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Towards a decolonial pedagogy: Building trust and daring to be vulnerable

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Abstract

In this article we reflect on the significance of building trust and being vulnerable as we engaged in teaching decolonial material. Using a collaborative autoethnographic methodology complemented with a thematic qualitative analysis of course data and student interviews, we report on the process of co-teaching a theory course that introduced decolonial perspectives to doctoral students. After discussing our positionality and how we established a relationship of trust between us, we set out the literature and research methods we employed, and we respond reflectively to our research questions. For this we first describe the effects of power sharing by handing over formal teaching to students and, second, we report on the extent to which we managed to build relations of trust, recognition, care, and vulnerability between ourselves and students. In conclusion, we reflect on what we have learnt from this experiment in teaching decolonial material and what significance a focus on pedagogic relations might hold for decolonial pedagogy more widely.

Keywords: doctoral education, decolonial pedagogy, collaborative pedagogy, affect, trust and vulnerability

Introduction

In 2023 we were assigned to design and convene an on-line course on a Higher Education Studies (HES) preparatory doctoral programme titled *Theoretical Frameworks*. The purpose of the course is to introduce doctoral candidates to a range of theories and concepts applied to researching the HES field, to them in writing their proposals. Since the transition to a democratic society, South African public universities have faced pressure from the state and from students and black academics, particularly since the 2015–2016 student protests, to transform through policy and funding drivers. The latter put the aspiration to decolonise the

curriculum firmly on the agenda of universities. Since 2015 there have been numerous publications in and beyond South Africa that seek to address the political and epistemic complexities of this challenge from the perspective of institutional policy, as well as from academic and student perspectives and identities (Andreotti et al., 2015; Hayes et al., 2021; Heleta, 2016; Hlatshwayo & Alexander, 2021; Lange, 2019). Although a decade has now elapsed since the outburst of the protests, teaching decolonial material remains challenging in a settler colonial society in which identities continue to be racialised. Black academics can experience micro-aggressions, low expectations leading to low self-esteem, and emotional exhaustion (Khunou et al., 2019) while many white academics still struggle with guilt, shame, and ambivalence (Jawitz, 2016; Matthews, 2021). That said, the passing of time allows some distance from the heat generated by the protests and creates possibilities for moving beyond the gridlock of the domination–resistance binary (Pillay, 2024).

Given this context in a country that is not yet post-colonial, we decided that, while it was important to expose students to canonical theories in the higher education field, it was imperative to decentre Eurocentric theory and broaden the canon by also prescribing readings on Southern and decolonial theory. So, we designed the curriculum as a series of conversations and debates on core themes such as theorising the subject and theorising knowledge, the curriculum, the institution; each theme was prescribed as the topic for a fortnightly seminar. For each seminar theme we asked students to engage with one set of readings on more established theories and a second set of alternative theorisations that draw on what we term radical epistemologies such as decolonial, postcolonial, and feminist literature. We agreed that a key pedagogic challenge would be to unsettle the epistemic, ontological, and normative assumptions made by the established theories. Furthermore, we hoped to encourage students to be equally critical when engaging with the readings based on radical epistemologies. We were committed to holding self-reflexive, critical conversations with students and one another, especially in the South African context, where decolonial theory has become axiologically charged and widely viewed as so-called politically correct and thus above critique.

We understood the overall purpose of the PhD programme to be the self-formation (Marginson, 2023) of novice researchers. Thus, we understood that the purpose of the course was to provide an environment and resources that would enable us and the students to transform ourselves as, together, we grappled with and critiqued the readings. We were equally concerned that the course should be meaningful to students and relevant to their research projects. We hoped, too, that the course would allow us to engage with each other and change together and so, from the start, we agreed to work in a manner that was caring, respectful, and collaborative.

Having run the course just once, we set up a collaborative research project to assess our pedagogic approach. Our research questions were:

1. How might relations of trust and vulnerability be intentionally fostered in a decolonial postgraduate pedagogy?
2. What are the pedagogic implications of this approach?

To address the first question, we began with ourselves by building a relationship of trust between us as co-teachers of the course. To do this we engaged with collaborative autoethnography (Adams et al., 2017; Chang et al., 2013). Through self-reflection, we turned the focus onto our personal thoughts and actions which we captured by each keeping a journal throughout the course. In this way, as two colleagues who had not worked together before, we made visible (Chang et al., 2013) how we built a relationship of mutual trust. We valued the affordance of collaborative autoethnography as a method for analysing ourselves and delving into our personal thoughts and feelings.

To answer the research questions in relation to our pedagogy, we used qualitative methods to gather data and thematic analysis to analyse it. Data was collected from seminar recordings and transcriptions, student assignments and reflections, course evaluations, interviews with selected students, and our own self-reflections written during and after the course. In analysing the data, we focused on pedagogic and relational processes as opposed to assessing the outcomes or impact of the course. We set out intentionally to capture student engagement with the decolonial content of the course and our own and students' expressions of trust, vulnerability, and affect throughout the process.

