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# Teaching and learning for sustainable futures: Reclaiming, collaboration and empathy

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## ABSTRACT

Introducing community engagement to my annual class of Visual Art honours students has become increasingly challenging. There is a healthy resistance to the perception of 'cultural tourism', and students are sensitive to the idea of entering a community as voyeurs with the perception of privileged "saviours". I offer a particular example of an emerging annual exchange with the African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO), who have partnered with the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in a range of projects that can add value to upcycling of collected and sorted waste products. The pervasive news of corruption, violence, and rolling blackouts undermines well-being and increasingly perpetuates despair, apathy, or distraction. In this climate, a question of response in an educational environment is pertinent. How does one teach and learn about sustainable futures? How can educators foster empathy, agency, and activism among students? This article draws on ecology activist and scholar Dylan McGarry's expanded concept of transgressive social learning using skills transfer through an apprenticeship, which is helpful in framing a model of teaching and learning based on social exchange. Including selected student reflections, the paper considers methods and practices that model ways to develop various forms of personal and social agency through exploring empathetic encounters.

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## Introduction

Introducing community engagement to my annual class of Visual Art honours students has become increasingly challenging. There is a healthy resistance to the perception of 'cultural tourism', and students are sensitive to the idea of entering a community as voyeurs with the perception of privileged "saviours". In recent years, student groups have become increasingly wary of the inherited legacy of charitable kindness for 'helping the poor' and are also sensitised to the imperatives from student movements calling for decolonialising approaches and conditions in higher education (HE). In my experience, students resist or are deeply sceptical of initiatives coming from white lecturers who have been in the education system for over two decades. Students have an innate knowledge of the social and environmental damage and inequalities perpetuated by the two previous generations.

In South Africa, in general, there is a growing intolerance for political leaders who steal from and undermine social programmes designed for equity and economic justice in our social environment. The pervasive news of corruption, violence, and rolling blackouts undermines well-being and increasingly perpetuates despair, apathy, or distraction. In this climate, a question of response in an educational environment is pertinent. How does one teach and learn about sustainable futures? Engaging with a constructed world through social media is preferable for many young people. The challenges facing educators in this environment require an openness to learning from and with students. Educators are faced with engaging with 'wicked' problems, for which solutions are not accessible on a Google Chrome search or Open AI. Educators need to find innovative ways for students to be open to learning in uncomfortable and sticky territory.

This article explores ways that educators can foster empathy, agency, and activism among students through their engagement in a community-led project. I offer a particular example of an emerging annual exchange with waste reclaimers based in Newtown, Johannesburg. The African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO) has partnered with the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in a range of projects that can add value to the upcycling of collected and sorted waste products. Involving students in activations that respond to some of the targeted requests for collaboration brings value to students, facilitators, and community partners.

Ecology activist, researcher, and educator Dylan McGarry works at the Environmental Learning Research Centre at Rhodes University. McGarry explores practice-based aesthetics, transgressive

social learning, and socio-ecological development in South Africa. McGarry (2014:189) suggests that the education of the "ecological citizen" should be a priority. He considers how one could "learn" to be an ecological citizen and suggests that what underlies the learning process is the interconnectedness of ecological citizenship and social learning. This interconnectedness suggests a model of apprenticeship that accommodates climate change, poverty, ecological decline, and economic-political transformation. Social apprenticeship would need an expanded concept of mentorship based on social exchange that recognises apprenticeship as helpful in framing a model of teaching and learning (McGarry, 2014:190).

I suggest that this proposition by McGarry is valuable to adapt as a teaching strategy; however, there is very little room in most art and design curricula for ecological teaching and learning. The education of an "ecological citizen" requires sustained and embedded practice. Borrowing the frame of a social apprenticeship for a short-term experience has significant limitations and may not be sustainable. This article seeks to reflect on the possibilities of empathetic apprenticeship that may emerge within a short-term project. The Visual Art honours students at UJ have a short community engagement module over a few months in the first semester, and the hope is that a valuable learning relationship is modelled through their community interaction.

