

Shared Humanity Course: How do I find my space and place in a changing world?

The Shared Humanity course consists of seven sessions taught by various lecturers from different faculties at SU (see Table 1). The Khampepe Report that was commissioned by Judge Sisi Khampepe (2022) in reaction to a racist incident on the SU campus suggests that the current Shared Humanity co-curriculum course should become compulsory for all students. In reaction to the report, workstreams were established to implement the suggestions. Some of the workstreams are Institutional culture; Student experiences; Race, human categorisation and science; Structures, policies, regulations and transformation; and Curriculum offerings embedded in the process of teaching and learning renewal.

Table 1: Shared Humanity course outline

SESSIONS	DISCIPLINE	SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS	CRITICAL QUESTION
Introduction	Anthropology	Prof. Jess Auerbach	Is it possible for people to change?
Session 1	Education	Prof. Jonathan Stephanus Coetzee	How is racism learnt and unlearnt?
Session 2	Science and Technology	Dr Mpho Tshivhase	For who do chatbots pose a threat?
Session 3	Engineering	Prof. Wikus van Niekerk	Why exactly can South Africa not produce enough electricity for its citizens?
Session 4	Health Sciences	Prof. Tulio de Oliveira	Will climate change fuel the next pandemics?
Session 5	Visual Arts	Prof. Elmarie Costandius	How do I find my space and place in a changing world?
Session 6	Law	Prof. Thuli Madonsela	Is the law a reliable instrument for the delivery of social justice?
Session 7	Economics	Mr Lorenzo Davids	What explains the rise in homelessness in urban settings?

Session 5 is the Visual Arts session (see Table 2), in which we have been experimenting with embodied learning for the last three years. The Visual Arts session consists of six parts: knowledge, values, social structures, resilience, cultural sensitivity, and design thinking and diffraction. With each of the parts I invited a speaker, but also very importantly, included embodied practice such as working with clay and mixing skin colour with spices (see Figure 1). The students engage with the six concepts individually, but thereafter also engage in collaborative workshops where they paint, draw with light or record sounds when walking in different directions from the Rooiplein (see Figure 2). The sound practice encourages students to notice how sounds change depending on where you are in the town of Stellenbosch, which is still mainly a segregated town because of the laws that were implemented during the colonial and apartheid eras. The senses are involved and often also challenged, which enable more affective body–mind entanglements (Massumi, 2015).

Table 2: Visual Arts, session 5 outline 2023

DATE	CONCEPTS	DURATION	PRESENTATIONS	VENUE	PRACTICES
Wednesday, 19 July 2023	1. Knowledge Knowledge production, whose knowledge, who speaks, Indigenous knowledge, decolonising knowledge, Land acknowledgement	30–60 minutes	Prof. George Sefa Dei	SUNLearn (online) and Padlet	Grounding ourselves practice linked with theme, Prof. Elmarie Costandius
Thursday, 20 July 2023	2. Values Respect, empathy and tolerance	30–60 minutes	Prof. Nico Koopman	SUNLearn (online) and Padlet	Blind drawing practice linked with theme, Prof. Elmarie Costandius
Friday, 21 July 2023	3. Social structures Hegemony, hierarchy and equality	30–60 minutes	Prof. Aslam Fataar	SUNLearn (online) and Padlet	Clay exercise practice linked with theme, Prof. Elmarie Costandius
Monday, 24 July 2023	4. Resilience Social cohesion, self-efficacy, self-esteem, optimism, cognitive reappraisal, active coping and mindfulness	30–60 minutes	Prof. Ashraf Kagee	SUNLearn (online) and Padlet	Mindfulness practice linked with theme, Prof. Elmarie Costandius
Tuesday, 25 July 2023	5. Cultural sensitivity Stereotyping, diversity, bias, shame, social identities	30–60 minutes	Ms Qaqamba Mdaka and Dr Jill Ryan	SUNLearn (online) and Padlet	Tasting and mixing spices practice linked with theme, Prof. Elmarie Costandius
Wednesday, 26 July 2023	6. Design thinking and diffraction Binary opposition thinking	30–60 minutes	Prof. Vivienne Bozalek	SUNLearn (online) and Padlet	Diffraction reflexivity, Prof. Elmarie Costandius



