

Decolonising Religious Studies through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: A South African Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The discipline of religious studies is at a critical juncture globally, and particularly in South Africa, where calls for decolonisation in higher education (HE) have gained momentum since the mid-2010s. Despite being shaped by the World Religions Paradigm (WRP), a framework rooted in Western epistemologies, the discipline continues to grapple with the need for a more inclusive and context-sensitive curriculum. This article reports on a pilot study exploring how the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) can inform the teaching of religious studies in South African HE. This investigation compares two consecutive cohorts of students enrolled in an introductory Religious Studies module during 2021 and 2022, respectively, at a public university in South Africa. The 2021 cohort was taught using the WRP, and the 2022 cohort was taught using a thematic approach. Guided by a constructivist perspective, the research examined how the different pedagogical approaches influenced students' understanding of religion. The findings provided insight into how diverse teaching methodologies might support the decolonisation of religious studies. This study argues that constructivist pedagogy can empower students to actively participate in discussions about religion, drawing on their lived experiences. While the sample size limits generalisability, this pilot offers valuable methodological insights for future larger-scale studies, examining how constructivist pedagogy might support the decolonisation agenda in HE.

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Introduction

This article argues that SoTL provides a critical framework for decolonising religious studies at a South African public university. To situate this inquiry, it is necessary to trace SoTL's emergence within South Africa's particular educational history.

Limits of applying SoTL to religious studies have been acknowledged for over a decade. For example, Gravett's (2016) foundational study on SoTL in religious studies explores the historical development of SoTL and the challenges of defining it as a scholarly practice. The historical trajectory of SoTL has been characterised by efforts to recognise and elevate the status of teaching within academia. Challenges to these efforts include definitional ambiguity, leading to varied interpretations among academics and the historical undervaluation of teaching. Additionally, concerns about methodological rigour arise due to the academics' varying research training. Adapting SoTL to disciplinary practices such as religious studies requires cautious integration while maintaining scholarly standards. The integration of SoTL into religious studies presents unique pedagogical opportunities as students of diverse religious backgrounds actively participate in shaping classroom dynamics.

SoTL emerged in South Africa in the 1980s, closely intertwined with academic development initiatives aimed at addressing the inequities of the Apartheid education system (Boughey, 2010). The Bantu Education Act of 1953¹ enforced by Apartheid resulted in racially segregated schooling and dramatic curtailing of education opportunities for Black South Africans, which ultimately created an enduring legacy of education disparities. This Act mandated a substandard curriculum for Black students aimed at confining them to menial labour roles and effectively denying them access to full citizenship. The Apartheid regime further extended its segregationist policy across the education sector, with similar divisive systems imposed on Coloured and Indian populations, thus establishing a racially tiered hierarchy in education, reinforcing class and cultural divisions (Naidu, 2011).

In its early stages, SoTL in South Africa focused on non-practice-based approaches such as collaborative teaching workshops, classroom-based research, and reflective practice methodologies that addressed racial inequalities and supported student success (Boughey, 2010; Chng, Leibowitz & Mårtensson, 2020). These efforts were often embedded in academic development initiatives aligned with national imperatives for post-Apartheid transformation and greater inclusivity in HE (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007). Centres for teaching and learning and academic development units provided

¹ <https://overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/sidebar.php?kid=163-581-2>

institutional platforms for critically engaged SoTL work in South Africa, where collaborative curriculum development projects responded to the educational and social legacies of colonialism and apartheid (Leibowitz, 2010). SoTL's early trajectory in South Africa was shaped by a broader educational commitment to social justice, focusing on bridging racial divides and promoting fairness within the academic milieu (Waghid, 2009).

The early 2000s witnessed growing institutional recognition of SoTL in South Africa, with universities such as the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) establishing a strategic leadership role to support curriculum transformation and enhance student success (Vithal, 2018). Similarly, the Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching (CILT) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) facilitated a culture of inquiry through workshops and collaborative research aimed at improving learning outcomes. According to Chng *et al.* (2020), South African institutions view SoTL as a valuable approach for improving teaching practices amid the pressures of productivity and corporatisation. By encouraging reflective and innovative pedagogy rather than rigid teaching methods, SoTL enables more adaptable teaching strategies responsive to both academic and institutional challenges. This approach has proven valuable been seen in addressing unique post-apartheid challenges in South African HE institutions (HEIs), including the need for culturally responsive education and broader access.

However, despite some institutional advances, policy reform alone has not entirely addressed the deeper inequities within HE. Waghid and Davids (2022) argue that democratic initiatives, while promising in discourse, have yet to fully transform students' lived experiences. Mampane, Omidire and Aluko (2018) highlight the growing global discontent with education in general, particularly in emerging economies, emphasising the need for curricula relevant to the socio-cultural contexts of the students. HEIs are increasingly pressured into providing industry-relevant knowledge suited to the 21st-century labour market. More focused attention on the diverse needs of the students is essential, as sluggish reforms continue to perpetuate educational inequalities.

