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My Pedagogical Becoming as a Stellenbosch University Residential Educator During the Covid-19 Pandemic¹

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Abstract

This article explores my pedagogical becoming through the enactment of a residential education and support programme (RESP) at Stellenbosch University (SU). I co-created the RESP with nine women students who remained in a university residence with me during the Covid-19 pandemic. The RESP focused on the relationality and interrelationships that transpired at the nexus of the institution, the students, and me. I propose that this RESP acted as catalyst for the transmission and acquisition of valuable qualities and dispositions—what Barnett (2009) referred to as epistemic virtues—which are vital to knowledge acquisition in higher education. This article uses an autoethnography approach to capture my personal experiences against the sociocultural backdrop of residential learning and living at SU before, during, and after the pandemic. Narrative prose expressing my embodied emotional, spiritual, and intellectual self (Bochner & Ellis, 1992), and emotional recall were the primary data sources, which I analysed against van Manen's (1982, 1994) conceptualisation of the pedagogical relation and Tronto's (2015) principles of care ethics. Both those authors emphasised the centrality of the pedagogical relation for good and effective teaching. This article demonstrates how an institutional care-based response to the pandemic enacted at one residence (at a university with an erstwhile separatist educational agenda) can surpass its legacy momentarily to point the way towards the possibility of inclusive transformation at such an institution. Furthermore, this article demonstrates how nurturing pedagogical relationships based on care can effectively cultivate and transmit valuable qualities and dispositions (epistemic virtues), and why these are important in our current supercomplex (Barnett, 2007) and fast-changing world. I offer the claim that the acquisition of these epistemic virtues by students holds promise for providing them the key to unlocking an education for life.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, residential education and support programme (RESP), relationality, pedagogical relation, epistemic virtues

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Introduction

The pandemic moment rendered a diversity of experience for students at higher education institutions across South Africa. At Stellenbosch University (SU), the nexus of student, staff, and institutional structures presented a particular experience, valorised a particular ethics, and enacted a particular pedagogy. In this article, I explore my pedagogical becoming through the enactment of the residential education and support programme (RESP) that developed spontaneously and consciously as the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded. I co-created the RESP with nine women students who remained in the university residence with me during the pandemic. The focus of the RESP was the relationality and interrelationships that formed at the intersection of the students, the institution, and me. In this article, I propose that the RESP provided the impetus, and acted as the catalyst, for engendering the transmission and acquisition of valuable qualities and dispositions, akin to Barnett's (2009) conceptualisation of *epistemic virtues*—which are as vital as knowledge acquisition in higher education.

I employ evocative autoethnography as a research approach to capture my personal and subjective experiences against the backdrop of residential living and learning at SU before, during, and after the pandemic. Evocative or heartfelt autoethnography “generates powerful narratives that evoke a sense of reality, highlighting concrete experiences and intimate details; it explores the meaning behind human experiences, and repositions the reader and subjects as active participants engaged in dialogue” (Ellis, 1999, p. 669). I used excerpts from a vividly narrated prose essay, and emotional recall as my primary data sources. I recorded my embodied emotional, spiritual, and intellectual experience (Bochner & Ellis, 1992) in *Pandemic Tales* (Petersen, 2020), shortly after our time together. I applied emotional recall or affective memory throughout the research and writing process of this autoethnography. Ellis described emotional recall as the act of “turning inwards” which, she stated, offers a “rich and underutilized cornucopia of data and experiences” (1991, p. 27). Pireddu explained affective memory as the “recalling and the re-experiencing of the sensory details that accompanied the experience” (2009, p. 97), and added, “it is this re-lived emotion that lends the recounted autoethnographic tale its electricity and immediacy or aliveness and verisimilitude” (2009, p. 99). These primary data sources were then analysed against van Manen's (1982, 1994) conceptualisation of the *pedagogical relation*. It was his belief that the pedagogical relation is at the heart of good and effective teaching (van Manen, 1994). I also assessed the interrelationality that was established between the institution, the staff, and the students during the pandemic, using Tronto's (2015) principles of care ethics. For Tronto, “care is about meeting needs, and it is always relational” (2015, p. 4).

Throughout the process of recollecting and writing, I was aware that the “truth of this autoethnography cannot be a stable truth because memory is active, dynamic and ever-changing” (Bochner, 2012, p. 161). As I recalled the events of this encounter, I applied my reflexivity rigorously to give a faithful description that captured the multiple and layered complexities, and took care not to reduce them to simplistic explanations and sound bites (Josselson, 2004).

In this article, I demonstrate how SU's institutional care-based response to the pandemic indicated a positive and qualitative shift toward its restitution, restoration, and transformation agenda. Furthermore, this article illustrates how and why in this time of rapid change, *supercomplexity* (as

Barnett, 2007 called it), and acute uncertainty, it is imperative to structure pedagogical relations that are based on care. It is equally important for teachers to thoughtfully construct and engage in pedagogical relations that model and inspire ethical and virtuous behaviour that can provide fertile ground for the transmission of worthwhile qualities and dispositions. The subsequent acquisition of these epistemic virtues by students holds (I propose) the key to an *education for life*.