This paper presents methods and practices that model ways to develop various forms of personal and social agency through exploring empathetic encounters.

The structure of the paper considers the following aspects:

- Background of ARO and engaging the stereotype of 'waste picker'
- Limited literature review of transgressive strategies for HE and implications for teaching empathy for engaging with social justice
- Methodologies and activation for the student projects with Bekezela
- Themes identified in the students' reflections
- Opportunities for emergent strategies.

## Background: ARO and engaging the stereotype of "waste picker"

ARO has collaborated with UJ on projects enhancing the upcycling of collected waste since 2022. ARO in Johannesburg is a collective movement advocating for the rights and well-being of waste reclaimers as individuals involved in collecting, sorting, and recycling waste. ARO is committed to

addressing the challenges faced by waste reclaimers, working towards their integration into formal waste management systems. ARO emphasises social and environmental justice, challenging stigmatisation, and promoting the value of reclaimers' contributions to sustainability. ARO adopts participatory approaches, encouraging active involvement in decision-making processes and addressing the erasure of reclaimers' contributions and humanity, challenging stereotypes, and advocating for fair compensation. ARO collaborates with UJ to support research projects and skills development for waste reclaimers.

Through conferences, talks, and workshops, ARO creates platforms for waste reclaimers to share experiences and expertise. Members of ARO have participated in seminars and workshops at the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture (FADA) at UJ and have presented their work to students and lecturing staff to manage university collaborations. Overall, the organisation plays a crucial role in advocating for improved working conditions, recognition, and fair treatment of waste reclaimers in Johannesburg, contributing to a more equitable and sustainable waste management system.

Sociology professor Melanie Samson (2020) has a specialisation in the field of waste management and is the convener of the UJ Reclaimers Network. Samson emphasises the political significance of reclaimers' work, discouraging the term “waste pickers”. In her presentation to students and in her writings, she advocates for the term “reclaimer”, highlighting the workers' role in rescuing valuable items and engaging in complex labour to revalue the items. Samson (2020) identifies various erasures experienced by reclaimers, including the dehumanisation that labels them as “human waste” and “surplus people”. She outlines four key erasures: the dismissal of reclaiming as a productive economic activity, the neglect of reclaimers' knowledge in differentiating valuable items, the municipal erasure of the reclaimers' created “recyclingscape”, and the oversight of their contribution to a new sphere of accumulation (Samson, 2020:195). Reclaimers challenge the traditional view of waste, identifying potential value. However, municipalities often disregard their economic contributions and the informal recycling systems they establish, considering these spaces as “wastescapes” to be cleaned up. Samson’s insights call for a re-evaluation of language and recognition of the multifaceted contributions of reclaimers in shaping sustainable practices (Samson, 2020).

Samson (2020) advocates for a paradigm shift in waste management, suggesting that instead of merely including waste reclaimers in formal systems, municipal and industry approaches should integrate into the world of these reclaimers. This perspective acknowledges reclaimers as epistemic

agents, recognising their rights to collected materials and viewing them as "architects of the recyclingscape" (Samson, 2020:195) Despite the challenge of transforming power dynamics (that those in control are reluctant to yield), addressing and rectifying the erasures of waste picker integration can potentially empower reclaimer movements (Samson, 2020). Samson calls on multi-disciplinary approaches, using the range of skills in university faculties to work with ARO on undoing these erasures and to collaborate on the strategies and broader visions for a productive way forward. UJ's Department of Visual Art collaborates with the wider UJ network in a collective effort to support the aspirations, skills development, and research partnerships of the ARO reclaimer movement, contributing to its expansive civic goals.