2015 revealed a significant shift in the focus of SoTL as a result of and in response to the #Mustfall and decolonisation movements, which called for urgent changes in HE². These movements emerged as a consequence of high failure and dropout rates, escalating student debt, and limited job prospects, representing a multifaceted challenge to the legacies of colonialism and Apartheid. The #MustFall movements expanded beyond symbolic challenges to focus on broader decolonisation issues in HE,

² A history of religion education in South Africa was discoursed in a previous paper - Vencatsamy, B. (2024). The world religions paradigm: Why context matters in religious studies. *Critical Research on Religion*. 12(1): 12-25. DOI:10.1177/20503032241226966

culminating in the #FeesMustFall phase from October 2015 to October 2017. This phase emphasised financial exclusion and called for a 'free decolonial education', a promise rooted in the visions of accessible and equitable education espoused by national liberation movements (Martinerie, 2021:278). The movement also critiqued broader issues seen as alienating and reinforcing legacies of racism and colonialism (Badat, 2016). While some universities initiated their decolonisation journeys, Greeff, Mostert, Kahl and Jonker (2021) noted that students' financial constraints and resource shortages became more visible, underscoring the need for continued decolonisation efforts.

Miller (2021) maintained that these movements created 'epistemic ruptures,' questioning the foundations of knowledge production and dissemination within HEIs. The demands for renaming buildings and removing colonial statues, as Martinerie (2021) argued, reflected a desire to recover lost territories, identities, and freedoms by challenging entrenched power structures and privileges. Students reclaimed physical and intellectual spaces, asserting historically marginalised or suppressed cultural, linguistic, and political territories, which in turn challenged the dominance of Western knowledge systems. Foucault's (1980) concept of knowledge and power illuminates how this resistance not only contested material conditions like tuition fees and the outsourcing of staff but also redefined the very nature of valuable knowledge. Through student-driven initiatives on personal and collective relevance topics, the movements encouraged new forms of political agency, debunking traditional hierarchies and foregrounding marginalised knowledge systems. SoTL was brought to the fore as academics across disciplines sought new ways to integrate student voices and their lived experiences into teaching practices in an effort to address historical injustices and the ongoing marginalisation of African knowledge systems. Religious Studies, as the following sections demonstrate, offers a particularly instructive case of how this broader shift in HE found concrete expression in pedagogical practice.

Although Gravett claims significant research has been done in SoTL in religious studies (Gravett, 2016), this research often serves as an addendum to theology or research on Christian-based modules. The limited broader research on the SoTL in religious studies underscores the need for detailed examinations and concrete examples of successful SoTL implementations within the field. Despite the involvement of international academics in SoTL and their contributions to the academic discourse on teaching and learning, religious studies is often overlooked in SoTL-specific compendia and general educational literature. This oversight indicates that the discipline does not always receive the recognition it deserves within broader education scholarship (Huber & Morreale, 2002; Haynie, Chick & Gurung, 2009; Chick, Haynie & Gurung, 2012; Gravett, 2016). The focus on SoTL in religious studies

in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is minimal. This gap becomes particularly evident in the light of broader transformation imperatives in HE. As Reddy (2018) demonstrates in her analysis of curriculum transformation, there are ongoing calls for decolonisation and inclusive curriculum redesign. These imperatives render developing comprehensive pedagogical strategies in religious studies more pressing. While the SSA region has seen an increase in SoTL activities generally, there is a lack of comprehensive research and application in religious studies. This highlights a significant lacuna that needs to be addressed to enhance the teaching practices and outcomes in SSA.

In addition to the broader challenges of applying SoTL to religious studies, academics should also navigate the complexities of student expectations, which significantly shape teaching practices and learning outcomes. Academics such as Killen and Gallagher (2013) and Gravett (2016), having explored SoTL, argue that teaching in religious studies presents unique difficulties regarding student expectations, their interpretation of the course content, and implicit theological assumptions. They contend that students who take introductory modules in religion and theology view their participation in the module as an opportunity to grow spiritually and /or religiously (Killen & Gallagher, 2013). However, student expectations in religious studies are more diverse than those in theology as the former approaches religion as an academic, comparative field, while the latter is rooted in confessional or doctrinal study, complicating course design and teaching approaches. This diversity requires academics to navigate politically and ideologically sensitive material that can provoke debates based on personal beliefs or societal issues relevant to religion. Moreover, academics in religious studies must navigate implicit theological assumptions inherent to their discipline, which influence how religious concepts, texts, and practices are understood and interpreted from the student's perspective.

Killen and Gallagher (2013) and Gravett (2016) advocate for reflective teaching practices and underscore the importance of academics critically evaluating teaching methods such as comparative religious studies, thus contributing to pedagogical scholarship. Addressing the lacunae in SoTL discourse specific to religious studies, they stress the importance of context, including cultural and historical dimensions inherent in this often intricately convoluted milieu. These dimensions include the influence of cultural backgrounds on interpretations and how historical contexts tend to influence the understanding of religious concepts and practices over time. This contextual understanding is critical as it augments teaching efficacy and allows for a deeper appreciation and ultimate acceptance of diverse student perspectives, thus promoting continuous pedagogical enhancement within the discipline.

