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‘All stories bring hope because stories bring awareness’: students’ perceptions of digital storytelling for social justice education

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Although becoming a more racially-integrated society, the legacy of Apartheid still affects learners’ social engagements in and outside their classrooms. Adopting Nussbaum’s (2010) capabilities framework for a socially just democracy, this paper examines 27 pre-service teacher education students’ perceptions of a digital storytelling project and its potential for recognising and honouring capabilities necessary for engaging empathetically with the ‘other’. Using narrative inquiry, and specifically Bamberg’s (2006) ‘small stories’ approach, the research team analysed 30 stories students constructed in four focus group conversations at the end of the project. In these stories, most of Nussbaum’s (2010) capabilities were evident. We found that, in the collective sharing of their stories, students positioned themselves as agentive selves, displaying the belief that they can make a difference, not only individually within their own classrooms, but also as a collective of teachers.

Keywords: capabilities approach; digital stories; digital storytelling; pre-service teacher education; social justice education

Introduction

Martha Nussbaum (2010) and other followers of Amartya Sen’s (1999) capabilities approach to human development argue that there are specific capabilities that it is necessary for learners to acquire in order to learn to live peacefully and respectfully with the ‘other’.

For South Africans, living with the ‘other’ⁱ has long been a reality. This living with the other, however, was not always peaceful and respectful. The legacy of a deeply unjust system of Apartheid still influences the lives of today’s youth, not only in terms of access to resources and opportunities for schooling and careers, but also in relation to social interactions (Jansen, 2009). Since 1994, creating more diverse schools based on the principles of anti-racism has, on paper, been at the forefront of government’s efforts to create a more equitable society. South African schools in practice, however, have predominantly followed a route of assimilation, which reproduced fundamentally asymmetric relations among learners (Soudien, 2012). For schools to become safe, enabling and socially just, it is essential to start working from within Higher Education (HE), in particular from within teacher education programmes. We believe that for future teachers to facilitate learners’ engagement across racial, linguistic, class and cultural divides, that this allows the questioning of beliefs and assumptions about the ‘other’ (Jansen, 2009), where alternative learning spaces need to be created.

One such alternative learning space is a digital storytelling project in a final-year pre-service teacher education course at a large University of Technology in the Western Cape, which we have been facilitating since the year 2010. As discussed in previous papers (Condy, Chigona, Gachago & Ivala, 2012; Gachago, Cronje, Ivala, Condy & Chigona, 2014; Gachago, Ivala, Condy & Chigona, 2013), digital storytelling has helped us open up a democratic and inclusive space for our students to share and listen to stories they would usually not hear. In the process, students reported that some of their assumptions and beliefs about the ‘other’ may have changed. Previous research has however shown that students could easily talk about their own experiences, but had difficulty in placing themselves within the larger historical and socio-cultural context essential to allowing the questioning of beliefs or assumptions and the exposure of privilege and comfort zones (Boler & Zembylas, 2003).

This paper reports on the 2013 digital storytelling project. Students were invited to reflect on a single social issue in education, one which they chose, and felt passionate about.ⁱⁱ Adopting a feminist stance to social justice, as promoted by Nussbaum (2010), this paper explores students’ perceptions of the digital storytelling project and its potential for creating a space, where capabilities necessary for an empathetic and critical engagement with the ‘other’ are valued and legitimised. Through this explicit focus on social issues in education, and through reflection on the link between personal experience/narrative and larger social issues that affect students’ practice in South African schools, we hope to ultimately increase students’ awareness of their own role in either perpetrating or resisting social injustice in South African classrooms.