This article is divided into three parts. I start with my pre-pandemic experience as the residence head where I live and work with more than 200 students in the university residential accommodation. Here, I relay my encounters with the residence culture and with the powerful student structures, and my experiences of being undervalued, underutilised, and unseen. Then, the Covid-19 pandemic strikes and I meet the students in the “shadow.” I describe how, in my first personal encounter with them, I experienced a significant moment of clarity and purpose when I “saw” the students in the fullness of their being—which redirected my way of being and doing in the residence. In this second part, I focus on the relationality that developed between us as we turned our mealtime gatherings into educational engagements and together, created a RESP. In the final part, I reflect on my pedagogical actions in enabling practices that engendered the transmission and acquisition of epistemic virtues, and my subsequent pedagogical becoming. Furthermore, I review SU’s institutional care-based response to the pandemic, which signalled positive strides and shifts in enacting its restitution, restoration, and transformation agenda.

This autoethnography is part of an extensive ethnographical case study. I received ethical clearance and institutional permission from Stellenbosch University Ethics Committee to conduct this research.

Residence Culture

On the day that I stepped into Disa² residence, it was with equal amounts of excitement and trepidation. Although I found myself seduced by the exterior facade of the residence, which was elegant and inviting, and the interior furnishing that created warmth and charm, the prospect of sharing living quarters with 260 other women was daunting. And, although I considered myself a confident and capable individual, it still felt intimidating to be heading a residence as the first person of Colour. My predecessor had been in this role for more than 20 years. I knew I was stepping into White shoes. It made me uneasy.

As I became acquainted with my new living and learning environment, it became clear to me that the student-based house committee (HC) of the residence was effectively in charge of many of the day-to-day operational and student life functions of the house. This group of students, who had been elected by their peers, was an essential feature of the social design of the structure and culture of SU’s residence life. Each member had a portfolio, which covered all the aspects of residential living from maintenance to meal bookings, cultural events to parking allocations, and room placements to discipline. Disa residence was run like a well-oiled machine, efficiently and effectively. The HC seemed to have significant control over social and cultural engagements, gatherings, and events. They decided what student life initiatives would be happening, where they would take place, and who would participate. While they tried to discuss and consult within the team and be inclusive, it was my perception that their attempts at building community fell short in one key aspect—building relationships. I experienced this as the residence head and therefore, I am sure that some students may have experienced it too. All student life engagements, including social get-togethers, dances, critical discussions, and cultural activities such as choir performances or plays, were planned and took place with little or no input from me—except when I needed to approve the expenses thereof. From my initial observations, it was clear that the HC had everything under control and that they were in

² A pseudonym.

control. This is not to say that they excluded me on purpose or with malicious intent; the students merely effectively enacted the residence culture. This was just “the way things work here.”

These practices, beliefs, assumptions, and ideologies, which are sometimes explicit in policies or regulations but are mostly implicit in behaviour or attitudes, are what constitute institutional culture (Matthews, 2015). According to van Wyk (2009), institutional culture is usually articulated, enforced, and perpetuated by the dominant group and is embedded in a very definite historical context and purpose that continues to play out in an invisible way. At SU, as Davids and Fataar (2022) explained, institutional culture is difficult to pinpoint, but it sends strong signals to those who are attuned to and interact with the institution. In the residential space, those authors added, institutional culture manifests as structural and cultural cues. The concrete and tangible aspects of the building, the furniture, and photographs, for example, are the structural cues that can be variously interpreted by those who enter and live there. The cultural cues are more difficult to decipher and are captured by the atmosphere, values, implicit understandings, and expected behaviour (Davids & Fataar, 2022).

The cultural cues that were displayed and relayed in the residence culture were particularly stark (to me) during the welcoming of new first-year students. The social events that were presented, the music that was played, and the clothes that the HC wore were reminiscent of a specific era, catered to a specific group of students, and sent strong signals about who was in power and held the authority there. At my first welcoming experience, I was shocked to see the HC members were all dressed in formal attire—grey, checked, double-breasted, knee-length dresses matched with black high heels. To me, their strict and formal dress code subtly and subliminally indicated the existence of a hierarchy and their presence at the helm.

Interestingly, I would later learn from the archives and through alumni conversations, that Disa residence was progressive in many ways. It was the first women’s residence to allow men to visit the residents’ rooms, they marched on the Rooiplein to protest women’s abuse on campus, and the students were introduced to different facets of leadership development to promote diversity. In 2018, Disa translated its house song into three languages in alignment with the university’s institutional transformation goals (Sharpley, 2021). However, Disa did not entirely escape or withstand the stronghold of traditions, values, and expectations from the dominant groups inside or the cues from the larger institutional culture outside. And given that the institutional culture places a particularly high premium on excellence and perfection, I came to understand that the HC’s reluctance to include or consult me would be perceived as a weakness or shortcoming on their side.