Gallagher and Maguire (2020) argue for reconsidering, reassessing, or re-examining how religion is taught to undergraduates, particularly in introductory modules, critiquing the traditional approaches that focus primarily on content coverage or academic induction. They emphasise the importance of moving beyond a narrow focus in preparing students for advanced study in the discipline, and emphasise the need to consider the students' interests, societal and economic factors, and institutional mission statements. Aligning course objectives with institutional mission statements demonstrates the value and relevance of the academic study of religion. This alignment ensures that course content engages with and connects religious studies to the broader institutional and societal educational aims. Supporting this view, Fink (2003) underscores the importance of thoughtful course design in promoting both learning and adapting to the course content to the transforming landscape of HE. Gallagher and Maguire (2020) advocate for modules that cultivate knowledge and skills relevant beyond academia, encouraging critical thinking and addressing contemporary issues such as power, gender, and conflict. By engaging with topics prevalent in and relevant to their society, students are guided into developing a greater awareness of global challenges and the role of religion in shaping national and international dynamics. This approach also allows students to both perceive and embrace the practical applications of studying religion.

Within religious studies, the #MustFall movement's broader call for decolonised education highlighted the need to critically examine traditional teaching approaches. While students were not explicitly demanding changes to the religious studies pedagogy, the movement's emphasis on contextual relevance and local knowledge systems engendered pedagogical reflection. This reflection led to a research-driven initiative to explore more effective teaching methods in religious studies – in essence, to decolonise the discipline and contribute cogently to SoTL in the process.

Decolonisation and Education

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) views decoloniality as a political and epistemological movement aimed at liberating formerly colonised peoples from the ongoing impacts of coloniality. This view critiques the dominance of Euro-North American paradigms, which often fail to address the specific realities and needs of the African student. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) advocates for curricula that respond to the lived experiences of the students, emphasising the integration of African epistemologies as a critical aspect of decolonised education.

Mampane *et al.* (2018) argue that effective decolonisation necessitates thorough research into decolonial concepts to align curricula with the diverse needs of students. This aligns with Mignolo's (2007) argument for understanding the genealogy of decolonial thought as foundational for curricula that reflect the students' lived experiences. As Vorster (2020) indicates, SoTL in South Africa has embarked on addressing the decolonisation of curricula, pedagogies, and research practices. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2015) call for the democratisation of knowledge parallels this, advocating for the recognition of diverse epistemologies as essential for decolonised curricula, particularly those rooted in African contexts.

Decolonising the curriculum requires a critical examination of the historical development of academic disciplines and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems (Chirikure, 2016). Dei (2000) cautions against constructing a false dichotomy between 'good' indigenous knowledge and 'bad' Western knowledge. Instead, decolonised curricula should validate and incorporate indigenous African knowledge alongside other global systems. Wa Thiong'o (1986 cited in Constandius, Blackie, Nell, Malgas, Alexander, Setati *et al.*, 2018) argues that African curricula should centre Africa, not relegate it to an appendage of Europe and the West. Decolonisation thus addresses critical issues of student alienation, empowering students to see themselves reflected in their learning and positioning them as co-creators of knowledge in a transformed and inclusive academy.

Incorporating diverse knowledge systems into the curriculum challenges colonial narratives and addresses the unique needs of South African students. As Vorster (2020) notes, the massification and diversification of HE in South Africa have brought to light significant disparities in student backgrounds, particularly the gaps evident in matters relating to financial status and social class. These inequalities underscore the need for targeted interventions to support student success, especially given the high dropout and failure rates at South African universities. Studies show that many students opt to leave without completing their studies, often due to a lack of preparation for the academic demands of HE (Scott *et al.*, 2007; Muswede, 2017).

Decolonising the curricula, therefore, becomes essential in addressing these educational disparities. SoTL can play a critical role in ameliorating these discrepancies by promoting reflective practices and evidence-based teaching strategies that cater to diverse student needs. By incorporating inclusive pedagogical approaches, institutions can assist in bridging the gap between high school and tertiary education, ensuring that all students are supported in their academic journeys and that their knowledge systems are valued alongside other global epistemologies.

In the light of these reflections, it is clear that decolonising religious studies is not merely about removing colonial symbols or revising curricula, but also about fundamentally reshaping how knowledge is produced, taught, and valued at South African HEIs. Such a transformation necessitates developing curricula that integrate global best practices while simultaneously addressing local contexts in formerly colonised territories (Wingfield, 2017). According to Foucault, knowledge cannot be deemed not neutral as it is constantly shaped by power relations embedded in societal structures, implying that the dominance of Western educational models reflects historical and contemporary power struggles (Sharma, 2018). Thus, the call to reassess Western understandings of disciplines often found disconnected from lived experiences can be seen as challenging the power dynamics that support and maintain ways of knowing (Foucault, 1980).