Social Justice Education

This paper is set within a feminist epistemology, viewing education as a liberating and active practice, driven by students who become co-constructors of knowledge (Freire, 2005; hooks, 1994). Within this paradigm, it is assumed

that education is neither non-direct nor neutral, but submits to a political agenda, as Paolo Freire (2005:34), whose work helps ground feminist epistemology, argues:

There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes 'the practice of freedom,' the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

Our 'agenda' in this project is to promote a socially just form of education, employing pedagogical practices that allow learners to be more aware of, and to act on, social injustices in their classrooms and in their larger communities. For this study, we view social justice education through the lens of economist Sen's (1999, 2007) capabilities approach. This capability approach is not a social justice theory, but rather a normative framework, useful to conceptualising and evaluating phenomena such as social justice (Wilson-Strydom, 2011). Sen (2007) defines a socially just society as one in which individuals have the freedom and ability to enact their individual rights. As opposed to looking at the rights and resources available to an individual, Sen (1999:75) focuses on the combination of the things a person sees value in "being or doing", what he calls "functionings". He argues, for example, that the right to vote does not mean that a person has the capability to vote, be it in terms of making an educated choice, or of having the means to provide for transport to the polling station. He sees functionings as the various desirable combinations of being and doing that an individual is capable of achieving. Functionings can be elementary, such as being adequately nourished, or being in good health. They may also be more complex, such as achieving self-respect or being socially integrated (Sen, 2007). In order for economic growth to be achieved, Sen argued, social reforms, such as improvements in education and public health, need to precede economic reform. Individuals and communities do not necessarily all aspire to the same beings and doings; hence these functionings will vary from context to context. Consequently, Sen (2007) refused to create a list of generic capabilities, arguing that each community has to negotiate its own list of capabilities they deem valuable. However, other authors, such as the feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2001:33) have critiqued Sen's capabilities approach for its vagueness. She argues that "capabilities can help us to construct a normative conception of social justice [...] only if we specify a definite set of capabilities as the most important ones

to protect."

Sen's (1999) and Nussbaum's (2000) early work in this arena focuses on economic growth and employability of learners. In their later work, however, we can see a shift towards a more nuanced view of social justice, one which foregrounds the importance for learners to learn to live peacefully in a society defined by difference, to participate in a healthy democracy. Nussbaum (2010:9) argues that, while it is important for education to teach skills and capabilities that promote learners' employability, it is equally important that learners are taught the skills to live in societies that are increasingly diverse and complex:

Every modern democracy is also a society in which people differ greatly along many parameters, including religion, ethnicity, wealth and class, physical impairment, gender, and sexuality, and in which all voters are making choices that have a major impact on the lives of people who differ from themselves.

Consequently, learners need to understand how to negotiate these differences creatively and empathically, as Nussbaum (2010:9) notes below:

All modern democracies, however, are societies in which the meaning and ultimate goals of human life are topics of reasonable disagreement among citizens who hold many different religious and secular views, and these citizens will naturally differ about how far various types of humanistic education serve their own particular goals.

Nussbaum (2010) suggests seven capabilities essential for learners to engage in a healthy democracy. These capabilities include:

1. learners' capacity to see the world from the viewpoint of other people;
2. learners' attitudes toward human weakness and helplessness that suggest that weakness is not shameful. Learners therefore learn not to be ashamed of their own and others' need and incompleteness, but to see these as occasions for cooperation and reciprocity;
3. a genuine concern for others;
4. to learn not to shrink from minorities of various kinds in disgust;
5. to see real and true things about other groups, countering stereotypes and the disgust that often goes with them;
6. learners' accountability, developed by treating each learner as a responsible agent; and
7. critical thinking, i.e. the skill and courage it requires to raise a dissenting voice.

Interrogating the theoretical underpinnings of her understanding of emotions is beyond the scope of this paper. However, what is important to note, is Nussbaum's (2001:2) understanding of emotions vis-à-vis the development of an ethical theory:

To say that emotions should form a prominent part of the subject matter of moral philosophy is not to say

that moral philosophy should give emotions a privileged place of trust, or regard them as immune from rational criticism: for they may be no more reliable than any other set of entrenched beliefs. There may even be special reasons for regarding them with suspicion, given their specific content and the nature of their history. It does mean, however, that we cannot ignore them, as so often moral philosophy has done. It means that a central part of developing an adequate ethical theory will be to develop an adequate theory of the emotions...