I also came to understand that the HC had been conditioned to a residence and institutional culture that had been cemented over the 50 years of Disa’s existence, perpetuated through habit and lack of oversight from those who came before me—or maybe, because of them. It seemed and felt as if the residence culture had been reinforced by the previous White “tannies”³ who supported the house’s traditions and ways of doing, and upheld its practices and allowed the authoritative ways of thinking, being, and doing that were espoused by the HC. I felt frustrated because my presence and expertise were unacknowledged. The White shoes were gnawing at my feet. They were not my size or my style.

The Opening Epiphany and Establishing a Pedagogical Relation

I was six months into this role when the Covid-19 pandemic struck. News reports from around the world instigated fear and anxiety and, on 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization announced

³ “Tannie” is a colloquial term that students use to refer to women residence heads as a form of respect. It is debatable whether this is suitable for the modern role that residence heads play as educators.

that the rapid and roughshod spreading of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (Covid-19) presented an apocalyptic threat to the global community. Days after that announcement, the South African government declared the pandemic a national disaster and announced that the country would be under a national lockdown from 27 March for 21 days. A mass exodus of students from the SU campus ensued. In my residence, nine women students remained steadfast in their decision to stay on campus. Willem de Villiers, Rector of SU, announced in March 2020 in an email communication to staff and students that the university would make provision for students who were unable to return home by accommodating them in its residences and ensuring that the necessary Covid-19 protocols were adhered to.

For those of us who stayed together in the university residence for the next nine months, the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic would mark the birth of an “extraordinary, life-giving experience or epiphany” (Bochner & Ellis, 1992, p. 3). Epiphanies are those moments that are perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of one’s life. They reveal ways that a person could negotiate “intense situations” and “effects that linger—recollections, memories, images, feelings—long after a crucial incident is supposedly finished” (Bochner, 1984, p. 595).

I recorded this life-giving experience in a short essay and present excerpts there from in this autoethnographic study (see Petersen, 2020).

The essay begins as follows:

It is two days before lockdown; we are meeting downstairs in the oopsitkamers. The wingback chairs—upholstered in beautiful hues of blue—are arranged in a circle.

There are 10 of us. We come from places far and wide in Southern Africa—Zimbabwe, Limpopo, Gauteng, and all the way down to the Cape Flats. Did I say we came? No, I think we were called. Our grandparents’ parents prayed and paid for this. The faces I see in front of me look weary and fatigued—three (aspiring) biochemists, an earth, an animal and a plant scientist, a chemical engineer, a psychologist, and a social worker—they have remained steadfast in their decision to stay. (Petersen, 2020, paras. 3 & 4)

I am distraught—what will we do, we hardly know each other, God forbid—what if something happens to them or their parents? I do not know if I can do this—provide emotional care, support, warmth, a sense of togetherness, and a home. Is that what they want, or do they want to be left alone? As I am about to utter my fears the unexpected happens . . . the last lines of Yeats’s poem start to reverberate in my head: “I . . . have only [these] dreams, I have spread my dreams under your feet; tread softly because you tread on my dreams” (as quoted in Menon, 1960, p. 31). The fog in my mind lifts, and as I look into the faces, our eyes lock and they tell me: I am on the precipice of my dream, I just started my dream, I am my grandmother’s dream. At that moment, my fears become inconsequential. I hold their gaze and we enter into a silent agreement to ride this pandemic wave together and protect each other’s (now) fragile dreams. (Petersen, 2020, para. 5)

And just so, after reassuring the girls their decision to stay was most brave and courageous, our facades drop, we breathe a sigh of relief, and we get to the business of Being. Almost in unison we agree this might be the rest, the respite, we needed from our daily hustle and inner wrestles! (Petersen, 2020, para. 6)

My first face-to-face encounter with the nine students remained etched in my brain. While I was conjuring up all the possible dark and fatal outcomes that the pandemic could bequeath us, something remarkable happened. As I quieted my mind, became present, and gave my full attention, an opening came, a clearing. At that moment, the ears of my ears awoke, and the eyes of my eyes opened (Cummings, 1950). I saw each individual student, unique and in the fullness of her being. I saw the anxiety in their stubbornness and the fear in their courage. And, without a prod or nudge, each one disclosed her reasons for staying: “I must graduate at the end of this year; I cannot lose sight of my academic project now,” “I will not have access to the internet,” “We have intermittent electricity cuts,” “My parents cannot afford to feed another mouth,” “Our house is noisy and overcrowded.” I saw and heard a piece of myself in each of these utterings—their story was my story. My mind raced back to my formative years; I too shared a room with my three siblings. I remembered the sparsely furnished room: two double bunks, a cupboard, and a chest of drawers, with no place to study. Throughout my high school years and later when I went to university, I would rise in the depth of night, when the world was quiet, to commit to my books. Sometimes my sister would beat me to the kitchen table, and I had to resort to the couch in the small living area.

I read the defiance in their eyes, which seemed to say, “We are not going to succumb to the threat of an invisible virus derailing our futures. We invested in a destination, and no matter how tenuous, we will remain en route, with or without you.” I reacted with an affirming nod, our gazes locked, and I communicated back to declare with soft eyes, “I am here for you; I will hold your hand, and you have my unyielding support.”