Constructivism and Decolonisation

Constructivism, particularly its social dimension as emphasised by Vygotsky, foregrounds the importance of social interaction and cultural context in learning, contrasting with Piaget's focus on individual cognitive processes (Mohammed & Kinyo, 2020). This is particularly relevant in the Religious Studies module at this particular university, where students originate from diverse religious, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. The constructivist approach enables students to actively engage with religious concepts by drawing on their experiences.

In the context of religious studies at the said university, constructivist pedagogy offers a promising framework for addressing the challenges of decolonial education. When students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds actively engage with religious concepts through their lived experiences, they become co-creators of knowledge rather than the perceived passive recipients of Western religious paradigms. The approach directly confronts the traditional WRP's tendency to present religions as static, immutable, and discrete systems.

Understanding constructivist theories is crucial to shaping curriculum design and educational practices, highlighting the dynamic interaction between theory and application (Roux, 2007), a critical factor for the chosen research methodology. Constructivism posits that knowledge is constructed in tandem with reality shaped by personal experience (Elliot, Kratochwill, Cook & Travers, 2000; McLeod, 2019). This notion is essential in religious studies, where students' religious experiences and prior knowledge play a significant role in interpreting new concepts. The module's focus is on actual religious experiences rather than abstract theoretical approaches, allowing students to append

classroom discussions to their own lives and broader social contexts, which is key in a pluralistic society like South Africa.

The social constructivist emphasis on cultural context and social interaction is relevant to comparing pedagogical approaches in the pilot study. While the WRP framework used with the 2021 cohort presented religions as discrete systems to be studied comparatively, the thematic approach adopted with the 2022 cohort deliberately leveraged the students' diverse religious experiences as resources for learning. This shift aligned with constructivist principles, by acknowledging how the students' prior knowledge and cultural contexts shape their understanding of religious phenomena.

Constructivism emphasises that knowledge is actively constructed rather than innately or passively consumed. This process involves students assigning personal meaning to real-life experiences and prior knowledge, shaping how they interpret and assimilate new knowledge (Phillips, 1995; McCray, 2007; McLeod, 2019). Constructivism recognises that knowledge is both personal and socially constructed; each student's understanding is unique, influenced by their existing knowledge, values, cultural context, and interactions with others (Fox, 2001). Learning is viewed as an active, internal process where the mind continuously updates and reorganises information to incorporate new experiences, allowing students to develop their interpretation of reality (Driscoll, 2000). Social constructivism extends these ideas by highlighting how cultural and social dynamics shape knowledge formation and dissemination, particularly in the context of religious beliefs and practices.

The core of constructivist pedagogy is underpinned by the students' engagement as active participants in the learning process, where their prior knowledge and lived experiences inform the co-construction of knowledge. This pilot study was designed to assess the degree to which the participants' prior knowledge of religious traditions influences classroom discussions and their ability to construct new understandings within a religious studies context. Based on the data gathered, the research aimed to inform pedagogical strategies that encouraged reflective practices and enhanced religious literacy. Dressler's (2018) emphasis on social constructivism in the academic study of religion further grounds the discussion that social and cultural contexts shape religious knowledge. This perspective illustrates how religious realities become established through the expressions of beliefs and practices by individuals, ultimately becoming widely recognised norms and internalised within social interactions. African religions, for example, transmit rituals orally across generations, embedding these practices as cultural norms and sacred traditions into their lived experience and community, thus shaping the individual's worldview. Similarly, in Hinduism, the Vedas – initially transmitted orally by the sages –

were later codified into written texts and to date continue to influence contemporary rituals. Social constructivism acknowledges the dynamic interplay between individual agency and societal structures, offering insights into how religious knowledge evolves and perseveres (Dressler, 2018). This perspective, which emphasises both individual agency and social context, contrasts with other viewpoints that prioritise the shaping of beliefs by external influences and /or social structures. These collective theoretical insights provide an invaluable lens for understanding how students at this university engage with religious knowledge in diverse settings.

Applying constructivist teaching and learning approaches in religious studies classrooms can result in significant advantages across diverse educational contexts. Constructivism enables students to engage empathetically with religious traditions, facilitating a closer personal and interpersonal exploration of the subject. This pedagogical approach encourages students to connect their experiences with the content being studied, thus enriching their insight into understanding religious concepts and practices. Constructivist methods empower students to explore religious ideas independently and through social interaction with their peers, allowing them to interrogate their prior knowledge and resources beyond class notes. Moreover, constructivism encourages lively debates by creating zones of proximal development (Goldburg, 2007), where students learn from peers who have gained more in-depth knowledge about the subject due to their adherence to the religious tradition being studied. It must be said, however, while constructivism promotes independent thinking, students should be able to critically evaluate the reliability and biases of their sources to ensure academic rigour in their interpretations. The teaching environment, as influenced by constructivist methods, facilitates the critical examination of religious knowledge and language. However, academics should be aware of biases when guiding discussions to avoid reinforcing misconceptions. While constructivist methodologies offer several advantages, it is crucial to critically examine the frameworks and paradigms often employed in religious studies education, particularly the WRP, to address inherent limitations and biases.