The paper is structured as follows: first we disclose our positionality as the two authors and share extracts from our journal entries on how we dealt with this. Second, we summarise the literature that informed our approach to teaching the course. We found that the established theories on agency that we had intended to draw on at the outset did not fully capture the processes of engagement and affect that emerged during interactions about the course, so, we deliberately sought out literature on decolonial pedagogy and on pedagogies of trust, recognition, vulnerability, and affect that proved to be better aligned with our data. Third, we outline our methodological approach drawing on the concept of praxis in critical pedagogy, Fourth, to address the first research question above, we report on our data analysis which we present under the themes that emerged from the data. Finally, in the concluding section, we address the second research question by pointing tentatively at some of the pedagogic implications of our approach for decolonial pedagogies.

Positionality

We are both South African women—a mid-career black academic and a retired white professor emerita appointed as honorary research professor. The unequal power relations structured into our institutional positions are compounded by our context in a not-yet-post-colonial country in which the legacies of colonialism and apartheid mean that race relations, in particular, remain unresolved as a point of tension, complexity, and sensitivity in South African society. Below we share some reflections captured in our respective journal entries on how we hoped to manage our different social and institutional positions and the unequal power relations this entailed. Collaborative autoethnography allowed us to capture, from a cultural perspective, how we shared aspects of our life experiences as we made sense of the complexities, internally, for ourselves (Coia & Taylor, 2009) through journal writing.

Furthermore, our political and feminist commitments led us to reveal the interpersonal and emotional dimensions of our collaboration.

We were mere acquaintances before co-teaching, but by the end of the course we felt at ease with one another; it was as if we knew each other well. At our first face-to-face encounter, which we had arranged as a course planning meeting, we spent the whole afternoon moving into the evening sharing stories about our lives, backgrounds, and histories over a meal. Below we share extracts[1] from our journals on our reflections about our first encounter.

> *Kathy*: After our first meeting I remember thinking that we had completely failed to achieve what we had set out to do (plan the course). On the other hand, it was a great experience sharing our stories. I felt energised and enthused about working with Mandz.

> *Mandz*: In 2023, I committed to my year of taking up space. As someone whose default setting is 'don't rock the boat', it was not an easy stance to take. I am far more comfortable at being the supportive act in professional (as well as personal) settings. The new HES programme was the perfect opportunity to force myself to take up space in research related activities . . . Teaching was not the challenge for me, I knew I could handle that. The real challenge was teaching a research module; I don't have confidence or sufficient credibility in research, that is not my strong suit. So, knowing I would be co-teaching with Kathy Luckett (*I add her surname here because of the weight her name carries in our field*) felt reassuring. She has credibility and has earned her rightful place of high regard in the academic community in our field. I was delighted (but daunted) that I would be working with Kathy (*dropping her surname to indicate how I began to see her as human first and not just a research powerhouse*). This daunting feeling completely dissipated after our first official planning meeting. It felt intuitive that we began our meeting by offering each other glimpses into our personal lives - who we are, what matters to us, what makes us laugh, what pisses us off, how we grew up. . . . I value the practice of 'breaking bread' with someone I am going to work with. This act of sharing a meal shifts the engagement to a personal exchange. Simple requests and offers made during the meal build trust and translate into collaboration. Although Kathy and I had mutual colleagues and friends, we didn't know each other prior to that meal. Sharing that meal gave me a strong sense that we genuinely valued what each of us would bring to the collaboration. I felt reassured that we would complement and learn from each other. The pressure of measuring up to Kathy's reputation eased. I felt that when it was my turn to lead, I could own that responsibility fully without overthinking and allowing my insecurities get in the way.

> *Kathy*: On looking back at our first meeting, I realise that I wanted to share bits of my anti-apartheid struggle story with Mandz because I wanted to prove to her (as a black South African) that I am not a regular white South African. I was at pains to dissociate myself from my white settler identity related to my insecurities about

1 These journal entries have not been edited in the interests of authenticity.

> belonging neither to the white nor to indigenous/black South African communities nor to the English society of my ancestors. Nuttall (2001) captures this personal angst when she describes how for many anti-apartheid activists their political commitment resulted in a split identity, "whites on the Left try to separate themselves from the culture of repressive whiteness and in so doing make their whiteness apparent" (Nuttall, 2001, p. 121). As we discussed the #RMF and #FMF protests of 2015–2017, I shared how the students' critique of the ED programme I headed up at the time and their labelling of me as 'white'—despite my struggle history—was painful and hard to bear; and that it humiliating to have the belief overturned (by a new generation of black South Africans) that my anti-apartheid activism had 'earned' me a certain legitimacy and right to belong to the new SA. Since then, I have acknowledged more fully my complicity with white privilege and come to understand that my right to belong here must be given by black people and cannot be assumed. This is why it felt important to feel invited by Mandz to work with her on the course. I wanted her to take the lead and to be the 'face' of the course to the students. During the course she took on this role quite naturally with superb facilitation skills. She was generous in creating a place for me alongside her in front of the students. . . Looking back, I feel embarrassed that I foregrounded my 'white insecurities' at our first meeting and think how gracious Mandz was to hear me out.