Van Manen (1994, p. 38) told us that every active encounter is a potential pedagogical moment because it requires action, even if the action is a nonaction, a tender touch, an admonishing look, or an affirmative nod. To me, the significance of this moment was captured in the students’ revealing of their subjective being, of their dreams and hopes, their fragilities, and their vulnerabilities. I saw the aspirant Black bodies from the urban and rural underclasses who had struggled, sacrificed, and survived to come to university pursuing their dream of becoming scientists, social workers, and engineers. They were the first in their families to gain this opportunity of entering higher education. They came here not just for themselves but as representatives of their clans and communities, whose aspirations they carried with them. The distant future may have been uncertain to them, but they reacted with certitude to the possibility of the present moment in which they had access to the resources and comforts that they needed to make the dream possible.

I knew these Black bodies. I was once in their shoes. In that moment, my purpose was reawakened, and my passion reignited. In that opening, I stepped out of the White shoes and into my own Brown genuine leather boots.

Enacting the Residential Education and Support Programme

Meeting the students in the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic activated my default setting—to care, to share, to make a difference—a motto that I had lived and breathed for seven years when I taught at Christel House South Africa (<https://christelhouse.org/>). In fact, it felt as if every teaching and learning experience that I had been exposed to, engaged in, and experienced had prepared me for this moment. I knew that eating together would create opportunities for us to be together, check in with each other, and, hopefully, help us to get to know each other. I also anticipated that it would allow us to access one another for the emotional care and psychosocial support that we might need from each other as the pandemic unfolded.

I wrote as follows about this:

We have regular coffee check-ins and eat supper together every other night. This turns out to be the highlight of the pandemic for me. I cook and they feed my soul! Over casseroles, pasta, wraps, and burgers, the girls invite me into their world. We traverse the Limpopo via their backyards where they lie under Marula trees, eating the citrus-like fruit they bear, where the avocados are bountiful and the mangoes are the sweetest, most juicy. I listen to stories of them growing up and reciting their ancestral lineage at large family gatherings—coached and coaxed by their dads to do so with pride and gusto. They share their embarrassment about their parents when they boast to friends and family about their daughter’s achievements, and they refer to their younger siblings with gentle dearness. (Petersen, 2020, para. 7)

This practice of eating together does something for us—it transforms our anxiety into appreciation and then affection. (Petersen, 2020, para. 8)

Food is the soother, a healer and connector. My attempt at samp and bean soup delights, and I am praised as if I brought a gift from home. We include pap and chakalaka as side dishes to our main meals. I become the lockdown scone expert, and we enjoy this together, warm, with cream and jam. We make Easter Sunday special with a feast that stretches into late afternoon cake, doughnuts, and Easter eggs. Sanelisiwe’s 21st birthday is celebrated with caramel birthday cake, candles, braai, music, dancing, and singing. (Petersen, 2020, para. 9)

And just like that, my deft orchestration of our practices of eating together became our classroom. Our gatherings evolved into forums for educational engagement, and we established, with conscious spontaneity, the RESP, based on the deep care and relationality that we had developed. I sharpened my practice by being intentionally present, attentive, and curious. My response to the pandemic predicament was premised on Tronto’s tenets of care; she explicated: “Care is about the meeting of needs, and it is always relational” (2015, p. 4). Her assertion is that in a relationality that is fostered in care, one must pay attention to fully understand the care that is needed and then act on the moral responsibility to do so. Importantly, the carer must be competent enough to provide the care, and if the cared for reciprocate, one can satisfactorily claim that a pedagogy of care was established.

The constitution of the RESP took on the structure and form of the pedagogical relation as van Manen (1994), Nohl (1957), and Spiecker (1984) conceptualised it. Van Manen (1994, p. 149) saw the pedagogical relation as “the concept of a caring human vitality that encompasses the normative and qualitative features of the educational process.” Nohl (1957) added that the pedagogical relation is “an intensely personal relation, rooted in a special quality between the teacher and student and developed effortlessly” (as quoted in Spiecker, 1984, p. 137). The teacher “cares for the child as they are and whom they may become,” explained Nohl (1982 as quoted in van Manen, 1994, p. 143) referring to the intuitive understanding of the lived experience and inner workings of the child. Spiecker (1984, p. 208) concurred, and added that it is the “pedagogical relation that makes human development and personal becoming possible.” Most importantly, when the intentions of the educator to give direction are met by responsiveness on the part of the student, the pedagogical relation is activated (Bollnow, 1989). By mutual agreement, the students and I entered a relationship that was interdependent and reciprocal. The dynamics of the pandemic steered me to provide a sense of comfort, care, and stability. And the students reciprocated with an openness to receiving it. More importantly, my role was to lead: “Educere” means to lead *out of*, and “educare” means to lead *into*—leading students out of childhood and leading them into adulthood (van Manen, 1982, p. 285).