The Study Setting

The South African schooling system is structured around a quintile framework, which inherently perpetuates inequalities that later significantly impacts on the student's academic preparedness and success at tertiary level. Quintiles 1–3 are non-fee-paying schools that serve the disadvantaged communities and receive more government financial support to offset lower parental contributions. Quintiles 4–5 are fee-paying schools and generally serve the more affluent communities, with funding supplemented by school fees paid by the parents. As Murray (2016) points out, the disparities

resulting from this framework lead students from lower quintiles to face substantial challenges in engaging with university-level learning. It must be said that it is not the school or the university that is at fault. Rather, societal acceptance that ill-prepared students are admitted to university without diagnostic testing—or the lack of sufficient vocational education—explains why not all students are suited for tertiary study. Many arrive at university with little understanding of what academic life entails, often perceiving only glamour or esteem, and are unprepared for the realities of HE, which sadly contributes to failure. A case in point is this university where the research was conducted, which admits students primarily from quintiles 1–3.

The Humanities Access Programme at this university addresses these inequalities by supporting disadvantaged students in developing the academic and social skills necessary for university success. Following the academic literacy modules in the first semester of the access programmes, students register for one of the faculty's four main modules: political science, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. For many students, however, English is not a first language, and without a strong foundation in the language, the complex jargon and abstract concepts of these disciplines can pose significant challenges to their learning. English is the sole medium of instruction at this institution, however, for the majority of students in both cohorts, it functions as an additional language, with isiZulu the most common home language. This is not merely a matter of linguistic accessibility; an attempt to translate foundational religious studies categories into isiZulu revealed that terms such as 'religion,' 'secular,' and 'transcendent' do not translate neatly into isiZulu, signalling that the conceptual architecture of the discipline is itself embedded with a particular Western Epistemic tradition. This linguistic and conceptual disjuncture not only affects comprehension but also shapes how students engage with, interpret, and critique religious knowledge. The implications for pedagogy are significant and bear directly on the rationale for the constructivism and decolonial approaches explored in this study. While these subjects provide a foundation for the humanities curriculum, the absence of an access course addressing religion and other underrepresented subjects is concerning, given that many students entering university from quintiles 1-3 secondary schools have limited exposure to formal religious education beyond their personal religious experiences. As an academic responsible for teaching the Religious Studies module, I have observed first-hand that students from disadvantaged backgrounds often enter the university underprepared and struggle to engage with foundational concepts in religious studies. For example, one of the challenges students face is the difficulty in defining religion, which is often complex and multifaceted, as a concept. Additionally, many students struggle to grasp the theistic vs. non-theistic nature of religions, which is fundamental in differentiating the belief systems such as Islam and Buddhism. This is compounded by the

limitations of the Life Orientation subject at secondary schools, which does not adequately equip students with the specific knowledge needed for university-level religious studies. As a result, students are mostly disadvantaged when engaging with the religious studies curriculum, limiting their ability to fully explore intellectual, cultural and religious concepts. While the Humanities Access Programme focuses on developing general academic and social skills, excluding religion modules and other related fields from the curriculum neglects the opportunity to foster critical thinking, empathy, and intercultural competence among students. This context directly influenced the decision to explore alternative pedagogical approaches that could better serve the students' needs.

The Research Questions

The pilot study emerged from a convergence of three key contexts discoursed on earlier in previous sections: the ongoing calls for decolonisation in South African HE, catalysed by the #MustFall movements, the limitations of the WRP in addressing local educational needs, and the potential of constructivist pedagogy to create more inclusive learning environments. The study specifically examined how two different pedagogical approaches might better serve the goals of decolonial education in religious studies at a South African public university.

The study addressed three primary research questions:

1. How does the transition from WRP to thematic teaching approaches affect student engagement with religious concepts?
2. To what extent does a constructivist pedagogy support decolonial objectives in religious studies?
3. How do students' prior knowledge and experiences influence their engagement with different teaching approaches?

Theoretical Framing

The research is grounded in critical pedagogical theory, which provides a framework for understanding how knowledge is socially constructed and contextually situated. This theoretical foundation acknowledges that educational processes involve inherent power dynamics and positions learning as a transformative dialogical experience. Such a framework aligns with the aim of the research to examine how different pedagogical approaches influence student engagement with religious concepts and support decolonial objectives.

The study utilised Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a methodological framework that transformed the relationship between the researcher and participants, positioning students as co-researchers rather than passive research subjects. This approach was selected for its alignment with both critical pedagogical and decolonial educational objectives, creating a research process that embodied the same principles of collaborative knowledge creation that informed the pedagogical interventions being studied. The positioning was operationalised through the inclusion of student reflections as co-interpretive contributions in the analysis, through which meaning was co-constructed, as discussed in the findings.

The participatory framework aligned directly with decolonial objectives by challenging traditional hierarchical relationships between researchers and research subjects. Decolonial methodology recognised that conventional research approaches often reproduce colonial power structures by positioning academic researchers as expert knowledge producers while relegating community members to mere sources of data. PAR disrupts these hierarchies by acknowledging multiple forms of expertise and creating space for the voice of others to be acknowledged in the research process.