Having taught the course, we again shared with each other our personal reflections captured in our journal entries.

> *Mandz*: There was no question that professionally the knowledge and experience gap between us was in the room. The question is 'Did we fall into the trap of weaponising it or did we don it around our shoulders as a liberating cape?' In the feedback, we discovered that students were surprised to learn that we had never worked together before. For me this was evidence that confirmed my experience that we wore that cape and refused to weaponise our differences.

> *Kathy*: I felt truly grateful when reading the student feedback; I realised that none of this would have been possible without our collaboration.

We have shared these journal entries at some length to illustrate the affective labour that we put into building a relationship of trust between us, despite our unequal social and institutional positions. Some unanticipated comments in the student feedback after the course confirmed that some students recognised this. Referring to our working relationship, students commented that we worked in "lovely ways" with each other and the students, that "we put people at ease", and one "was shocked to hear that Mandz and Kathy have never worked together—a truly dynamic duo."

Theories of pedagogy

In this section we outline the theories and concepts that informed our pedagogy as we developed and changed our approach. As explained in the introduction, we were cognisant of

the political context in which we were teaching. We understood that South African universities are still coming to grips with the call made during the student protests (2015–2017) to decolonise institutional cultures, practices, and curricula. We were committed to being responsive to this decolonial call by expanding the canon of higher education studies and decentring its Eurocentric bias, but we wanted to do so in ways that enhanced students' criticality and reflexivity. It was for this reason that we offered two sets of readings for each seminar—established readings and more radical, (often decolonial) readings—that would knock against each other and unsettle the assumptions made in the opposing set. We wanted to show students the power of social theory to explain complex phenomena, but we also wanted them to apply it to their own histories, experiences, institutions, and research projects. We believed in the possibility of generating critical conversations about the contestations in the readings (McArthur, 2022).

Theories of student agency

When we set out to design the course, our thinking was informed by familiar theories of student agency and self-formation through their engagement with knowledge (Archer, 2003; Biesta, 2009; Marginson, 2023). Central to these notions of self-formation is that it is students themselves who are agents of their own formation and transformation.

> In student self-formation, teaching, the curriculum, and the institution, all contribute by conditioning the process, but the heavy lifting is done by students themselves. (Marginson, 2023, p. 5)

Lee (2024) proposed that it is the teacher-student relationship that mediates how students will engage with knowledge; teachers provide and create the relational and contextual conditions for students to engage (or not) in their projects of self-formation. Engagement with knowledge works as a key mechanism of self-formation in which students develop the capacity to view and critique their subjective selves objectively.

Our understanding of the exercise of agency and reflexivity was also informed by Archer's theorisation of the internal conversation (Archer, 2003, 2012). For this theorist, agents make sense of themselves and their pre-structured worlds consciously through their internal conversations as they take action to realise their concerns and projects—in particular situational logics. Archer's early work is often understood to focus on the achievement of individual autonomy[2] at the expense of recognising the significance of collective agency. In this regard, McArthur's (2021) application of Axel Honneth's theorisation of recognition to the problem of inclusion in higher education is helpful. According to McArthur, Honneth emphasised that because we are social beings, self-realisation is intersubjective, and recognition is mutual. For Honneth, realising justice involves valuing both individual autonomy and cooperation with others. Honneth's expanded theory of recognition has three aspects: love recognition (caring relationships); respect recognition (honouring universal rights); and esteem recognition (opportunities for achievement) (McArthur, 2021, p. 11).

2 This was modified in her later work with Donati on the emergence of relational reflexivity (see Donati, P., and Archer, M. (2015). The relational subject. Cambridge University Press).

These theorisations of self-formation, agency, recognition, and reflexivity through engagement with knowledge and life projects were key to informing our approach to the design of the course.[3] McArthur's work on Honneth's notion of recognition and her own on inclusion (2021) helped us to expand individualistic notions of self-formation, agency, and reflexivity such that we hoped the course would offer a collective learning arena in which all would feel free to participate.

However, as we began to teach the course, we realised that our initial assumptions about students' exercise of agency did not hold for all students in the group. We realised that much of the theory on student agency generated in northern, metropolitan contexts tends to underestimate the extent to which the exercise of agency when one is engaging with theoretical knowledge depends on the availability of certain economic, cultural, and social resources. The fact that people in the Global South (most of our students) bring different but unrecognised epistemic, cultural, and linguistic resources and often lack the economic resources assumed by globally recognised theorists, can lead to a severe misrecognition of who they are, and, in this way, constrain their agency. Furthermore, the emotional toll borne by those positioned as different or deficient is seldom accounted for. For these reasons, without relinquishing the importance of critical engagement with knowledge, we came to recognise the limitations of our initial adoption of an overly rationalistic, individualistic, and Eurocentric approach to our pedagogy (by one of us in particular). At this point, we agreed to extend our understanding of teaching and learning as a process that is also embodied, collective, socio-political, and involving of emotions and values (Danvers, 2018). As we developed a more holistic and decolonial understanding of pedagogy, we endeavoured to make the course a truly communal one in which students would feel safe enough to share their feelings, experiences, and internal conversations.