As a feminist philosopher, she emphasises the important interplay of emotions and reason and of the personal and the political, and concludes that “without emotional development, a part of our reasoning capacity as political creatures will be missing” (Nussbaum, 2001:3).

Melanie Walker’s (2003) adaptation of these capabilities for HE helps to translate Nussbaum’s (2000) concepts into our own context. By defining critical thinking, as the “capacity to make appropriate and informed choices about one’s life and group or team work, which is based on values of empathy and mutual recognition, compassion, respect, dignity and meaningful relationships with peers”, she establishes a link to the field of HE by arguing as follows:

Nussbaum’s capabilities approach, if taken up pedagogically, should enable collective problem-solving through processes of critical dialogue, respect, inclusion of diverse perspectives and ‘reasonableness’, that is the willingness to listen to others whose views, histories, and experiences differ from one’s own (Walker, 2003:174).

Walker (2003:176) notes that such pedagogical interventions involve “processes of the educational development of individuals in participatory and inclusive learning communities in which gaining knowledge and constructing successful learner identities went hand in hand.”ⁱⁱⁱ Our digital storytelling project is one such attempt at creating a space that addresses both questions of epistemology and ontology in education.

Social Justice and Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling and other participatory video techniques have been used for at least a decade in South Africa. Originating from community work, these techniques have gained increasing educational interest as a tool for engaging 21st century learners (Mitchell & De Lange, 2013). A digital story is a personal narrative which combines voice, sound and images into a short video developed by non-professionals. Individuals can position themselves as “authors, composers, and designers who are expert and powerful communicators, people with things to say that the world should hear” (Hull & Katz, 2006:10). This study is influenced by the digital storytelling model developed by the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) in Berkeley, California.

Originating from a history of critical theatre, this digital storytelling model had, as its main objective, the fight for social justice and the desire to give marginalised groups a voice (Lambert, 2009, 2013). The CDS showcases numerous examples of stories from marginalised groups, which are often silenced through the hegemony of public discourses. At the core of their stories, is an “act of self-discovery and a means to localise and control the context of their presentation” (Lambert, 2009:82).

Digital storytelling has been adopted as an emancipatory and critical practice in HE (Benmayor, 2008; Oppermann, 2008). Our digital storytelling project is part of the compulsory Professional Studies course students take into their last year of studies. It is a complex eight-week process: students are expected to attend weekly workshops and are guided by a team of facilitators, consisting of lecturers, members of the Educational Technology Unit, student counsellors and peer facilitators. The 2013 project focused on students’ perceptions regarding a single social issue in South African education, which they had either encountered in their own teaching or during their schooling, or observed in their communities. The brief of the project was to embed a personal narrative in a larger social issue, thus helping students place their own experiences within the larger socio-economic context of South Africa’s education system. This had been proved challenging in previous years (Gachago et al., 2013).

The first four weeks of the project are spent on sharing and developing students’ story scripts in small, randomly selected groups, each supported by a peer facilitator. To start this process off, we introduce the Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) technique ‘River of Life’ (Bozalek, 2011), in which students draw their life journeys and identify critical incidents related to the social issue they choose to explore in their digital story. PLA techniques are open-ended, flexible, visual learning methods. Of particular importance is the collaborative interaction and sharing PLA techniques provide for differently positioned students to share their backgrounds and begin to engage with each other (Bozalek & Biersteker, 2010). As a next step, students develop their stories in a story circle (Lambert, 2013). The story circle helps students to focus on one particular critical incident. Frequent opportunities for sharing and critiquing each other’s stories, which are limited to 300-500 words, are built into the writing process. The last four weeks are spent on narrating their stories, creating or searching for images, background sounds, and creating the actual digital film. We use digital film editing programmes, such as Photostory or Windows MovieMaker, for this task. There are weekly training sessions offered in a dedicated com-

puter lab for students who need additional support, but during the last four weeks of the project, students often work on their own. This project ends with the screening of the digital stories, to which students invite their families and friends, and a final debriefing session, in which students reflect on the process and their learning.^{iv}

Methodology

This study is set within the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences at a large University of Technology in South Africa. It is part of a larger research project, begun in 2010, to investigate the potential of digital storytelling in pre-service teacher education (Condy et al., 2012; Gachago et al., 2013; Ivala, Gachago, Condy & Chigona, 2014).