A crucial strength of the PAR approach was its capacity to make the curriculum more relevant to the students' lived realities by connecting the course content with to their personal experiences. As a result, their contributions and views directly influenced the curriculum development and pedagogical adjustments throughout the research process, ensuring that the educational experience remained focused on and responsive to student needs and interests.

The PAR framework also demonstrated particular adaptability during the COVID-19 pandemic, when educational institutions worldwide shifted to remote learning modalities. The digital adaptations not only preserved participant engagement during pandemic-related disruptions, but also potentially enhanced accessibility for students who might have been less likely to participate in traditional face-to-face research activities. Although the university had contingency plans in place, the sudden transition still presented challenges, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, due to limited access to digital resources.

2021 Cohort – World Religions Paradigm Approach

The first phase of the study (n=27) utilised the traditional WRP approach, which has dominated religious studies education for several decades. This approach structures the religious studies content

around the concept of discrete, bounded religious systems that can be systematically compared and analysed. The WRP typically organises content according to what are considered the ‘major world religions.’³ In some instances, other religions are included depending on institutional context and geographical location. At this public university, Buddhism is replaced with African Religious Heritage. Within this paradigm, the course structure followed a systematic examination of beliefs, practices, and traditions for each religious system. Students encountered each religion as a distinct entity with clearly defined boundaries, core doctrines, ritual practices, institutional structures, and historical developments. The curriculum progresses through each tradition sequentially, covering the content of what are deemed essential elements of each religion. This approach emphasised comparative analyses of different religious systems, encouraging students to identify similarities and differences between traditions.

The WRP approach presents religions through established taxonomies that have developed within Western scholarly traditions and are commended as the primary frameworks for understanding religious phenomena. However, this exposition of religions often presents as static, homogenous entities that exist independently of social context and lived experience. Viewed from this traditional approach, students were positioned as recipients of expert knowledge about religious traditions, with limited opportunity to engage critically with how these traditions intersect with contemporary social issues or their own personal experiences.

2022 Cohort – Thematic Approach

The second phase of the study (n=32) employed a fundamentally different thematic approach that reorganised religious studies content around contemporary themes and issues, rather than discrete religious categories. This pedagogical shift represented a conscious move away from the compartmentalised structure of the WRP towards a more integrated, problem-oriented, issue-based exploration of religious phenomena.

This thematic organisation centred on contemporary themes such as gender and religion and digital religion (how religious beliefs and practices are expressed, mediated, and reshaped through online platforms). Rather than studying religion separately, students examined how different religious

³ The WRP considers the major world religions to be Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Vencatsamy, B. (2024). The world religions paradigm: Why context matters in religious studies. *Critical Research on Religion*. 12(1): 12-25. [DOI:10.1177/20503032241226966](https://doi.org/10.1177/20503032241226966)

traditions, communities, and practitioners engage with these shared contemporary challenges and opportunities.

This approach emphasised intersectionality as a core analytical framework, recognising that religious identity intersects with other identity categories including gender, race, class, and sexuality. From this perspective, students were encouraged to explore how these intersecting identities shape religious experience and expression in complex ways that cannot be understood through traditional categorical approaches alone. The thematic approach prioritised lived experiences and practitioner perspectives over institutional or doctrinal analyses. Students engaged with contemporary voices from religious communities, examining how individuals and communities navigate religious identity in diverse social contexts.

A crucial element of the thematic approach was its focus on local contexts and applications. Rather than presenting religion as an abstract system, the curriculum emphasised how religious traditions manifested in the students' immediate social environment. This included the examination of local religious communities, contemporary religious debates, and the role of religion in addressing social issues.

The pedagogical methods associated with the thematic approach were inherently more participatory and discussion based. Assessment methods were also structured to foreground critical analysis, personal reflection, and application of course concepts to contemporary situations, rather than recall of factual information about religious traditions.

Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected through surveys administered to both cohorts mid-semester during their respective academic years (2021 and 2022). The same survey instrument was used with both year groups. It is acknowledged that this cross-cohort design means observed differences cannot be attributed solely to the pedagogical approach, as cohort effects, year-on-year contextual variation, and the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic may also have influenced responses; findings should therefore be read as indicative rather than conclusive. This timing was strategically chosen to allow students sufficient engagement with the course material while ensuring their perspectives were current and evolving. The data collection process focused on four key areas, namely capturing the diversity of student backgrounds and religious diversity; assessing expectations and perceptions of the

religious studies module; evaluating the impact of teaching approaches on student learning; and understanding shifts in student perceptions and critical thinking. Qualitative data, comprising the open-ended survey responses and additional data gathered through the participatory process, were analysed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument remained consistent across both years to support comparative validity. The survey collected data on students' religious identification and background, prior knowledge of religious traditions, self-reported religiosity, course expectations, and demographic information. This systematic approach enabled the researcher to track cohort changes and patterns while maintaining methodological rigour.