Decolonial pedagogy

Despite the widespread apparent adherence to decolonising the curriculum and pedagogy in South Africa, the practical implications of this call have proved challenging and must still be worked through via different pedagogic approaches in different disciplines and fields (Hlatshwayo & Alexander, 2021). This is taken up by Fataar (2024) who noted,

> Rather than getting stuck in debates over definitions and theoretical posturing, the focus should shift toward how decoloniality can shape pedagogy, teaching, and curriculum design in universities and schools. (p. 1)

And characterised decolonial pedagogy as

> moving away from the universalist claims of Western-centric knowledge while maintaining the possibility of a universal humanism grounded in respect for

3 We are aware of the literature on students-as-partners and curriculum co-creation (Bovill, 2019) and we want to point out that our course was not co-created with our students. Rather, we worked in partnership with each other and then with the students insofar as we handed over the formal teaching space to them, allowing their understandings and concerns to take centre stage.

> difference and the dignity of all cultures. It builds knowledge rooted in the specific experiences of the colonised as a basis for broader struggles for justice. (p. 2)

Fataar's characterisation is expanded by Hlatshwayo and Alexander (2021), who advocated a decolonising pedagogy that decentres Eurocentric knowledge, addresses power imbalances, and works towards epistemic and social justice that deliberately includes legitimatising indigenous knowledge. In similar vein and based on a wide-ranging literature survey on decolonising the curriculum and pedagogy, Shahjahan et al. (2022) summarised their findings as follows:

> First, decolonizing was actualized by regularly critiquing and probing the positionality of knowledge in educational spaces. Second, decolonizing entailed constructing an inclusive curriculum beyond dominant knowledge systems. Third, decolonizing environments fostered relational teaching and learning. Finally, connecting higher education institutions, community, and sociopolitical movements was a critical area of actualizing decolonization inside/outside higher education. (p. 86)

Clearly, ours was a very modest attempt at working out a decolonising pedagogy. While we made a small start in addressing the first three dimensions set out by Shahjahan et al. (2022), our focus in this paper is on the third, namely, relational teaching and learning, while we did not begin to address the fourth dimension regarding the legitimation and inclusion of indigenous knowledge and practices in the curriculum. According to the classification of approaches to decolonising higher education (Andreotti et al. 2015), our attempt would sit somewhere between what they term soft reform (an additive approach that supplements existing Eurocentric curricula with non-western perspectives) and radical reform (rejection of colonising norms and worldviews and the empowerment of marginalised groups). We were constrained by the context in which we were working; this was just one course in an established PhD programme at a historically white university, and this meant that our capacity to engender radical reform was limited.

Shahjahan et al. (2022) concluded their review by noting the omission in the literature on the affective challenges entailed in engaging with decolonial pedagogy. We hope that, despite its limitations, a report on research conducted on one small online course, in a context still largely dominated by Eurocentric perspectives (soft reform), our focus on acknowledging and welcoming affect into the learning process might serve as a small example of how the affective and relational dimensions of a decolonising pedagogy might be addressed.

Attending to affect

Our decision to adopt a more holistic approach to pedagogy was informed by work on higher education and affect. Zembylas (2022) re-theorised critical thinking and reflexivity by drawing on feminist politics of emotion (see Ahmed, 2004). Zembylas argued that critical thinking is "an affective, embodied and material practice with important social, political and pedagogical implications" (p. 6). In a recent publication focused on working for

decolonisation, Mikulan and Zembylas (2024) noted that to counter the legacies of colonialism, one needs to recognise and work with the emotional histories of the past that continue to impact social relations in the present.

Similarly, but writing in the context of disability studies, Ferrie and Greenwood (2023) emphasised the importance of attending to students' experience and affect.

> Within post-graduate study, there has been an increase in the social sciences of students studying injustices they have personal experience of and seeing their research careers as a route to challenge injustice and this is impacting on their wellbeing. . . Why must we hide our anger and frustration at injustice we have evidence of because we also have lived with the injustice? (p. 12)