Students' demographic composition is diverse in terms of gender, age, race and language. The cohort of this study consisted of 74 students. Thirty one percent were male and 69% female; 28% were isiXhosa speaking, 61% English speaking and 11% Afrikaans speaking; 28% had an African^v, 12% a White and 60% a Coloured racial background.

To answer our research questions it is necessary to explore 1) students' perceptions of the potential of a digital storytelling project to provide a space in which to recognise Nussbaum's (2010) capabilities for a healthy democracy, and 2) the project's potential for students to explore the way in which their own story is linked to South Africa's larger socio-economic context, which may in turn increase their understanding of their own role in either perpetrating or resisting social injustices. This study follows a narrative inquiry methodology. Narrative inquiry has gained an increased following over the last 25 years, especially in the field of education and teacher education. This is partly due to the comfort that telling and listening to stories provides and to the potential of storytelling to make meaning of human experience (Clandinin, Huber, Huber, Murphy, Murray-Orr, Pearce & Steeves, 2006; Clandinin, Pushor & Murray Orr, 2007; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Connelly and Clandinin (2006:375) offer the following definition of narrative inquiry:

Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study.

The focus of this paper is, specifically, on the 'small stories' (Bamberg, 2006; Bamberg &

Georgakopoulou, 2008) participants tell during focus group conversations, which occur at the end of the project when reflecting on it. These stories are *small*, being mostly short, brief stories, but also *small* in a metaphorical sense, in relation, for example, to participants' larger life stories.

We chose focus group conversations as a method of data collection to create a less intimidating, more gratifying and stimulating space for students than is possible, for example, in a one-on-one interview (Madriz, 2003). We deliberately kept the groups small to allow a safe space for students to reflect on their emotional engagement in the process of creating, sharing and listening to each other's digital stories. We aimed to have focus groups that would reflect the diversity of students in the classroom. Being aware of potential conflict of interest that may have arisen by conducting research on one's own students, focus groups were conducted by the four members of the research team, two of whom had had no previous contact with the students. To facilitate the telling of narratives, focus groups were loosely structured, which raised "opportunities for participants to decide the direction and content of the discussion", lowering the power and control of the facilitator over participants (Madriz, 2003:371).

In total, four focus group conversations were held with 27 students. These sessions lasted between one and two hours, were recorded and transcribed. Riessman (2001) points out that interpretation of narrative data starts with the interviewing and transcription process. The researcher decides which segments to analyse and puts boundaries around narratives. We identified 30 small stories in these conversations, which we analysed deductively, using Nussbaum's (2010) seven capabilities as the analytical framework. Narratives are represented in poetic form, which means polishing and re-structuring students' narratives to allow narrative flow without losing the meaning. Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that this presentation is powerful, where it focuses the reader's attention and helps establish a human connection between reader and research participants. Ten excerpts of these small stories are presented in this paper to foreground students' voices and substantiate our argument.

Ethical approval was sought through appropriate institutional channels. Students gave informed consent to participate in the study. To guarantee anonymity, student names were changed where necessary.

Findings

This section answers the research questions and reports on findings from a deductive analysis of 30 small stories told in the focus group conversations

guided by Nussbaum's (2010) capabilities for a healthy democracy.

Seeing the World from the Viewpoint of the Other

The sharing of stories, in the process of developing their digital films in randomly selected groups as facilitated by this project, allows students a glimpse

into each other's worlds that often resulted in surprise, empathy and a heightened sensitivity towards the 'other'. Excerpt 1 reflects this experience. The student's choice of words expresses genuine surprise, a feeling of discovery, the ability to help somebody understand how one thinks, feels and views the world through the telling of one's story.