Figure 1: Examples of clay and spice practices



Figure 2: Examples of painting of values, light and sound workshops

After the embodied learning workshops, students were asked, “Which session developed your critical thinking capabilities?” Examples of the students’ feedback is provided below:

The Session 5 [Visual Arts] workshops had the greatest impact on me because it was the most engaging session with in-person workshops and activities that encouraged creative critical thinking and idea generation. It was very enlightening and has introduced me to a new way of critical thinking and solution development.

I’ve come to realise that values have always seemed quite abstract to me and I find myself struggling to list values, not being sure what is considered valuable, but with these practices and reflections I have come to understand the term much deeper.

I found that I looked forward to the sessions [Visual Arts] more so than in the previous modules. I loved to learn about different concepts and reflecting on what was said and how I could apply that to my practical life. I consider myself a sensitive, open-minded and tolerant person and I enjoyed the sessions on cultural sensitivity and social structures. In studying medicine, it is not often that one is faced with reflecting on your own attitudes and cultural sensitivities. I enjoyed changing the focus from “hard skills” to “soft skills”. Ultimately, I truly believe this Visual Arts session will have a lasting impact on my attitude and life outlook. I think everyone needs to go through a module like this at some point in their lives.

It remains a challenge to pinpoint exactly how embodied learning influences participants, but reading the reflections of students can provide some insight into their experiences. Different experiences emerged from the individual versus group practices.

Some students felt that the individual learning space helped them to reflect on real issues in their life, saying for example: “The visual arts one allowed me to understand more of what is happening in everyday life and what we can do to build community, especially the workshop”. Students commented that they enjoyed the individual practices and felt that they achieved something: “... I loved this part, because it made me really proud of what I could achieve ... all on my own.” Group engagements focused on social justice issues tend to be more stressful, and students are often not willing to engage as freely. The individual practices therefore allowed students to engage with sensitive and often uncomfortable issues in which they would normally not engage in group sessions.

Simultaneously, it is not helpful to focus solely on individual practices and avoid group engagement. Carrying insights through from individual practices to group sessions has proved to be an important

strategy. The spices, for instance (used in some of the practices), stain the skin, and one would be reminded of the engagement long after the practice was started. In the practice, students were asked to follow an individual process, but they also discussed afterwards in group reflections how they now look at spices connected to history and socio-political issues instead of only an everyday ingredient used in the kitchen. Playful group activities such as the painting of values on a big piece of paper also allowed students to collaboratively address serious issues.

Implications for embodied learning

Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) put forward 'response-able pedagogies' that create "relational processes through which social, political, and material entanglements ... [such as students, facilitators, discourses, texts] are rendered capable through each other to bring about social transformation" (p. 64). Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) argue that 'response-able pedagogies' incorporate collective knowing, being, doing and making – and this could involve "how to flourish together in a complex world", and "being and becoming and making-with" (ontological) and "knowing-with" (epistemological) (p. 69). Another concept in new materialist thinking is diffraction. Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) refer to Haraway (1997), who considers diffraction as a way to bring in the self in relation to knowledge that is situated. By this she means a critical interrogation and embodied perspective of the effects of one's own place in the production of knowledge.

Zavala (2016) argues that anticolonial education comes alive when engaging in dialogue and reflection by naming people's social worlds. This enables terminology to critique and understand the complexities involved in colonised worlds. Apart from developing a language, healing and reclaiming identities and spaces are crucial aspects that Zavala (2016) emphasises. Reclaiming involves "recovering who people are (their cultural identities), their practices, and their relation to place (Land, cosmos)" (Zavala, 2016, p. 5).