As a first step in practising our revised pedagogic approach, we learned to be vulnerable and honest with each other. As illustrated above, this included sharing aspects of our own emotional histories and how these linger and cause inner misgivings and conflicts. We believe this mutual sharing of our vulnerabilities laid a foundation on which we built sufficient trust, care, and respect for each other to carry us through the teaching process. Second, we had to learn to take risks and be vulnerable along with our students. Instead of speaking with authoritative voices, we chose to share our stories through self-disclosure about our difficulties and inner anxieties. For example, we discussed how, as a Black female academic, Mandz is hyper visible; there is an inherent vulnerability to being seen as an embodiment of diversity. Ahmed (2009) argued that where the dominance of whiteness is prevalent, the presence of Black female academics is celebrated as symbolic of the institution's commitment to transformation. Our choice to embrace vulnerability as teachers made it safer for students, but it meant that Mandz ran the risk of perpetuating the discourse on Black women's inadequacies. She felt anxious that sharing her challenges with the students might undermine her contribution and legitimacy as an academic. There were also implications for Kathy in teaching decolonial texts as a white person. She had to acknowledge the role that colonial structures and white privilege (had) played in promoting her apparent success and competence as a senior academic. This is captured well here:

> If we do not teach in ways that encourage personal, courageous reflexivity, especially around the role of white privilege, the risk is that decolonisation will take place at an intellectual level alone, if at all. (Christodoulidi, 2023, p. 6)

Our reflections and commentary on our findings below suggest that the willingness to be vulnerable encouraged students not only to share their lived experiences and their concerns for social justice, but also their feelings of having been (and being) hurt and harmed.

Methodological approach

Pedagogy as an ethical praxis

Our pedagogy was underpinned by the concept of praxis as developed in critical pedagogies following Paulo Freire. We understood this to mean that through dialogue about the readings and engagement with students' lived experiences in the world, together we would forge a more critical reading of the world that could lead, at least potentially, to social transformation (Freire, 1970/1996). More particularly, we drew on Gibbs et al. (2004) who emphasised an existentialist reading of a pedagogy of praxis for higher education teaching. They stressed the importance of building a learning community in which students partner with academics in exploring knowledge. Furthermore, they emphasised this as a "personal and a moral endeavour" (p. 183), in which trust forms the ethical basis for building this community that "needs respectful individuals who trust each other as one in humanity to make it work." (p. 185). Our reflections on our positionality recounted above suggest that, first, we had to build this trust between ourselves as a precondition for enacting it in the classroom. Then we set out to build a trustworthy learning community in which all would feel sufficiently at home to be authentic and risk sharing (what we go on to call) their thinking-feeling meanings about their lives and work. Our decision to step back and let pairs of students run the seminars and in-class discussions was a key move that helped honour the dialogic nature of a pedagogy of praxis.

From the start we committed to using a dialectical approach to reflect on our pedagogical choices through honest sharing of our teaching experiences. We were aware that this would require investing time in communicating openly as we discovered our "authentic selves" and hoped to let go of our "well-managed persona" and roles (Chang et al., 2013, p. 57). So, from the start, we committed to spending thirty minutes with each other after each seminar to reflect on the session (our pedagogic practice) and thereafter through email and WhatsApp. Based on these reflections, we adjusted our methods and materials as the course proceeded, often in response to advice or comments from the students. For example, we learned to facilitate break-out room conversations prior to the plenary discussions. This dialogic collaboration brought us fresh questions and insights (see Chang et al., 2013) as we attempted to follow the advice of Sawyer and Norris (2009) for researchers engaged in duo-ethnography to "take the time to talk about how (they want) to work together" (p. 136). Although we chose to be equal collaborators, it was difficult to erase the power dynamics between us. This entailed being honest and owning up to our feelings.

> Pedagogical practice as "feeling-thinking" praxis in higher education needs to be enabled by cultural discursive arrangements in universities, where academics are not afraid to speak and write about the feelings connected to their thoughts and actions, [since] feelings can empower university community members towards solidarity. (Santos & Soler, 2023, p. 1361)

In terms of methods to research our pedagogy as an ethical praxis, as discussed above, we drew on autoethnography to research ourselves. We complemented this with a thematic

qualitative analysis of the course data. Our data sources were recordings and transcriptions of the five seminars of 90 minutes each. These involved two presentations by two pairs of students, followed by discussion in break-out rooms and then by plenary sessions. To this data set was added student assignments and reflections, voluntary interviews with some of the students, course evaluations, and our final self-reflections.

We first immersed ourselves in this data and generated four themes that emerged from it. The themes were: student engagement and participation on the course; trust and affect, including expressions of anxiety, (un)belonging and vulnerability; working authentically and reflexively with decolonial texts; and the risks and challenges that students expressed.

Formally, this research project was covered by a blanket ethics approval for the HES doctoral programme, obtained from the university's Education Faculty Ethics Committee by the coordinator of the programme. Given that it was run as a pilot in 2023, the rationale was that research on the programme could offer supervisors and convenors insights into doctoral education that might improve the programme and enhance the experiences of doctoral candidates. A condition stipulated in the consent form was to provide students with anonymity as well as to encourage participants to discuss their experiences freely. The course evaluation was set up to provide us with anonymised data, so in reporting data from the voluntary interviews we used pseudonyms.