## Teaching empathy and participation: Literature and approaches

Each year, the UJ's Visual Art and Honours in Art Therapy students participate in community engagement using participatory and visual research methodologies to conduct research. My seven-week module introduces a range of participatory and visual methods and offers approaches that ensure participants' voices are heard and amplified, as well as strategies for students to participate, actively listen, and learn through collaboration during this research opportunity. The question "Can one teach empathy?" is one that I grapple with in this learning module. I provide the students with readings, such as *The Danger of a Single Story* (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 2009), *Why Stories Matter* (Marshall Ganz, 2009), *The Moral Imagination* (Lederach, 2004), and *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Frere, 2007), for discussion, as well as readings on subjects of visual-arts-based methodologies, participatory action research, appreciative inquiry in organisations, the scholarship of engagement, and others.

As mentioned, there was an initial reluctance by the honours students to undertake a research project with the reclaimers. The students thought the research was potentially intrusive, exploitative, and "othering". We discussed issues of exploitative research relationships of "doing research on people" compared with participatory practices "with participants" (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). We explored storytelling, aspects of co-creation, and co-researchers as agents of their stories. The challenges facing educators in this learning environment require an openness to learning from and with students and finding innovative ways for students to be open to learning in uncomfortable territory. Empathy, or the ability to share the experiences and perspectives of others, is a core component of social change and sustainability. Empathy promotes connections and collaborations among diverse stakeholders. Jean Paul Lederach (2005) writes of the moral imagination as an inner

action that results in personal freedom. He acknowledges the role of artistic processes that stimulate moments of possibility that pave the way for constructive change (Lederach, 2005:5). Teaching students to acquire a moral imagination involves helping them develop the ability to empathise with others, think critically about complex ethical issues, and creatively envision and implement ethical solutions.

The literature on participative research and collaborative practice that students engage with in the introductory theoretical model comes alive for them on reflection, and after their experience in the field.

Photovoice and visual research methods are considered ethical approaches in community engagement as they empower participants, promote collaboration, and mitigate the risk of exploitative relationships. This approach highlights the importance of embracing methodologies that prioritise the voices and agency of community members, fostering a research environment that aligns with principles of respect, collaboration, and cultural understanding. Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris (1997) are pioneers in the photovoice method and have written extensively on its applications, including the ethical dimensions of empowering communities through visual methods. Arts-based methods for community engagement offer innovative ways to encourage empathy and understanding. Storytelling and narrative arts community murals and collaborative arts workshops, including theatre and digital storytelling, allow individuals to express experiences, creating connections and empathy. These methods use creative practice to build bridges of empathy within communities and with external audiences. A core value of social justice education is grounded in lived experiences and interconnectedness. This interconnected approach influences a critical pedagogy for a more human-centred, caring approach. Relevant themes have emerged in this process and will be directed to the next group of students working on the subsequent phase of the project in the following year.

Cultural humility is a valuable concept that I became aware of in my role in convening the Art Therapy programme in the Department of Visual Art at UJ. The department hosted a conference on Training Art Therapy for Social Justice. Art therapy scholar Savneet Talwar (2015) refers to cultural humility as an attitude and approach in which individuals maintain a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique, particularly in healthcare or intercultural interactions. Cultural humility involves recognising and challenging one's own cultural biases and assumptions, being open to learning from others, and actively engaging with different cultural perspectives. This practical

experience with intersectionality is a rich and sticky area for students to grapple with in the field. Talwar (2015) insists that an intersectional framework regards race, class, gender, and sexuality as intersecting principles that shape everyday life and creates the possibilities for exploring the complexities of identity and building alliances for social change. The first step, whether researching, preparing to be a therapist, or engaging with a community, requires "deconstructing our own positions of power and privilege [that lie] at the heart of a social model" (Talwar, 2015: 101).

Cultural humility encourages deep self-reflection and acknowledges that cultural knowledge is dynamic, and individuals are unique, going beyond stereotypes or generalisations. In this context, cultural humility goes beyond cultural competence, which may imply a fixed set of knowledge or skills. Instead, cultural humility emphasises the ongoing learning process about and respect for diverse cultures. Practitioners with cultural humility continually reflect on their own cultural background, acknowledge the limitations of their understanding, and approach interactions with genuine curiosity and openness.