Excerpt 1:
 I think that's exactly
 what we were experiencing
 when we did our own digital stories.
 Even as grownups and adults
 and people who are out of school,
 we were able to learn about other people
 and discover things,
 that we might not have ever imagined,
 that he thought or felt or viewed the world that way.
 I think it's a very eye-opening experience.

Recognition of Mutual Vulnerability

In the South African context, against the backdrop of a contested debate concerning the meaning of reconciliation and redress, recognising and valuing our own vulnerabilities is complex. Authors such as Jonathan Jansen (2009) or Andre Keet, Denise Zinn and Kim Porteus (2009) contend that we all carry 'troubled knowledge': both descendants from the former oppressor and the former victim. They claim that only when both parties, formerly oppressed and

oppressors, in our case White, Coloured and Black students, acknowledge their shared pain and mutual vulnerability, will South African society be able to heal and move forward. Excerpt 6 exemplifies this mutual recognition of the diverse challenges students experience based on their socio-economic and cultural background. Some of these challenges differ, while others connect. Sharing and listening to diverse stories elicits mutual respect and empathy for both privileged and the less privileged student.

Excerpt 6:
 Now that the story has been watched
 by the whole class,
 when they go back to the classroom,
 they'll feel like some of the children
 are still thinking about 'what she told'
 or 'what he told' in the story.
 They will have mutual respect in the classroom,
 because they now know their situations.
 And they now have seen their challenges:
 their common challenges,
 and their different challenges.

Allowing near-strangers a glimpse into one's own world takes courage. In excerpt 2, a Coloured male student reacts to the story of an African male student who spoke about his experience of corrective

rape, and consequent mistreatment by the police. In his story, the student recognises the courage it took for his friend to stand up in front of the class and share these moments of pain, shame and anger.

Excerpt 2:
 So, when Thembi told us
 about what happened,
 it was like: Wooow...
 For four years,
 you knew actually all these people
 and they have these issues,
 but still they come to class,
 they smile, they are happy,
 or they act happy.
 I think it's not easy to come out
 and to say what happened.
 It really takes a brave person
 to do that.

Similarly, in excerpt 3, a Coloured female student reflects on how she reacted to her friend's story about her younger sister. Many of these learners come from impoverished, underprivileged communities, rife with crime, drug abuse and gangsterism. These students' stories exhibit anger at social injustices they encounter in their lives. Boler (1999) argues that emotions can be both sites of social control and of resistance. The anger and passion this

Coloured student refers to could be a site of resistance and mobilisation towards social change. However, as excerpt 3 shows, these stories are also testimonies to human connection, love and vulnerability. In the process of narrating her story, by changing from a third person (her) to second person (you) narrative, she addresses her friend directly, re-affirming their bond.

Excerpt 3:
 I could hear just in the tone of her voice,
 it was just so emotional.
 She was just so proud of her sister
 and in the way she portrayed her sister in there
 and this relationship they have with each other.
 I could see that
 there is such an unbelievable human bond.
 Because I could just hear it in your voice, you know.
 You are passionate a lot of times about things,
 you are almost like me when you are passionate,
 there is almost a bit of anger that you manifest;
 but there it was, unbelievably warm,
 and I just felt that resonating
 when you spoke about that bond that you have.

Concern for Others

Listening to each other's stories not only allowed students to see each other's private, inner worlds, but also provided a starting-point to understand differing socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. In the process, students' respect and sensitivity towards each other were awakened, as shown above. Excerpt 4, by the same student as cited in excerpt 2, shows his heightened awareness towards the feelings of his peers, along with the need to be sensitive and patient. These are not traditional values in patriarchal South

Africa: showing empathy is considered weak, and not fitting to a 'real' man, not appropriate according to patriarchal constructions of masculinity, and are usually not attributed to male teachers (Petersen, 2014). This student, however, reflects on his emotions not only without feeling shame, but sees it, as Nussbaum (2010) would argue, as an opportunity for cooperation and reciprocity, where there is a chance to develop the capacity for genuine concern for one another.