Theoretically, the notion of residential education diverts from the instrumentalist and rationalist modes of teaching which place emphasis on knowledge transmission, acquisition, and assessment. Here the focus is on the development of self and the development of self in relation to the other. Biesta (2009) referred to this as the socialisation and subjectification purpose of education. In other words, residential education is meant to positively bring students together, where they live and learn from each other. In doing so, students develop and grow an understanding of who they are in relation to others and themselves.

In 2015, SU adopted a residential education paradigm with the adoption of its Residential Education Programme (Kloppers, 2015). This values-driven programme is geared toward leveraging the value and potential of outside-of-class experiences in the enhancement of the student's learning experience and student success. At SU, the values approach favours the use of community selected values as the "moral compass" and "guides to action" to navigate "desirable" interactions with members of the community. According to Solomons and Fataar, the educational values-driven approaches emphasise "values, things and persons that are desirable" (2011, p. 225) and can therefore be open to misinterpretation and speculation and are often confused with social norms and traditions. At SU, values are meant to be the organising principle for all community actions and interactions and residence heads' training and development espouse this approach.

Our RESP addressed the pertinent issue of how we can educate in the residential environment, and why this is important. Eating together, having a genuine interest in other persons, trying to understand each other's lived experiences, and laughing at our foibles were some of the simple practices that we followed. In the process, we were able to build rapport and trust, share our differences, and revel in our similar journeys of aspiration. Most significantly, though, was the space that we gave each other to just be in our skins—relaxed, open, and unashamedly ourselves, with loud laughter and academia-induced fears and anxieties.

The notion that we were co-constructing and co-creating a RESP came from the awareness that this is how living and learning can be—a blueprint or template for residential education. This is how we can learn about each other and learn from one another. The benefits thereof are bountiful—building authentic relationships and experiencing living with and in an awareness of difference. These engender and promote qualities of empathy, care, respect, and compassion, amongst others.

Pedagogical Risks

The pedagogical relation sets the conditions, motives, and intentions for teaching. As we became more comfortable in our own being and in being with each other, I decided to take our engagements a little further and deeper.

Reflecting on the relationality that we established, I wrote,

These poignant encounters [mealtimes we shared] make room for deeper dialogues, including conversations around our cultural and societal constructs like marriage, how children should be reared, and real friendships discerned. We talk about losing our voices upon entering the forest, being overwhelmed by the magnitude of newness, adjusting, and assimilating to get in on "how things are done here." These discussions provide me with the opportunity to broach topics of belonging, how it is (in my opinion) inherent, a given, and reciprocal—demanding an openness to receive and give. We talk about victimhood, complacency, and agency—finding your voice again. My "world experienced" viewpoint provokes and shocks; it also evokes new curiosities (I hope). I share my dad's favourite and

often-used word of the time, “propaganda,” and let them in on a life lesson I was taught in an academic literacy class—consider everything you read to be contentious! I could be wrong, but from these talks, I deduce that finding a sense of self is becoming more important than pleasing parents, culture, and traditions. (Petersen, 2020, para. 10)

I remember that I wrote this one evening in response to a barrage of inviting questions from the students: “Tell us, how did you meet your husband?” “How long have you been married?” “How did you know he is the *right one*?” I offered them a naughty grin and responded: “Is there only one right one?” My banter added lightness and frivolity and piqued their curiosity. I shared the story of how my husband and I met at school, had our beautiful son in our early twenties, and got married 10 years after his birth. They were noticeably intrigued; I sensed both judgement and permission. This revelation created the opening to segue into more intimate and authentic discussions about the contemporary human condition. I shared how I felt excluded, being a single mother within a circle of friends who were all married, albeit unhappily. How society’s constructs reduced my sense of being, made me feel less than. How I coped with the death of my parents within two years of each other and having a child that was not two years old then. How for years I kept asking myself why my parents named me Joy, and what was the purpose of my life! I remembered being amazed at how comfortable I was sharing these personal stories. I sensed that the students may have resonated with me. I may have answered some questions that they may have wondered about but not asked out loud.

It was Barnett’s (2007) view that when students find personal meaning and can identify with another’s story, a new energy and resolve is given to their being and a new spirit emerges—the person is *inspired*. He admitted that such a conceptualisation is elusive and mysterious; inspiration, he maintained, cannot be taught—but those who have determination, care, and enthusiasm to come into issues their own way will catch it. The RESP provided such a pedagogy for inspiration; here both the students and I actively participated in creating an inspirational loop based on the mutual disclosure of, and fascination with, each other’s stories. This transformed our educational engagements and provided the impetus for us to take greater pedagogical risks (Barnett, 2012). Three stand-out pedagogical moments jump to mind.

Two months into our stay together, the George Floyd murder happened. He was the Black man who was brutally killed by the police on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States of America. The students were visibly upset and, when I probed their distress, they disclosed that their anger was directed at the lack of response from the SU community. As the murder spiralled into the *#BlackLivesMatter* movement’s march, and the global condemnation of racism, they started talking about their own experiences of racism. One student shared how the family that she lived with whilst on an exchange programme in Australia had told her: “You speak very good English for a South African.” Another told us how she had felt constantly harassed and reprimanded to fix her hair at the White Afrikaner school she had attended. I tried to keep the conversation going, allowing the students to debate, argue, and present their viewpoints, facts, and emotions while listening with stunned disbelief at how these young Black bodies had already been exposed to the societal constructs of inequality and racism.