## Imagining transgressive strategies for HE

Educators in this SOTL learning environment face challenges that necessitate openness to learning from and with students, fostering innovative approaches for comfortable learning in unfamiliar territory. As suggested, empathy is central to social change and sustainability, enabling shared experiences and perspectives among diverse stakeholders. McGarry (2014) calls for transgressive strategies that urge HE institutions to question and redefine established norms, embracing a mindset that actively seeks to disrupt and innovate. He argues that this approach aims to better prepare students for the complexities of the contemporary world and align HE with the evolving needs of society. I find this idea to be particularly helpful in framing a model of teaching and learning as he embraces the use of the arts in responding to "wicked" problems such as environmental responsiveness. McGarry (2014) advocates for a model based on social exchange.

McGarry (2014) explores practice-based aesthetics, transgressive social learning, and socio-ecological development in South Africa and suggests that the education of the "ecological citizen" should be a priority (McGarry, 2014:189). He considers how one could "learn" this and advocates for a model of "social apprenticeship" that accommodates climate change, poverty, ecological decline, and economic-political transformation (McGarry, 2014:190). McGarry (2014) argues for mentorship for transferring skills through apprenticeship. This mentorship approach seems valuable for my

reticent honours students, some of whom were sceptical of the value of the community engagement module as part of their professional development learning.

Transgressions will lead HE beyond established norms and will challenge existing boundaries or limitations. In the context of HE, transgressive strategies defy conventional expectations and actively disrupt the status quo (McGarry, 2014:190). These transgressive strategies may expand on innovative pedagogies that embrace unconventional teaching methods that prioritise experiential learning, critical thinking, and real-world application over traditional lecture-based approaches.

## Project: Activations to enhance the Bekezela Crèche

### *Methods*

We received ethical clearance from UJ's faculty Ethics Committee and engaged with the recommended translated academic consent forms. The students cleared all engagements and materials with the coordinator of ARO to ensure that participants understood their choices and consented by approving the publication of their names, photographs, and stories. The students subsequently responded well to photovoice as a visual research method, as they understood the power of participant-led research (Wang 1999). Photovoice requires students to listen to and record stories and is a method that has been shown to foster individuals' identities and roles as competent citizens and as active participants in the institutions and decisions that impact their lives (Wang, 2006). The visual image is evocative and stimulates the aesthetic experience. The methods for the community engagement class draw on participatory arts-based approaches. The students' projects supporting the reclaimers in the settlement of Bekezela using artmaking product development and photography are effective in community learning and exchange. The projects stimulate connection and empathy across collaborators.

I stepped back from leading the project, which alleviated the students' reticence regarding community engagement. I invited the passionate and energetic education coordinator of ARO, Luyanda Hlatshwayo, to talk to my class. He spoke about the innovative work the community has done in building a crèche in the middle of the Bekezela informal settlement. The settlement of approximately 500 residents is situated under the Carr Street bridge in Newtown. Hlatshwayo then invited students for a tour around the settlement. We all independently arrived at the designated time, and he introduced the group of 15 students to the highly organised teams of reclaimers,

starting with what he called the “office”, where reclaimers enter with their huge loads to sort the waste materials.

Figure 1. Luyanda Hlatshwayo presenting the Bekezela reclaiming system to the Visual Art Honours students. May 2023. Photograph by the author.

We visited the urban food gardens, and then, the dedicated team of five teachers waited for us at the crèche. The students were all moved by the stories about the crèche and the invitation from the teachers to help improve the crèche conditions. The teachers shared their challenges and hopes to improve the environment for the children. The students were invited to choose and design interventions that responded to selected issues.

Following the site visit, the students organised themselves into a gardening group, a classroom group, and a playground and mural painting group. The following week, we met at the crèche, and the students were tasked with presenting their three group project proposals to Hlatshwayo and the Bekezela teachers at a site visit for feedback. Honours students from Graphic Design and Fashion joined us and were invited to share their research projects. The students met in their interest groups and engaged in a productive exchange with a self-assigned community member to lead and manage the group’s project. After discussing ideas and allocated spaces, the students submitted their group proposals for interventions to transform the designated spaces with consent from the crèche teachers.