Considering these frameworks, my own use of embodied learning strategies in the visual arts have sought to explore how such strategies can facilitate more relational, Indigenous knowledge-informed, and African-centric cognitions. The need to rethink how we do higher education is clear if we consider the deeply entrenched dualism of much Western thought, but I have found that we cannot simply rely on old tools to uncover new ideas and solutions. The perspectives offered by Indigenous knowledges and new materialisms, plugged into arguments for embodied cognition, can help us explore the possibilities of arts-based and embodied learning for anticolonial education.

Concluding remarks

Embodied learning is not new. Many theorists who engage in perspectives on learning, Indigenous and new materialist thinking, as well as perspectives on apprenticeship-based learning, argue for embodied, relational and contextual teaching and learning pedagogies. We can learn from Indigenous practitioners when it comes to relational mind–body practices, and more recently from new materialist perspectives that trouble non-relational and dualist thinking. Immersive embodied practices have the potential to assist in decolonising the body–mind, which could enhance teaching and learning practices. Theoretical knowledge is often disconnected from the body (especially if one cannot relate to what is being learned). In academia we mostly deal with theory over practice, allowing theory to stand in for reality, or become a representation of reality. Practice can facilitate learning in real time and in reality. Although receiving theoretical information often helps us to classify and cognitively understand concepts, it

might not help us to fully internalise new ideas, or change our perceptions. However, internalising learning through embodied practices could result in a more transformative effect. Embodied experiences can challenge dominant knowledge systems by asking us not to map theory onto disparate realities, but rather to consider how affect, the body, the sensory and the material sit in relation with reality. In the project of decolonising theory and the body–mind, situated and embodied practices provide important insights and methods.

Art-based practices allow new possibilities, because they are exploratory and often unpredictable (Manning, 2015). Art-based practices specifically encourage connections of ideas that are normally not put or seen together, and that is what Hofstadter (1985) sees as the crux of creativity, which is necessary in moving educational thinking forward. In my work, I have noticed how engaging with concepts such as knowledge production, values and social structures while experiencing them in an embodied way enables participants to ‘stay longer’ with issues, and work through them within themselves and in collaborative ways. This relates to Haraway’s (2016) concept of ‘staying with the trouble’. In my work I argue for experimenting and exploring and therefore also staying longer with the trouble; engaging with concepts in an embodied way, including materials and becoming aware of the environment where the practices take place.

In my teaching praxis, I have engaged with many students and staff who felt disconnected from their environment (e.g. a university campus, residence or town) and struggled to find their place and space in a complex world. It is as if the participants (and I) live in an unrelated world of constantly aspiring for something that is not perceived as attainable, because learning is not grounded in local context. Embedded and embodied practices could assist in learning, especially in the postcolonial and post-apartheid context in South Africa.

The embodied practices with which I have been experimenting are premised on a basis of Land acknowledgement and the agency of the material and the non-human. While this work remains in progress, my experience thus far has produced interesting and unexpected slippages and ideas that have helped students connect theory with real life, and produced critical dialogues between humans, spaces and places. Combining individual and group practices has also proved to be a strategy with potential to allow students to engage with uncomfortable topics in a less intimidating way, while learning from one another and becoming open to difficult realities. This can be explored further in future praxis.

As in the Shared Humanity course practices, research can be done while engaging in the projects, so learning in action also becomes research in action. This engages participants in the knowledge production process, creating a collaborative learning environment and a shared sense of ownership that could enhance social justice and anticolonial education. The learner, the environment and the content are related and should be treated in a relational manner. Engaging in the environment where we find ourselves enables context-specific knowledge creation. Social justice education does not only happen through theoretical or rote learning, and alternative educational practices need to be explored to further learning processes.

What remains salient is that if we are to work towards decolonising our body–mind and implementing anticolonial education strategies, we must take seriously insights from Indigenous knowledge and

emerging perspectives such as new materialism. Informed by these perspectives, a relational embodied approach where we engage deeper with our historical, current and possible future contexts could assist in decolonising the body–mind.

References

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