In another conversation, I asked about their welcoming experiences, and how they had subsequently adjusted to the new and different SU environment. Only three of them had applied for residence placement, and were placed here at Disa. The others shared the cumbersome process of waiting to be placed in a residence but, once here, they had settled in and found the student leaders warm and welcoming. It was the faculty space where they experienced great difficulty, especially with the Afrikaans language. One student was allocated to an Afrikaans tutor group. She explained how she had never been exposed to the Afrikaans language or Afrikaans-speaking people until she arrived at SU.

Almost every student recalled an incident in which they felt explicitly excluded in a conversation or from a group because of the use of Afrikaans.

These pedagogical encounters created intimacy, discomfort, and disturbance among all of us. I remember being very aware of my own positionality and pedagogical integrity, not wanting to impose my own stance and opinion on the students. I was cautious to reply verbally. A soft gaze and touch on the shoulder to acknowledge the pain and hurt experienced was mostly my response. We became comfortable sitting in silence and holding space for each other.

Not all our pedagogical interactions were emotionally heavy and cognitively charged. By far the most significant of these pedagogical moments was the celebration of one student's 21st birthday. We decided that this important milestone was to be remembered with a proper South African braai, and so we did. The students brought the quad alive with music, boisterous singing, and exuberant laughter. The smoke and smell of barbeque wafted in the air. The students choreographed a coordinated dance to the blaring sounds of the musical hit *Jerusalem*. It was a day of joy and laughter—an altogether marvellous day! We were barefoot and carefree!

There was a teachable moment in every engagement. With a heightened sense of awareness and presence, I became skilled at discerning these opportunities to learn and improvise according to my reading of the situation. I drew from my reserve of *mensenkennis* and applied it with pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact. *Mensenkennis* is a Dutch word that means having

a sensitive insight into the nature of humans, a wisdom about how people are and how they tend to act and react in specific situations, a practical type of knowledge of how people's actions relate to motives, intentions, emotions, feelings and moods. (van Manen 1994, p. 138)

Pedagogical thoughtfulness directs one to act mindfully, in a way that takes into consideration the student's strengths and weaknesses, inclinations, and life circumstances. Pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact refer to the way that our "action is framed by our special orientation or commitment that defines our relation to others, expressed as love, hope, and responsibility; it is always immediate, situational, contingent, and improvisational" (van Manen, 1991, p. 507).

I became adept at consciously engaging my thoughts during our interactions—taking the students' lived experiences and views into consideration as I did so. I tried to present the students with all the "possible truths" about a specific social or personal dimension of their experience, and have them develop a curiosity about power structures and patterns of inequality. The aim was to incite an inquisitiveness for their own further investigation.

Reflection and deep contemplation also became essential practices for me when I retreated into my personal space. Taking some distance to disengage and think about the meaning and importance of our interactions, a "recollective or retro-active reflection" (van Manen, 2006, p. 87), helped me to suspend my immediate judgment and savour the joy and grace of our surreal encounter.

The RESP, spontaneously and organically, took on a dialogical teaching approach. This meant that during our exchanges, the students were encouraged to think and question ideas, explore new viewpoints, and construct knowledge in dialogue with their peers and me. Alexander (2004) explained that the aim of the dialogical approach is to engage students in sustained stretches of talk to stimulate and extend their thinking and advance their learning and understanding. He added that harnessing the

power of talk empowers the student for life-long learning and active citizenship. Dialogic teaching endorses the holding of different ideas or perspectives together in the tension of a dialogue that leads to new insights and mutual illumination (Wegerif, 2019).

As the interlocutor of the RESP, I found myself modelling and projecting particular qualities in these dialogical exchanges. These included, as mentioned above, courage, risk, attentiveness, thoughtfulness, discernment, patience, curiosity, and restraint, amongst others.

Epistemic Virtues

The qualities mentioned in the previous paragraph were manifestations of my disposition or sense of being in the world (Barnett, 2009). Aristotle named it *virtues*, from the Greek word *arete* that means the excellence or quality of a person's character and identity that makes a particular life exemplary, good, admirable, or excellent (as cited in Myers, 2008, p. 95). Virtues can be described as the normatively desirable ways of being that are developed over time and become a normative practice through habituation (Eflin, 2003). Virtues, as opposed to values, are therefore the deliberately and rationally chosen habitual practices of one's intellectual, emotional, and passionate self (Myers, 2008). How you apply your mind, and your natural powers of reasoning responsibly ultimately becomes a question of virtue—epistemic virtue—a way of developing good mental habits that will allow you to form your beliefs responsibly (Greco, 2000).