Excerpt 4:

One thing that it has done to me,
is that I am more sensitive towards people.
I am not a very patient person
and I can't say I tolerate nonsense, yeah.
But I am more sensitive towards people now,
especially the stories that I have heard in my group.
It has touched me so deeply,
that I have tried to practice tolerance
towards people.
I try to be more patient
and I try to act sensitively towards everybody;
they know, anyway I tease them always.
After this digital storytelling I realised
that we need to practice more sensitivity towards others.
Because I might it find funny;
I sometimes still do;
but she doesn't.

Countering Stereotypes

In the process of developing and sharing these stories, many stories are told that would normally be considered stories to which a stigma is attached: stories of teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, joining gangs, sexual abuse, homosexuality, or, as mentioned before, corrective rape. Not only was there space to share these stories in a safe and trusting space, but

students also expressed the importance of owning their complex and often disturbing stories, and of challenging their peers not to judge them, as shown in excerpt 5 and 6. In these excerpts, the students are showing how sharing their stories helped them re-evaluate their understanding of each other, and to counter stereotypes.

Excerpt 5:

You don't know anybody in your class,
and it's a nice way to actually show:
'this is who I am'.
Before you judge me and put this stigma on me,
'this is who I am'; and if you can't accept this,
I would like you to and respect me for it.
Even if you can't accept it,
I would like you to respect me for who I am.

Accountability

In the process of constructing their stories, students position themselves as agentive selves (Hull & Katz, 2006), demonstrating a sense of accountability and registering an awareness of oppressive systems. They express a desire to support their learners. Mirroring the public discourse of 'brokenness', they consider society, community and families as 'degenerate' (see excerpt 7 and 8). They have no illusions about the impact that 'broken' families and 'broken' communities have on their learners. They display little faith in government's ability to bring about change in the highly inequitable society that is today's South Africa. In students' narratives, we find a strong belief that, for change to take place, it would have to start with them, and also the realisation that change will

not happen easily, as one of the students explains in excerpt 7. Examples of oppressive systems they are fighting include unmotivated colleagues, absent parents, gender-based violence, drug abuse, and the attraction of gangs. But they have their own lives to offer as role models and a sense of care for their learners. In excerpt 8, a Coloured female student explains her pragmatic yet uncompromising view of herself as a teacher of learners that may be blinded by the sense of belonging to a gang. Gang membership demands respect in many of South Africa's communities. In excerpt 9, an African male student reflects on his growing maturity, his sense of responsibility towards his learners, and on the way in which this affects his relationship with them.

Excerpt 7:

It is very, very hard for us as ...
 I mean it's not impossible,
 we can make a difference,
 we are agents of social change.
 But there are so many social issues
 that our kids are plagued with;
 drugs, drug abuse ...
 Kids are coming to school
 who just don't have the capacity
 to be trained academically.
 And then obviously, I mean in any society,
 there is, you know, there is a whole lot of prestige
 placed on that gangsterism mentality you know.
 There is value where people would rather view
 those who display such qualities
 as being fitting or something to aspire to.
 It's really hard to reason with kids.
 But we can never give up as educators.
 We absolutely have to try.
 There really is a lot against us
 because society has been left for so long
 just to degenerate.

Excerpt 8:

In my second teaching practice,
 I had a similar experience with this boy.
 He always got into trouble
 for either taking his peers' erasers
 or something, or for fighting and beating up other children.
 And I spoke to him one day
 and I asked him: 'Why are you doing this?'
 You work very well in class.
 Why are you getting into trouble for silly things?'
 And he said to me: 'because my brother is a *tsotsie*', he said, 'and
 he steals other people's stuff.
 And nothing happens to him.
 And it's an easy way of making money.'
 I said to him: 'You don't have to make money that way.
 If you finish school,
 if you continue working hard the way you do now,
 you will be somewhere making easy money by working,
 by having an honest living.'
 But he was in Grade 5,
 so if he took in anything I said - I don't know.
 But we try and encourage them,
 We can try to be positive role models to them.
 But if they are not interested?
 Because the parents, the family unit,
 plays an important role as well.