Reflections and commentary on the data

Encouraging students to participate and exercise their agency towards self-formation

In the first seminar we explained how we intended to run the course, emphasising that we wanted students to develop a sense of ownership of it. To encourage participation, we asked students to present the seminars in pairs. Before each seminar, they self-selected to present one pair for Group A readings and the other pair for Group B readings. Students were encouraged to present their own readings in addition to those prescribed in the reading lists. Seminars were run fortnightly and in the intervening weeks we met with each pair of presenters for a tutorial-cum-coaching session to ensure that they were ready and confident to present at the next seminar.

The effect of handing over the seminar presentations to pairs of students not only shifted power relations and positioned us as co-learners, but allowed students to share their wisdom, experiences, and opinions. Requiring students to lead the seminars provided them with structured opportunities for engagement. We were aware of the level of vulnerability that could be involved for students stepping into peer teacher mode. Interview data showed that students experienced the tutorials as having been supportive as well as challenging. One student[4] valued the "structured, facilitated support that facilitates (our) ambitions." In the evaluation one student stated that the tutorials provided an opportunity "to ask questions and

4 These transcripts have not been edited.

get insight into how experienced researchers deal with theory." Another elaborated in more detail, "Data from the course evaluations indicates that students appreciated the opportunity to co-teach." Comments included:

> Facilitating seminars was what really cemented my understanding of the theory.
>
> It was great working closely with a colleague trying to unpack (the reading) for the presentation.
>
> I loved seeing colleagues' presentations. . . I loved the small group discussions!
>
> This was one of the best theory modules I have done. The participation was really great!

Building relationships of belonging, vulnerability, and trustworthiness with students

Our stepping down from the role of expert or authoritative knowers was crucial for allowing us to be more authentic, open, and honest. At one point, a seminar transcript has Mandz stating,

> It's not like I have an answer. I'm genuinely having a question. So let me hear if anybody else has an answer to this question.

In response to a question about recovering Afrocentric knowledge, Kathy admitted,

> I don't think it's actually for me to answer these questions . . . I feel ill-equipped to find the answers. Of course, I think about them, but the answers are going to come from you, the next generation.

The engagement and participation of students was enhanced as we shared our own uncertainties and stories. This was endorsed by this student interviewee who said,

> In your classroom, there was an invitation to be yourself. . . Also, we could tell that you embraced your own selves in that space. And so, I trusted that when you guys say, 'speak your mind', or when you tell me that 'it's fine to say what I need to say', I could.

As noted above, this approach to teaching politically or emotionally charged topics through a pedagogy of vulnerability is advocated by Christodoulidi (2023). She asked, "How can students dare ask bold, often uncomfortable questions or voice the reality of their own experience when being taught by educators who do not model such risk-taking themselves?" (p. 3).

We were aware that many students in the class would have grown up in disadvantaged (poor) schools and/or homes and even if economically secure, they would have experienced racial (and in many cases gendered) oppression. In Seminar 2 during a discussion on the Zembylas

(2022) reading on the importance of considering affect in higher education, students related the reading to their own experiences. One student commented,

> It deals with the conflict that is happening within the higher education space where you'll find students who are coming from historically poor backgrounds in institutions with high rankings.

Another responded,

> I've seen this happen, where there seems a weird sort of disconnect between content and the way a lecturer acts. I'll give an example of a lecturer who's teaching about inequality and structural violence, but then, kind of enforces his power over the students. So, he's not connecting what he's teaching with the way he is in the classroom.

When wrapping-up, Mandz agreed with these comments, noting that while ethics clearance procedures are intended to protect research participants from harm, there is no equivalent procedure to protect students from being harmed by the lecturers who teach them. She noted,

> Without guidance, without policies, without any kind of structure or training, they (academics) are let loose in a classroom to traumatise, to re-traumatise students.

Another student spoke more generally about the politics of emotion on South African campuses in saying,

> I guess in South Africa, a narrative that has come out . . . parallel to the one about the rainbow nation, that we are an unhealed population, a nation where historical trauma is something that has remained unresolved . . . what we are dealing with is a kind of intergenerational trauma, and . . . then how are those emotions claimed . . . and bringing that into the classroom.

These interactions suggest that by treating students as partners in the quest for what we thought of as decolonial truths, we began to build what Gibbs et al. (2004) thought of as a trustworthy learning community in which all felt sufficiently at home to be authentic and risk sharing personal thinking-feeling meanings about our lives and work.

> Through existential trust, a dialectic can develop that facilitates our creative engagement in the process of becoming with others. Interpersonal trust based on compassion and competent judgements of others can unshackle the self from the imagined security of its inauthentic identity as a role player. (Gibbs et al., 2004, p. 187)

Students' comments gathered from their reflections suggest that most students felt able to risk sharing their thinking-feeling in the course:

> There was just so much knowledge and consideration brought to the space. I felt challenged and safe!
>
> I liked the humour and humility in unpacking tough theories and answering questions.
>
> The readings were fantastic. Some of what I read during this module feels significant and important for my life. Like they have already started to influence the types of questions I'm asking in the real world and beyond just this PhD.