In recent years, virtue theorists have made a distinction between virtue ethics and virtue epistemology. Virtue ethics takes a practical perspective on doing what is good, right, and just, whereas virtue epistemologists emphasise the thinking and intellectual perspective of what would be normatively desirable. Since teaching is “at heart a virtuous, normative practice, or, in Aristotelian terms, pedagogy is the excellence of teaching” (van Manen, 1994, p. 151), it holds that pedagogy is both an ethical and epistemological virtuous practice. We find that in the act of teaching, the teacher is actively also applying reasoning and thinking that is, for example, thoughtful, mindful, and tactful. In my pedagogical becoming, I embraced this new consciousness—teaching as both an ethical and epistemological imperative—and, like virtues, it can be developed, strengthened, and refined through practice.

Barnett (2009) placed a particular focus on the development and transmission of epistemic virtues in higher education. He explained that epistemic virtues are evinced through our dispositions and qualities. As explained earlier, dispositions are the “universal ways of our being in the world, and qualities are reflections or manifestations thereof” (Barnett, 2009, p. 433). For example, a will to learn (disposition) will show up in our resilience (quality) when we experience difficulty in a course or module. It was Barnett's belief that these worthwhile dispositions and qualities (epistemic virtues) can be transmitted and acquired through the pedagogical relation and pedagogical practices. He said: “A deep and personal encounter with knowledge calls for and helps to nourish certain ethically worthwhile forms of human being” (Barnett, 2009, p. 435). He further contended that students can acquire these (epistemic virtues) on their own but that a “well-designed course of study in higher education can also engender the formation thereof” (Barnett, 2009, p. 435).

The RESP, I propose, was such a course. The RESP was enacted in response to recognising and understanding the students in their being—their fears and fragilities, hopes and aspirations. Based on that, and in a time of unpredictability, the RESP premised its pedagogy on an ethics of care. The constitution of the RESP or pedagogical relation was an intensely personal relation, bringing the students and teacher together in a close and intimate way, which enabled the transmission, cultivation, and nurturing of the dispositions and qualities that the teacher modelled and transmitted.

Stellenbosch University's Institutional (Transformational) Shifts

To many people, the apocalyptic Covid-19 pandemic signalled a violent and cataclysmic ending for the world (Dein, 2021) and, for many people who lost their loved ones, it was the end of the world. However, for our institution, SU, there appeared (at least, momentarily) a glimpse of what rebirth could be. But the questions and suspicions still nagged at me.

I wrote:

This is not to say I know how to navigate this pandemic terrain. I explore, feel my way through, and largely consult with the owls. Yes, many a day I wander in the courtyard, seeking their wisdom from where they are located high up the towering jacaranda tree. The counsel and enlightenment I seek have to do with making sense of the serendipitous circumstances surrounding our presence here. How did we arrive at this present pandemic moment finding ourselves in fortified accommodation, with a stocked pantry and access to emotional and material support and assistance? Not to say we are not grateful for it. (Petersen, 2020, para. 11)

But the harsh reality, which is difficult to lose sight of, is the fact that the atrocity that was apartheid has its foundational roots here too; this is where it was engineered! It is here where all the scheming happened, and exclusionary practices and structures were promulgated! And let me add "exclusionary" in every sense of the word—based on the colour of your skin. Does this mean we are now included? Is this caring sincere, a definitive and tangible activation of the transformation we have heard about? They say owls can see what is invisible to the naked eye; they can see beyond deceit and masks. (Petersen, 2020, para. 12)

Despite the precarity that befell the majority of higher education institutions across South Africa, SU continued to provide a fortified experience for the students who chose to remain in residence. I, however, could not shake my doubts and suspicion of this institution that had instigated and promulgated separateness. Apartheid was based on the preposterous notion that conditioned people to think their Whiteness made them more worthy and therefore superior to people of Colour, and it was conceived, declared, and regulated from the very grounds I was standing on. And SU played a key educational role in reproducing such racialised conceptions of being among its White students.

And now, the once-shunned Black bodies were cared for and venerated by the same institution! The paradox of it all. Or was this a genuine move based on the implementation of the 2017 SU Transformation Plan that was developed to operationalise and accelerate transformation? And was it a sincere attempt, the spontaneous and organic enactment and execution of the 2018 Restitution Statement declaring SU's intention to heal and restore relations with those towards whom it had acted harmfully? I ask because my lived experience of the pandemic showed and revealed practices that indicated an institutional relationality that was based on and espoused concrete caring practices. Applying the same principles of Tronto's (2015) care ethics, the institutional response to the pandemic showed an attentive caring as staff and student needs were listened to and prioritised. The fact that students were allowed to stay, not just on campus but also in their own residences to enable familiarity and stability, comforted students and lessened the possibility of an outbreak because social distancing could adequately be applied. SU acted on its moral responsibility to care for staff and students—as was evident throughout the pandemic in the communications, the disbursement of laptops and data, and the continued availability of the emotional and psychological support services that were fully

functional online. The caregiving was done with humility and discreetly without fanfare or announcements of grandness. Students and staff generously received the care that was offered, and for the duration of the pandemic, it seemed as if a new trust had been established.

