation and feedback. In developing assessments, we draw on our personal experiences, consider the limited resources available to students, and encourage creativity among students. We use student feedback to inform our pedagogy, and ongoing assessment practices. The use of technology, particularly during the COVID-19 lockdown, opened up space for more frequent communication with students and fostered class engagement. Our formative assessment and feedback practices are shaped by the importance we know is critical to keeping experiential knowledge in mind so that we design inclusive, impactful assessments, using feedback to improve our and students' competencies, and affirm their presence in higher education.

Conclusion

Assessments play a significant role, much more than simply testing for knowledge among students. A pragmatic transdisciplinary approach to pedagogy ensures that scientific, social, and personal knowledge is infused to develop solutions to challenges in students' contexts. Feedback, on the other hand, is a loop between us as lecturers and students, and is useful for improving our pedagogical and relational practices as young academics. There are challenges with inclusive formative assessment practices in access institutions, such as language, larger class numbers, and limited institutional resources for meaningful participation by students. Our lecturer experiences as first-generation university graduates from a township or rural village setting, combined with the ability to speak multiple languages, has allowed us to build rapport with students and provide a comfortable learning environment. Overall, our approach to assessment and feedback stems from personal experiences that have enabled us to relate more closely to the unique challenges faced by students, even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic. Transformation of academia places significant social responsibility on Black lecturers to be intentional in their development of formative assessment and feedback practices to drive successful student outcomes beyond academic performance. More research is needed on student-centric formative assessment and feedback practices in relation to the unspoken expectations of Black students of Black lecturers, particularly at South African access universities, because of their perceived relatability. As understood here, relatability between lecturers and students stems from intractable parts of their shared identities, although there should be a conscious awareness by lecturers of the potential for relatability to be othering, which can also be exclusionary. With this contribution, we hope to encourage our fellow lecturers not to shy away from relatability, but to harness its power to improve formative assessment and feedback practices towards strengthening inclusive teaching and learning for students' academic success.

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