Zembylas (2022) argued that paying attention to "the entanglement of affect and thought, feeling and thinking" highlights "reflexivity's relational character and its inherent emotionality" (p. 10). This leads on to the next data-generated theme on working reflexively with decolonial texts.

Working authentically and reflexively with decolonial texts

The counter-hegemonic texts in the Group B reading list included some on decolonial theory. Given how topical this is currently on South Africa campuses, there was enthusiastic and deep engagement with these readings. From our side, we hoped to use these readings to counter the "colonial master narrative of progress and enlightenment [through a] relational practice of entangled histories" (Gravett et al., 2021, p. 7). In the seminar discussions, many students did demonstrate high levels of reflexivity as well as express their feelings about the ongoing effects of coloniality on their lives. One commented,

> I feel that deconstruction is the first step, let's just deconstruct what we already have . . . and look at it properly, historically . . . and understand why things are as they are. And then we can start thinking about how they could be otherwise.

Another responded,

> It's also a situation of who to blame. On the one hand, (authors) will blame the Eurocentric knowledge that has dominated our institutions and disciplines. But another scholar says we are implicated in our own colonization . . . we are complicit in how we reproduce the very same things. . . To what degree are we willing to turn a critical lens on ourselves?

This student also presented a nuanced view of the decolonisation project in saying,

> We're tired of the current model, the present academic model with its origins in Europe . . . we want to be open to epistemic diversity. . . But there is complexity, everybody! According to Mbembe. . . the discourse of Africanisation has mostly performed an ideological task which has masked the neoliberal restructuring of higher education.

This student challenged the class by saying,

> What I want to know is where you end up landing, personally as a scholar around decolonial theory? . . . In my reading is there is a strong push for pluralism, there should be contextually derived theory as well as hyper-reflexivity. . . I'm interested in what decolonisation means for each of you. . . How far are you willing to go, to push yourself, as an academic, as an educator. . . to decolonise?

This student, challenged by the Stein et al. (2020) paper on "[g]esturing towards decolonial futures. . ." suggested that we had not reckoned with the full cost of a decolonial praxis.

> Unravelling coloniality requires time, effort and disinvestment from modernity. . . our fears and desires force us to hold onto the house of modernity. . . this affects how we deal with decolonisation.

In discussing political engagement as a form of critique, Zemblyas (2022) emphasised the importance of

> developing a supportive emotional atmosphere and a trusting, open relationship in the university classroom that allows students to reflect critically on their emotions. . . while recognizing and examining others' feelings, perspectives and interpretations. (p. 11)

Similarly, when discussing the challenges of teaching a decolonial curriculum, Shahjahan et al. (2022) asked how pedagogues might "hold affect related to engaging with questions of healing, pain, and trauma (that) manifest as we engage in decolonial curriculum and pedagogy?" (p. 101). We believe we were beginning to engage with affect in our course. But what contributed significantly to this possibility was the presence and vulnerability of a black female academic, such as Mandz, with whom students felt a shared identity, background, and history.

Risks and challenges

The responses to our course were not all positive. For a small minority, there was not a good match between the course content, our pedagogic approach, and their identities, disciplines, and research projects. Students working in the natural sciences, applied sciences, mathematics, and technology found the content of the course difficult to engage with and apply to their projects. For example, one wrote,

> I enjoyed the course and interacting with everyone but I'm not sure the module has helped me in a very direct way to write this section of my proposal.

Another stated,

> I would have found it useful to have fewer readings and to do something different with them. How theoretical frameworks do the work they do in empirical studies. . . would have been (more) useful.

After reading the paper by Gordon (2014) on “Disciplinary Decadence”, this student noted our failure to attend to decolonising research methods and noted that,

> We spent a great deal of time critiquing the production of knowledge, we did not spend equal time critiquing methods and norms that contribute to disciplinary decadence.

Another, who did not enjoy the teamwork, stated,

> My experience working with a co-student was challenging in terms of effort and having (a) different work ethos.

A few found the process too demanding. One student said,

> What a scary proposition. . . for me the presentation was difficult as I did not adequately understand the theory I was presenting.

One student noted the risks entailed in working with affect in the classroom and observed,

> You know, if we are going to look into bringing affects into learning spaces, then we must ask what kinds of procedural things do we have to have in place when it comes to this like referral debriefing? Forty-five minutes in a lecture is not enough time to hold space, for difficult emotions, especially if trauma and so on comes through without anyone ever anticipating it.

Two students thought the course did not go far enough in addressing decolonial challenges. One noted our omission of spirituality as an important dimension of decolonising knowledge and noted,

> I want to critique theories and research that omit a spiritual perspective. I want to read and write and research with my heart as well as my head.

Another pointed to our failure to challenge the hegemony of English, in commenting,

> Decolonisation is saying we should not just see one language but also think about indigenous people, their values, and their everyday lives and also their languages. . . the curriculum should be inclusive of their languages.

The salience of these comments suggests the need for on-going pedagogic praxis and further research on how to implement a decolonial pedagogy.