Were these the qualitative changes that Chris Brink (2006), former SU Rector, alluded to—a change in institutional behaviour and consciousness, a concomitant shift toward real transformation, restoration, and restitution? Marie Brennan (Badroodien & Fataar, 2020, 29:45–31:50) pointed us toward such a measure when she said: “If one was to look at the relationality and interrelationships that shape our current lives and institutions (in this pandemic moment), we can understand where we are, and what we moved away from.” This kind of measurement would indicate positive and qualitative shifts towards the envisioned SU as a university.

My Pedagogical Becoming

My pre- and post-pedagogical beings are not the same. The RESP reawakened the pedagogue in me in profound and powerful ways. When I commenced this journey with the students, I acted on intuition and experience, on my moral and ethical duty as a human being. The deep and intense relationality that emerged and the pedagogy of care that was reciprocated was a beautiful blessing.

I wrote:

As for us, I do not know if we are the same people who entered the regal residence building that became a home amidst the pandemic. We arrived without fanfare, quietly, tiptoeing into new lives, into a new world—unseen, unheard, and unacknowledged, with very little but our dreams. We stayed to guard and protected our dreams when they seemed threatened by the pandemic. Our dreams, it now seems, were the easy part. As Sarah Ban Breathnach (2008, September 9) affirms, “The Power that gifted you the dream knows how to help you make it come true.” In our encounters, we were met by a few dream collaborators who conspired to turn our possibilities into realities. (Petersen, 2020, para. 14)

But it is the unanticipated and inconceivable transformations revealed on this dream quest that sits with us, what Sarah alludes to very potently: “Dreams are gifts of Spirit, meant to alter us” (Breathnach, 2008, September 9). This new stirring, a divine discontent, is what stays. It feels like a shedding, a parting from who we were before the pandemic, a loss of our old selves. (Petersen, 2020, para. 15)

It is Freire (1978) who proclaimed, “Ultimately, a genuine higher education is none other than a transformation of being” (as cited in Barnett, 2007, p. 38). As I reflect on our time together and our participation in the RESP, I hope that it empowered those nine students to uncover, recover, or discover their self-belief and sense of agency and that, in their openness, they acquired the worthwhile qualities and dispositions that they were modelled. As for me, I have become intentional and invitational to establish relations and have centred my praxis on the fullness of the students’ being and their aspirational becoming.

Conclusion

As recount this epiphany, I can recall the significant moments, practices, and experiences that have shaped my pedagogical growth. One pivotal aspect was the recognition and adoption of a pedagogy rooted in care, which was modelled and inspired by my university's response to the pandemic. I drew

inspiration, motivation, and encouragement from the rector and the Institutional Committee for Business Continuity, who prioritised establishing a relational approach based on care. Their commitment to listening to students, addressing their basic needs, and fostering open dialogue through the various SU community stakeholders set a powerful example. It was through this collective mindset that I found the opportunity to implement the principles of the RESP.

Another crucial understanding that profoundly influenced my growth as an educator was the importance of establishing deep and personal connections with my students. This required me to be present, to see the student in the fullness of their being, and to listen attentively to what was said and not said. This pedagogical relation laid the foundation for the co-creation of the RESP, drawing on multiple approaches. The pedagogy centred on care and trust fostered open dialogue, where my commitment to being present and attentive allowed me to engage with my students and transmit values such as respect, active listening, and intellectual humility. Within this framework, we embraced critical pedagogies and explicitly established standards for engagement, emphasising openness, equality, and the exploration of contrasting insights and perspectives. We approached our discussions on the diverse experiences of the pandemic in South Africa, naturally transitioning into a pedagogy of justice. We explored our own resilience, encouraged one another, and recognised the importance of acknowledging and celebrating the existence of diverse knowledge systems. The pedagogical relation is fundamental to setting the conditions for the cultivation, nurturing, and transmission of worthwhile qualities and dispositions—epistemic virtues.

As a residential educator, I've realised that I have the power to shape and influence students' development by modelling virtuous behaviours, attitudes, and ways of being. By practising and embodying these qualities, I provide students with examples to emulate and integrate into their own actions. The goal of residential education is to cultivate important dispositions in students such as thoughtfulness, humility, receptiveness, critical thinking, resilience, courage, and contemplation. As educators, our focus should be on understanding who students are and guiding them towards their potential. This approach requires a pedagogy that embraces risk, mutual disclosure, and occasionally, disruptive teaching methods. Through building relationships and fostering a sense of community, residential education can enable the emergence of authentic individuals who act purposefully and judiciously.

According to Barnett (2007, 2012), in our uncertain, supercomplex, and unknowable contemporary world, it is worthwhile human qualities, rather than mere knowledge and skills, that are crucial for students to thrive. I agree with this viewpoint. Developing dispositions such as a will to learn and engage, a willingness to listen, and a determined attitude to persevere—demonstrated through traits like openness, restraint, discernment, and generosity, among others—will make students desirable candidates for employment. Most importantly, an education that seeks to cultivate and nurture the transmission and acquisition of epistemic virtue or worthwhile qualities and dispositions is essential for students' personal growth, and amounts to an education for life.

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