Part of the needs assessment introduced photovoice as a visual storytelling method. The teachers were given disposable cameras to take their own photographs over the six weeks of the intervention, and the photographs would be developed, printed, and returned. As the teachers were all undergoing early childhood development (ECD) training with the Mimosa NGO [1] at the time, they expressed delight that they were able to use their own photographs as part of their presentations and assessments. The students experienced the importance of addressing and responding to the concerns of community members; in this case, the teachers who are also part of the reclaimer worker community and create reciprocal relationships as part of their research and community service process. The students were given a budget (R10,000 from the UJ Teaching and Innovation Grant) to spend on improvements. They purchased mural and classroom paints, and waterproofing and building materials, a large JoJo water tank, hosepipes, seedlings, and gardening supplies. The groups arranged times and days for the teachers to work at the site so that they would not disrupt the teaching programme.

Figure 2: Students introduced to the classrooms of the Bekezela Creche. May 2023. Photograph by the author

[1] Further information about the Mimosa NGO can be found at Africa Food for Thought: https://afft.org.za/about-us/

*Reflections*

At the end of the project, the students wrote reflective essays on their experiences. Readings by authors who collectively contribute to the discourse on responsible and ethical community engagement were used to guide students and researchers in navigating the potential pitfalls of intrusiveness and exploitation in their collaborative endeavours.

The students were asked to reflect on various sections of their module: cultural/community learning, critical self-reflection, cultural sensitivity, and academic learning with a particular focus on the effectiveness of arts-based or visual methods (such as photovoice and others). Students were directed to Ash & Clayton's (2010) DEAL model, which promotes deepening learning through service, through describing, examining, and articulating learning. Certain authors writing about service learning acknowledge the complexities of student engagement in community projects. For example, Sherril B. Gelmon (2007) emphasises the need for careful consideration of power dynamics and ethical dilemmas. Gelmon (2007) considers the concerns of students in community engagement, particularly the concerns related to intrusiveness and exploitation. Trust and collaborative relationships with communities can be built by acknowledging the communities' concerns and perspectives (Gelmon 2007:253).

Harry Boyte's (2015) approach aims to inspire students to envision and work towards a democratic society by cultivating hope and agency in the classroom. He promotes democratic pedagogy, creating environments where students actively participate, voice their opinions, and engage in dialogue (Boyte 2015:22). This democratic approach fosters critical thinking and decision-making skills. Facilitative environments within educational institutions support students in developing the confidence and knowledge needed for civic engagement. He emphasises the importance of political imagination, encouraging students to envision alternative futures and actively participate in shaping them (Boyte 2015: 1). Overall, Boyte's (2015) strategy involves holistically integrating experiential learning, community partnerships, democratic pedagogy, and cultivating a sense of responsibility, empowering students to contribute actively to societal well-being.

## Themes identified in the students' reflections

Some of the themes that emerged from the students' reflections are identified in this section, and some are compatible with McGarry's (2014) model of skills transfer and apprenticeship. Selected

student quotes extracted from their essays indicate their own self-learning and are grouped with relevant themes. I received students' consent to include their names in this article, but I have chosen to keep them anonymous, referring to them by initials.

### *Empowerment*

Some of the themes relate to issues of empowerment or increased self-confidence among participants. The students acknowledge that photovoice allows community members to express their perspectives through photography, giving them a direct and active role in the research process. This participatory nature of photovoice empowers individuals, enabling them to share their stories, experiences, and insights on their own terms. Traditional research methods can sometimes reinforce power imbalances between researchers and participants. In contrast, photovoice diminishes this hierarchy. It acknowledges the expertise of community members in understanding their own experiences, reducing the researcher's authority, and fostering a more equal partnership. A student from a rural community in the Eastern Cape, who is comfortable with the processes, expresses this understanding clearly:

> Photovoice is a very effective and creative research methodology that empowers participants to communicate their personal experiences and perspectives via visual imagery. By integrating the mediums of photography and narrative, this approach offers a captivating and innovative means of understanding intricate societal matters. Photovoice facilitates the process of individuals documenting and interpreting their personal experiences, therefore fostering inclusivity and participation. This initiative serves to enhance the representation and visibility of individuals belonging to marginalised communities. Participants assume the role of active co-researchers. This study sheds light on aspects that are often overlooked by traditional research methodologies. The utilisation of a visual methodology effectively evokes emotional responses, fostering empathy and encouraging societal transformation. Nevertheless, there are challenges that arise in relation to ethical issues, data analysis, and representation. Overall, photovoice offers a revolutionary perspective that enables academics to enhance their understanding (LM).

### *Cultural sensitivity*

The theme of cultural sensitivity and ethical representation came up, particularly among the more privileged white female students. They were able to recognise the value of visual methods that transcend language barriers and cultural differences, making them more inclusive and accessible. This transcendence helps avoid misinterpretations and ensures that the research respects and reflects the cultural context of the community. Visual methods provide a platform for participants to

represent themselves authentically. This self-representation is particularly important in avoiding the distortion or misrepresentation that may occur when researchers interpret and convey participants' experiences in their own words.

> In speaking with the community members of the Bekezela informal settlement and members of ARO it became clear to me that the members in this community are indeed hard-working, family-oriented people concerned for the well-being of the people within their community, with an emphasis on the children within the community. Working within the Bekezela community and getting to know the people within the community has been a new experience for me. Coming into this kind of engaged community practice, I was hesitant. I was aware of the social and cultural differences between my background and the people in the community. But despite my previous hesitation, I began to make connections between different communities. For me, this connection is the children within the communities. Children are the heart of most communities and our instinct to provide and protect these children is what connects our communities. Children are the foundation of the next generation, and with this community project, I hope that we helped lay a small brick onto the foundation that they are building (JP).

Photovoice often involves collaborative analysis and interpretation of visual data. This shared process ensures that community members are actively engaged in shaping the meaning of the images, reinforcing a sense of ownership and control over the research outcomes. Photovoice is a visual research method, and its power in participant-led research can be engaged. This shift exemplifies the transformative potential of empathetic and participatory approaches in education, encouraging students to contribute actively to societal challenges. A student who was initially quite nervous and hesitant to collaborate with a community of people she did not know expressed the following:

> I learnt to share the successes and failures with others so that we as a collective can learn together and hopefully aspire to positive social change. To be hopeful of positive change. I have learnt to act and be responsible first and then come together as a community to change our social position. On the final handover day, when all projects were completed and we gathered with our shared experience, I witnessed the transformative properties our community engagement had, not only for Bekezela informal settlement but those who were involved in doing the community project. Community engagement is empowering for all those involved. Community connects us to one another, brings us together, and aspires us to move towards becoming whole individuals with a sense of morality and purpose (KA).

### *Reciprocity and mutual benefit*

McGarry's apprenticeship model (2014) is rooted in the principles of social exchange that emphasise reciprocity and mutual benefit. Students receive knowledge and skills from their mentors and

contribute to the learning environment through their unique perspectives, ideas, and energy. This two-way exchange creates a dynamic and enriching educational experience. Two of the students in the group were very inspired by the project and volunteered additional time and resources to work with the Bekezela teachers to upgrade the spaces. Collaborative learning promotes a partnership where both mentors and students actively contribute to the learning process. This collaborative approach encourages open communication, shared problem-solving, and a sense of shared responsibility for the learning outcomes.

> Community-engaged learning has not only enriched my first-hand experiences but has also enhanced my academic and civic learning. Through arts-based methodologies and participatory research, I have acquired creative and research skills that are essential for my academic and professional growth. Moreover, actively engaging with the community has instilled in me a sense of civic duty and a commitment to advocating for social change. Lastly, the importance of remaining open to rethinking theoretical frameworks based on subjective experiences has been a valuable lesson throughout my engagement. Community-engaged learning is a powerful approach that fosters holistic learning and empowers individuals to actively contribute to their communities. Embarking on the journey of community-engaged learning allowed me to step outside my comfort zone and connect with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Through collaborations with fellow students, community members, and educators, I encountered a wide range of perspectives and experiences that enriched my understanding of the world. Personally, this experience encouraged me to break down preconceived notions and embrace cultural diversity as a catalyst for personal growth and empathy (LS).