Excerpt 9:

So those things you know,
 when you listen to these stories,
 you start to see
 that you have an obligation towards your society.
 So for me,
 the story gave me time to sort of reflect
 on how much I have matured over the years:
 from when I was a teenager up until now.

In some student narratives, however, we see how the collective narrative constructed from the individual student accounts, albeit full of trauma and pain, creates a picture of hope, which allows students to trust their collective capabilities in their fight for a

better South Africa. In excerpt 10, a Coloured, male student stresses the fact that the collective of the stories that were told in the project allowed him to feel hopeful for South Africa's future.

Excerpt 10:
 I just want to say now that
 it gives me hope for the future in South Africa.
 Because, looking at the 70-odd teachers
 that are moving out of here next year.
 A lot of them identified social issues -
 but not just identified -
 They have actually given proactive suggestions
 to what is happening,
 how to better those issues
 that our country is facing.
 I think that there is hope right there.
 I think that is why there are people out there,
 who want to make a difference in the community.
 Even if it is just one change there,
 it's like one change that can make changes.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper explored 27 final-year pre-service teacher educators' perceptions of a digital storytelling project, which focused on social issues in South Africa, to create a space to tell stories that are usually not heard, and in the process to facilitate an understanding of, and empathy for the 'other'. Through students' sharing of and listening to stories, we hoped that the capabilities necessary to live in a democratic society characterised by diversity and intolerance could be recognised and honoured. Extracting student narratives from a range of focus group conversations that we facilitated at the end of the project, we tried to make sense of their experiences when sharing and listening to each other's stories.

In their narratives, students addressed Nussbaum's (2010) capabilities for a socially just democracy, such as understanding the world through somebody else's eyes, the importance of emotions, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, developing a genuine concern for the 'other', countering stereotypes, and demonstrating a sense of accountability towards our learners.

This project intentionally created an emotionally-charged space of engagement. Students narrated and shared stories of individual and collective trauma narratives with near-strangers. In the small stories performed in the group conversations, the telling of these stories – usually hindered by strong social segregation that characterises students' engagement in their classrooms – worked towards students' better understanding of each other, a heightened awareness and respect for the 'other', and potentially a change of assumptions students carry about the 'other'. Thumbran (2010), like Freire (2005), holds that one of the main barriers to social justice in education is a culture of silence, resulting from both the marginalisation of certain voices from mainstream society, as well as the unspoken nature of

social issues and abuses. We see the facilitation of a process in which all student voices, both dominant and marginalised, were given equal room, and the creation of a space where some students felt safe enough to start the telling of stories of stigma, as a starting point to break this culture of silence.

Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) argue that, through the analysis of 'small stories' constructed 'on-the-fly' in everyday conversations, one can explore how identities are constructed in interaction. Some authors call this approach 'narratives-in-interaction' (Bamberg, 2006; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). They are particularly interested in how storytellers position themselves towards their audience and towards dominant narratives and ideologies. Bamberg (2012:106) introduces the notion of "*agency dilemma*", which relates to the choice a storyteller makes: either to pick narrative devices that lean toward a person-to-world fit, which allows him to position himself as agentive self-constructor, a heroic self; or a world-to-person fit, which results in a low-agency marking, and assists in the construction of a victim role.

Students' stories tended to be 'against-all-odd'/success/hopeful stories. There is a predominantly positive outlook for their future, which emphasises the importance of such projects to unleash the power of creativity and resilience which allow students to imagine a better future for South Africa. We regard this strong focus on an individualised 'meritocracy' discourse, opposed by critical race theorists such as Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001), as highly problematic. In their reflections on how their own stories are linked to larger social issues in education, such as the impact that their belonging to certain racial groups still has on the kind of opportunities and challenges they face in the educational system and in society more broadly, a more nuanced understanding emerged in some of the stu-

dents. The importance of a more critical engagement with systemic inequalities was foregrounded by these students. A realisation of their own responsibilities and limitations in their work emerged against a system that remains oppressive.