Findings and Discussion

Impact of Thematic Teaching Approaches on Student Engagement

The shift from WRP to thematic teaching approaches significantly influenced student engagement with religious concepts. In 2021, when the WRP was utilised, students demonstrated strong surface-level comprehension, with 96.2% reporting that the RELG 101 module had assisted them in recognising the purpose and meaning of religion in society. This finding slightly declined to 93.7% in 2022, when the thematic approach was implemented. However, more significantly, the percentage of students who demonstrated critical engagement with religious concepts increased from 37% to 46.9%. These figures correspond respectively to survey Q7 (“RELG 101 has enabled me to recognise the purpose and meaning of religion in society”) and Q9 (“RELG 101 has challenged some of my views about religion”). The higher response rate on Q7 across both cohorts reflects the module’s consistent success in building religious literacy as a foundation; the more pronounced shift on Q9 between years suggests that the thematic approach was more effective in prompting the kind of reflexive questioning that goes beyond surface recognition. A student from the 2021 cohort captured this distinction in open-ended feedback, noting that the module “promotes critical thinking” and “feels close to reality” — a comment that anticipates the direction the 2022 thematic redesign would pursue more deliberately.

This significant (in a descriptive, non-statistical sense, given the small sample sizes and cross-cohort design of this pilot study) increase in critical engagement suggested that a thematic approach

facilitated more analytical thinking and deeper understanding. While the WRP achieved basic literacy goals, it tended to present religions as stultified and homogenous, often reinforcing stereotypes and oversimplifying the lived experiences of religious adherents. Thematic approaches, by contrast, encouraged students to explore religion contextually and reflexively, thereby enriching and advancing their engagement with complex religious ideas. These findings reiterated the limitations of the WRP and supported pedagogical models that fostered more dynamic and critical engagement.

Constructivist Pedagogy and Decolonial Aims in Religious Studies

The implementation of constructivist pedagogy in 2022 supported decolonial objectives in purposeful and materially meaningful ways. Most notable was the gratifying increase in students recognising the importance of understanding various religions and cultures, rising from 92.6% in 2021 to 100% in 2022. Additionally, 63.7% of students in 2022 reported that the course challenged their views about religion, reflecting a shift towards reflexivity and critical awareness. This shift suggested that constructivist teaching strategies, which centre the students' lived experiences and encourage active knowledge construction, were particularly effective in advancing decolonial aims. These included challenging dominant Western epistemologies, appreciating diverse perspectives, and validating multiple ways of knowing. As noted earlier, the increase in critical engagement (from 37% to 46.9%) reinforced the idea that students were not merely acquiring knowledge but developing the tools to interrogate and reframe inherited paradigms. The 92.6% to 100% shift corresponds to Q5 ("I think that as a member of a multicultural society like South Africa, it is important to know about the various religions and cultures"), while the 63.7% figure for challenged views derives from Q9 ("RELG 101 has challenged some of my views about religion"). Taken together, these two questions trace a movement from recognising the social value of religious literacy to actively revising one's own assumptions — a distinction central to decolonial pedagogy's aim of developing critical rather than merely additive learning. Student feedback from the 2022 cohort reflects this movement: one student observed that the module "made me want to engage in the lectures and opened my views on the different religions in South Africa," while another noted that it "assisted me to comprehend and not judge religious beliefs that I do not follow" — responses that suggest the thematic approach achieved the reflexive orientation the constructivist redesign intended.

These findings lend empirical support to Goldberg's (2007) critique of the 'glossary approach,' which reduces complex religious systems into a rote-learning model that obscures local, contextualised

expressions of religion. They also resonate with Kreber's (2013) argument that the SoTL must reach beyond technical effectiveness to address broader issues of social justice and power in education.

The Role of Prior Knowledge and Experience in Student Engagement

The analysis of students' religious backgrounds revealed important patterns across the two years. Religious identification remained relatively stable, from 77.7% in 2021 to 78.2% in 2022. However, prior religious knowledge declined modestly from 62.9% to 56.2%, and self-reported religiosity decreased from 51.9% to 46.9%. These figures correspond to Q1 ("I identify with a particular religion"), Q2 ("I consider myself a religious person"), and Q6 ("I knew about other religious traditions before taking RELG 101"), respectively. The relative stability of religious identification alongside the decline in prior knowledge of other traditions is noteworthy: students arrived with a strong sense of their own religious identity but with less cross-traditional exposure in 2022 than in 2021. It is worth noting that personal and religious identification are not always equivalent categories; one 2022 student explicitly remarked that they consider themselves "a spiritual person rather than religious," identifying as an Omnist — a response that itself illustrates the diversity of frameworks students bring to the classroom and the limitations of binary survey categories for capturing that complexity.

These trends may indicate a shift in how students engage with religion before entering the module, reflecting broader socio-cultural changes in the student body. Despite these declines, the overall increase in critical engagement and recognition of religious diversity suggest that students with less prior exposure to religious content can still engage meaningfully, especially when supported by pedagogical approaches that are thematic, student-centred, and reflexive.