### *Real-world knowledge and skills*

By integrating the approach of apprenticeship-style learning, the model ensures that knowledge and skills are acquired in a real-world context. The experience of this exchange is consistent with McGarry's (2014) finding that contextualised learning is often more effective in preparing students for practical challenges they might face in their future careers. One student, who extended herself beyond the class project by accessing resourcing for sustainable food gardens and installing a drip watering system using recycled bottles, made these comments in her reflective essay:

> Our community-engaged learning project at Bekezela Crèche highlighted the importance of creating meaningful and sustainable change within the community. By providing a space of greenery, incorporating educational and regenerative practices, and acknowledging power dynamics and privilege, we fostered a sense of empowerment and shared responsibility. This experience not only enriched the lives of the children and teachers at the crèche but also inspired us to continue engaging with communities and contributing to positive social transformation in South Africa. By seeing the transformative potential of collective effort, we understood that community engagement was not just about individual actions but the power of

> collective action. Together, we could make a positive impact that would endure beyond the project's duration. In summary, the personal impact of the community-engaged learning project was transformative. We experienced personal growth through discomfort, which opened our minds to new possibilities and opportunities for positive change (MR).

### *Skill acquisition*

The apprenticeship model further focuses on skill acquisition and the broader development of students. Through mentorship, students gain technical expertise and develop critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and a deeper understanding of the social and ethical dimensions of their field.

A white male student, who was initially deeply resistant to and critical of the community module and service-learning, challenged the project as perpetuating the colonial "helper" or "saviour" position. The classroom debate was robust in challenging student "service" or "volunteerism". After the participation and developing a close bond with his community mentor, Justin, he reflected on his experience.

> In studying to be an artist, you become very used to working alone and being in total control of a project. While ego can be a very useful tool in that environment, this project required one to listen instead of speaking, and to collaborate instead of control. I am very proud of my honours group and the dedicated staff at Bekezela for the initiative we showed in our execution of this project. The collaboration with Justin and Melphy has been a crucial part of this process, and I thank them for being so welcoming and constant in their support. While I would have preferred to engage with the community sooner in the timeline of this module (I feel eight weeks is excessive for research before ever actually going to the community) I am very happy with the results, as we were able to contribute to the community's progress in creating a safe, clean, and enriching environment for their children (AM).

### *Mentorship*

Mentorship implies a sustained and ongoing relationship between mentors and students. This enables continuous learning, guidance, and support. This community project extended over three months, with only six weeks of collaborating with the community members of Bekezela. Yet, even in that brief time, when the students understood through their photovoice interviews that their efforts were appreciated and collaborative, and they were not doing "for" but doing "with", the power dynamics shifted, and they came to understand the value of an apprenticeship relationship. Each of

the three project groups (gardening, mural painting, and classroom enhancement) was assigned a mentor at Bekezela who guided, directed, and supported their very special kind of learning. One of the students, who is a high academic achiever and was insecure about her ability to do well outside of an academic setting, stated:

> This project has changed my perception of the communities and the people around me. It has also helped me improve my relationships and interactions with people while providing an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others. I found the service-learning strategy very effective – it has helped me gain a clearer understanding of the methodologies we have learnt about in an academic setting, and through the act of conducting a photovoice interview on-site, it has helped me fully understand the power of photovoice as a tool in research. Despite the difficulties, I have found this process to be eye-opening, fun, generative, and valuable (PK).