In the collective sharing of their stories, they positioned themselves as ‘agentive self-constructors’, representing strong belief in their capabilities to effect social change, not only individually within the confines of their own classrooms, but also as a collective. Ibrahim (2006) argues that there is a need to understand how individual capabilities work within systemic structures, and a need to develop collective capabilities which benefit the collective in order to achieve social justice.

We are aware that attitudinal and behavioural change is hard to measure - in particular within a qualitative paradigm without a pre- and post-design. Also, given our sampling frame, we cannot make any claim that these student voices are either representative or comprehensive, or that we can track change in their beliefs and assumptions. However, following other narrative researchers, such as Walker (2009), we see our findings as illustrative, and would like to emphasise the capacity of small-scale data on lived experiences to generate rich narratives of practices and learning. One dimension of narrative inquiry is its potential to allow multiple interpretations of data (Kohler-Riessman, 2008). We see our interpretation of our students’ stories just as one possible interpretation, and invite readers to derive their own conclusions.

In terms of making South African schools safer, as is the focus of this special issue, this study has highlighted the importance of creating intellectually and emotionally safe spaces within teacher education, where students can share their life narratives, where difference is embraced and not feared, where alternative values, such as emotionality and vulnerability are respected, and where students can position themselves among their peers as powerful agents of hope in their schools. As such, Nussbaum’s (2010) list of capabilities for a socially just society has been found to be useful as theoretical framework to make sense of these spaces.

It is important to mention that not all students react to such pedagogical interventions in the same way. Engaging with contested issues such as race and privilege can lead to strong student resistance (Kumashiro, 2002) as we have explored elsewhere (Gachago et al. 2014; Gachago et al., 2013).

What we haven’t found in our students’ stories are examples of Nussbaum’s (2010) last capability, *critical thinking*: she defines this as the skill and courage to raise a dissenting voice, not only to identify, but to speak out against injustices that students

face in their everyday practice. Wilson-Strydom (2011:409) further reminds us that there is a critical difference between capabilities and functionings: “understanding outcomes/achievements [alone] does not necessarily provide sufficient information to understand how well someone is really doing in terms of their personal wellbeing”. Our students’ optimistic outlook on and belief in their own capabilities to create change, will be tested once confronted with the reality of teaching in the challenging environment that a South African classroom presents. However, we see this as humble progress in a long history of subjugated identities, which can be directly linked to low self-esteem amongst the formerly and still oppressed (Soudien, 2013). This also shows a growing urgency for such a digital storytelling process to be supported beyond the development and screening of digital stories. We did this in conversations with students, which encouraged them to reflect and to remain engaged. Engagement with our students should ideally continue beyond the time of their studies, to convert this belief in their own capabilities into social action, which may include raising a dissenting voice.

Further research is needed to determine how these novice teachers may apply some of the techniques or elements of this pedagogical approach in their own classrooms and how they manage diversity and issues of social injustice in their practice.

We conclude this paper with Walker’s words (2003:176), which have guided us, reaffirming our belief about the importance of social justice education within deeply unjust societies, while alerting us to the difficulty and messiness of such interventions:

Realising what are essentially democratic aspirations in pedagogical action is far from straightforward - indeed our practical efforts are likely to be imperfect where inequalities and relations of domination still prevail.

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Notes

- ⁱ We signal the social constructedness of the term ‘other’ by placing it in inverted commas. ‘Other’ in this sense refers to all ‘others’ not only to the inferior/object ‘other’.
- ⁱⁱ For examples of digital stories developed in this project see <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL5oHsfRWAnQH K5lsWcbgfrTABfwuBRoB>
- ⁱⁱⁱ For an overview of the adaptation and use of the capability approach in Education see Wilson-Strydom (2011).
- ^{iv} For a detailed description of the adapted digital storytelling model including a weekly course outline see Gachago et al. (2013).

^v We are following the Department of Education racial categorisations, distinguishing between African, Coloured, Indian and White students, which despite being highly contested, are unfortunately still widely used (Department of Education, 1997).

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