Reflections on the pedagogic implications of our attempt to realise relational and ethical decolonial praxis

In this paper, we seek to make a modest contribution to the challenge of working out a decolonial pedagogy by focusing on pedagogic relations. We were working in the constrained

context of a small online doctoral course run just once in a historically white South African university. Thus, while we cannot make any generalisable claims, we hope that this paper gestures towards ways of dealing with the decolonial challenge from a pedagogic and relational perspective. Our experience illustrates that teaching decolonial content involves a relational process. First, we built a relationship of trust between ourselves as teachers. This enabled us to create a pedagogic space in which we focused on building relations of belonging, vulnerability, and trustworthiness with the students. We believe that this enabled most students to feel sufficiently recognised and affirmed to participate actively in the course. This approach meant that to some extent we achieved our goal of working authentically and reflexively on decolonial texts with the students. Our data points to the importance of auto-critique, power-sharing, and being vulnerable in a decolonial teaching praxis. We have stressed the significance of affirming students' identities, lived experiences, and concern for social justice. But perhaps our most significant learning is the importance of building a trustworthy community that allows one to attend to affect—to the emotions of anger, hurt, and shame that teaching decolonial material surfaces, especially in a context still shaped by settler colonialism.

There were severe limitations to both the design of the course and this research study. First, the course was only one of six on a year-long HES programme designed to prepare doctoral candidates to conduct research and complete their PhD proposals. The short-term feedback on one course cannot capture the long-term challenges students may face when collecting and analysing data using their chosen theoretical frameworks for their doctoral projects. The full impact of this course and programme on students' doctoral journeys will become evident only later, once they have navigated the complexities of doctoral research. Furthermore, this study does not take into account the high attrition rate characteristic of doctoral programmes (Idahosa & Mkhize, 2021; Van Lill, 2019). Some pre-doctoral students on the course may not even advance to PhD registration, while others, although registered, may discontinue their studies. Thus, to get a proper sense of the impact of this and other courses on this HES programme, it would be important to interview cohorts of students, two or three years after their completion of the coursework, to elicit their retrospective opinions on its effectiveness. This would best be done through conducting longitudinal tracking of the students during and after their doctoral work and conducting a full impact study on the programme in about five years from now.

Given the limitations of this project, we could not engage with wider and more pressing challenges related to decolonisation in universities such as the imposition of market values on knowledge production and neo-liberal governance models (Waghid, 2021), the structural resistance of the institutional curriculum (Lange, 2019), institutional hierarchies and power dynamics, funding pressure, staffing policies (Morreira, 2017), appropriate pedagogies for large classes at undergraduate level, and the impact of working in different disciplinary contexts and epistemic communities. In their review of the literature on decolonial pedagogy, Shahjahan et al. (2022) noted that the "challenges of decolonizing pedagogy and curriculum varied depending on the context (i.e., ranging from disciplines, programmes, institutional type, local/national contexts, and positionality of instructors and students" (p. 99). This

confirms the context-specificity and limited replicability of the findings reported here. In addition, we suspect that our attempt at realising a decolonising pedagogy was facilitated by that fact that there were fewer than 20 postgraduate students on the course, that we had the luxury of having two lecturers to co-teach it, and that the assessment was not high stakes but fed into students' PhD proposal development.

We conclude with extracts from the journal reflections we shared with each other after teaching the course.

> *Mandz*: Having had previous experiences of collaborative teaching with colleagues I knew well, I had found those experiences to be varied. Initially, my instinct was to be guarded and focus on proving my legitimacy as a suitable choice to teach the theory module and 'deliver' the content. Had I followed this approach, I would have missed the opportunity to build trust and share stories with Kathy and our students. By embracing this perspective, I shifted my focus from being anxious about delivering content to fostering an environment of trust, openness and vulnerability. This allowed us to build a meaningful and productive partnership, enhancing our teaching experience and the students' teaching-learning experiences too.

> *Kathy*: The most significant thing I learnt from our collaborative experiment in teaching decolonial theory was the importance of building relationships. Hitherto my tendency in teaching has been to focus on ensuring that students grasp the content; I take trouble to explain it well and then assess their learning through informal and formal assessment. This experience was different. We put energy into building our relationship and somehow, the goodwill and trust we shared generated an emergent energy and trust in the classroom went way beyond my expectations. This was significant, for teaching decolonial material that can surface emotions of hurt, anger and shame. I think these emotions were expressed and held in the space we created. But I certainly could not have done it on my own. Mandz has a way of making students feel at home and safe to share their feelings. Some students really came to life, they claimed the space, energised each other and initiated discussions that were raw and deep. It meant a lot to me to be part of that space.

Our findings and reflections on our pedagogic experiment reported here are certainly not new. They confirm the significance of recognising and welcoming feelings and affect into the teaching space when teaching politically and axiologically charged content. We learned together how being open, honest, and vulnerable with each other and then with the students built sufficient trust to allow this to happen.

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Declaration of interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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