The findings also underscore the importance of acknowledging the students' lived experiences and socio-cultural contexts. Constructivist and decolonial approaches do not assume prior religious literacy, but instead work to co-create meaning with students, regardless of background. This opens up spaces for students to challenge dominant narratives and engage with religion in ways that are personally and socially relevant.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, this article proposes several key recommendations for enhancing religious studies education. Firstly, interactive teaching methods should be prioritised to encourage critical

reflection and facilitate meaningful peer discussions. These methods should integrate students' lived experiences while challenging their preconceptions about religious traditions. Secondly, a thematic approach focusing on contemporary issues and examining intersections with culture and society proves more effective than traditional paradigms. Finally, critical engagement should be encouraged through carefully designed learning activities that challenge assumptions and biases while promoting an understanding of religious diversity.

These recommendations aim to transform the lecture hall into a space for meaningful intellectual exchange while preparing students for engagement with religious diversity in South Africa's pluralistic society. The evidence pointedly suggests that this approach enhances learning and better serves the broader goals of decolonial education in the South African context.

Conclusion

While SoTL has gained global traction, its interpretation and implementation have varied significantly, depending on local contexts. In South Africa, a country shaped by a unique historical and complex socio-political landscape, there has been a pressing need to reassess Western educational paradigms and integrate local, indigenous knowledge systems with the curriculum. The #MustFall movements further brought these demands to the fore, edging HEIs towards curriculum transformations to redress historical injustices. SoTL provides the methodological framework necessary to systematically achieved these transformational objectives. However, structural challenges – including persistent educational inequalities and resource disparities – continue to hamper the full realisation of SoTL's potential, contributing to high student dropouts and failure rates. Against this backdrop of transformation and challenge, this research demonstrates how SoTL can be practically applied to achieve meaningful pedagogical change in religious studies education.

This pilot study highlights the transformative potential of the SoTL in reshaping religious studies pedagogy within South African HE. The comparative analysis of two teaching approaches – the WRP and a thematic approach – reveals promising directions for decolonial education that extend beyond content changes. The shift to thematic teaching, supported by SoTL informed constructivist pedagogy, demonstrated measurable improvements in student engagement and critical thinking, with the percentage of students demonstrating critical engagement increasing from 37% to 46.9%. Additionally, recognition of religious literacy as an essential skill increased from 92.6% to 100%

between the two cohorts, emphasising the irrefutable impact of pedagogical restructuring on student learning.

These findings reinforce the argument that moving beyond traditional Western paradigms is necessary to create inclusive and contextually relevant learning environments. Integrating students' lived experiences and prior knowledge into the curriculum enhances engagement and deepens their understanding of religious diversity. Roeland (2023) critiques the oversimplification of religious studies, particularly the reduction of religious traditions to static categories that obscure their fluidity and complexity. This study's findings support that critique, demonstrating how thematic teaching mitigates essentialist stereotypes by encouraging students to critically engage with religious traditions in ways that reflect the hybridity and contested nature of time-worn contemporary belief systems.

Effective decolonisation requires more than content revision – it demands a fundamental shift in how knowledge is co-constructed and shared in the lecture hall. The success of the thematic approach in nurturing deeper engagement with religious concepts while supporting decolonial objectives highlights SoTL's potential for broader implementation. Insights from student surveys suggest that many enrolled in introductory religious studies modules identify with a particular religion, offering varying levels of prior knowledge about other traditions. Their understanding of religion includes not only doctrinal aspects, but also lived experiences of religious diversity, contestation, and engagement – insights that shape how they construct meaning in the classroom. This underscores the value of a constructivist pedagogy that validates student knowledge and positions them as co-creators of learning rather than passive recipients of information.

Looking ahead, and based on this research, there is evidence to support the adoption of constructivist, student-centred approaches in religious studies education. The data reflects the experiences of students at this particular HEI, where the student body is diverse in terms of religious, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds, rendering these insights particularly relevant to discussions around inclusivity and equity in the curriculum within the enclaves of academia and the teaching of religious studies. Such approaches strengthen academic engagement and address historical inequities in South African HE, as the #MustFall movements emphasised. By acknowledging and valuing diverse knowledge systems and positioning students as active participants in knowledge construction, religious studies can move beyond its current constraints to a more inclusive and socially just objective educational environment – a transformation for which SoTL provides the methodological rigour to achieve, document, and refine.

Limitations

Acknowledging the study's limitations, particularly the low student enrolment numbers during the COVID-19 pandemic, which reduced the sample size, is important. This limitation means the findings cannot be generalised to the broader student population. However, the insights gained are valuable as they offer a concise representation of the student's prior knowledge and demonstrate the potential to inform the co-construction of knowledge.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted under the ethical approval of the university's ethics committee, with careful attention to the sensitive nature of religious identity and practice. Specific measures were implemented to protect participant privacy and ensure ethical data handling. These included obtaining informed consent from all participants, maintaining strict confidentiality and anonymity protocols, and securing all data storage and handling processes.

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