## Findings and strategies going forward

By participating fully in the community projects with Bekezela Crèche, the students were able to empower themselves when navigating discomfort and engaging critically with societal challenges. They managed to express a meaningful contribution to community initiatives without perpetuating inequalities. This expression required transferring skills through a hands-on mentorship learning process with experienced individuals, with students actively engaging in real-world experiences. Students were able to critically synthesise their theoretical knowledge in their reflections on practical understanding. I would propose that this approach helps to generate cultural humility and empathy.

Going forward, the lessons learnt can enhance future student interventions with a community partner such as ARO. Some of these emergent strategies are consistent with McGarry's (2014) apprenticeship model:

- Promote critical reflection on biases and assumptions by integrating real-world case studies that engage the complexities of societal issues
- Bring in guest presenters from the communities involved with the issues to present the challenges directly to the students
- Consolidate and confirm partnerships with local organisations and community sites to ensure students collaborate directly with community members and gain first-hand insights
- Share success stories of individuals or communities that have effectively addressed challenging and collaborative efforts across disciplines



 

- Ensure experiential learning opportunities, such as internships and service-learning projects, are participatory and collaborative in engaging hands-on experiences
- Arts-based and visual methods such as photovoice enhance participation and inclusion for students and community members
- Establish clear communication regarding researchers' actions and outcomes with all participating stakeholders
- Students should be aware of techniques and resources for coping with discomfort, such as peer and/or arts-based processes of mindfulness, support networks, or counselling services
- Meaningful community engagements require an inclusive environment that promotes critical and open dialogue and frames challenges as opportunities for learning and growth.
- Arts-based methods can enhance and foster participatory understandings of empathy, agency, and activism among students

## Conclusion

Donna Haraway's (2016:1) phrase "stay with the trouble" is a call to embrace and engage with the complexities, uncertainties, and challenges inherent in the contemporary world, particularly in science, technology, and ecology. The phrase encourages individuals to confront and endure the trouble rather than seeking simplistic or reductionist solutions. Haraway (2016) argues that staying with the trouble involves acknowledging and grappling with the intricate, interconnected problems characterising our global existence.

Sticky problems are complex, multifaceted, and defy straightforward solutions. These sticky problems often involve entanglements of social, political, economic, and environmental factors, making them challenging to address (Haraway, 2016). Haraway (2016) advocates for a sustained and thoughtful engagement with these sticky problems, emphasising the need for collective, collaborative efforts that span disciplines and perspectives. Instead of shying away from the complexities, Haraway (2016) encourages immersion in the messiness of sticky issues to stay connected and committed to finding innovative, inclusive, and ethical ways forward.

A commitment to social and environmental responsibility is embedded in the educational mission, encouraging active engagement with and contribution to addressing societal challenges. This educational mission involves rethinking learning environments, exploring flexible formats that cater to diverse learning styles, and preparing students for the complexities of the contemporary world.

The concept of transgressive strategies is a useful frame to adopt as it seeks to reshape priorities within HE, aligning it with the evolving needs of society and fostering a mindset of continuous disruption and innovation. Research strategies that place students and educators in uncomfortable situations are considered transgressive, and transgression promotes engagement. Ultimately, this strategically transgressive approach aims to create a more dynamic, responsive, and socially conscious HE system.

The intended interdisciplinary collaboration of the UJ-ARO network with art and design expanding inclusion and collaboration with network partners in sociology, law, engineering, environmental science, and other departments, can be considered transgressive in that interdisciplinarity can break down silos and foster collaborations that enable engagement of complex, multidimensional challenges. UJ has funded Global Excellence and Stature (GES) Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) initiatives that support the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), encouraging meaningful partnerships to ensure academic endeavours contribute positively to societal well-being. Encouraging increased and more wide-ranging support from the university in promoting cross-faculty and university-civil society collaborations can provide a valuable foundation for expanding this approach into other key areas of environmental, social, and economic sustainability and development.

Educators can actively promote diversity and inclusion that recognises the value of diverse perspectives in enriching the educational experience of our students. Embedding a sense of social and environmental responsibility into the core of the educational mission encourages students to actively engage with and contribute to addressing societal challenges.

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