

MAKING SPACE FOR IDENTITY, DIVERSITY AND VOICE IN A TRANSCULTURAL VISUAL ARTS COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

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Abstract

There is national and institutional pressure to transform education, to revisit curriculums and approaches to teaching and learning and to address issues around dominant worldviews, inclusiveness and diversity. Visual arts lecturer practitioners, like other academics, are being challenged to respond.

We know that the students entering our programmes, in all their growing diversity, provide new challenges, bringing with them as they do different and often complex social, cultural and familial identities, some of which they leave, wittingly or unwittingly, willingly or unwillingly, at the door, as they look to conform to the expectations of the disciplinary communities.

I maintain that the time is ripe for the teaching and learning approaches used to bring students into the visual arts disciplines/discourses to be appraised and problematized, for lecturer practitioners to reflect on their practices and for theories-in-practice to be set down on paper. To this end I reflect on one entrance level collective teaching practice, to see where the approaches to teaching and learning meet the needs of our diverse student body, and where adaptation and change is called for.

I conclude that lecturer practitioners need to move beyond the confines of their disciplinary knowledge, establish transdisciplinary teaching partnerships, and acquire the literacies of diversity and transformative educational theory, as they face the challenges involved in making connections with diverse groups of students, with different cultural frames of reference (Adams, Bell and Griffin 2007), (Steyn 2007).

Key Words: *Transculturality, diversity, disciplinary discourses, voice, identities, literacies.*

Introduction

The call has gone out from government for educational transformation. At institutional level there are laudable activities: units have been established, policies are emerging, and colloquiums are held. Academics are required to play an active role in transforming educational practices within their disciplines, but in my experience there is a dearth of explicitness as to what is actually expected.

My reading is that two things are entailed: firstly, that academic curricula and approaches to teaching and learning should be interrogated, in order to establish the relevance and appropriateness of these, in relation to a changing dispensation, where the traditional deference to western models of thinking and to what Freire (1972:71) (1998:32) refers to as banking methodologies of teaching are being challenged. Secondly, that we should set out to critically examine our discourse communities of practice, in order to establish how these are adapting to meet the needs of our diversifying body of students.

Depending on point of view there are potentially polarizing assumptions that might be brought to bear, affecting the reception of these readings: one is that academics, steeped in their disciplinary discourses, and comfortable in their acceptance of the validity of tried and tested methodologies, in the promotion of their own worldviews, will be unwilling to look critically at their own teaching practice. The second is that ardent proponents of transformative educational theory might throw the baby out with the bathwater, with good-practice 'old-school' teaching methodologies being sacrificed on the altar of political expediency.

I suggest that lecturer-practitioners in the visual arts disciplines need to reflect critically on their own teaching practice; scaffolding it to pedagogical and theoretical frameworks. They need to find multiple mirrors in which to survey themselves; to engage in an inspection of their 'own' discourse terrain; to reflect on their own preconceptions; to view themselves through their students diverse eyes, to consider how much space they make for these students to critically interrogate issues around identity, diversity and voice, and to look (inside and outside their disciplines) for ways of 'seeing' things differently.

To this end the first section of this paper comprises a phenomenological reflection on the collaborative teaching and learning practices in the Art and Design Introductory Studies Programme at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth. The narrative is based on my own lived experience, and it represents the first stage of a larger research project. This exercise has allowed me to interrogate my own assumptions about the relevance and effectiveness of our practice, and to map our home grown theories-of-practice to the larger world of texts on teaching and learning, as a first step towards the end purpose of seeing where our approaches meet the needs of our diverse student body, and where adaptation and change is called for.

The paper then briefly examines possible ways that lecturer-practitioners can address issues of concern, as they face the challenges involved in making connections with diverse groups of students, with different cultural frames of reference (Adams, Bell & Griffin 2007), I suggest that there is a need for practitioners to internalize a range of 'diversity' literacies (Steyn 2007:1-13). I highlight the potential of transdisciplinary teaching partnerships, and promote the idea of developing a better theoretical understanding of the fluid transcultural communities of practice that have begun to operate within the disciplines, arguing that these already serve a transformative function that aligns with institutional expectations, in addition to serving as a means of perpetuating the positive heritage of dialectical antagonism, generational rejection and change from within, that has long characterized the visual arts academy. (Appigianesi & Garratt 1995:5)

A reflection on who we teach

We present the only generic first year art and design programme in South Africa, along with its offshoot, a two year augmented programme. At like institutions incoming students enter directly into the disciplinary streams from day one (Breytenbach & Johnston: 2008). In our case they have an introductory year in which to establish, through practice and experience, where their talents lie. Only after successfully completing our programme are students considered for places in the second year of the disciplines, and only then do they have to commit to a final study direction.

I have drawn from a range of telling 2008 statistics that show the profile of our incoming students, and that serve to illustrate why that broad introduction to the visual arts is so necessary. The vast majority comes from our province, the Eastern Province, which has an uneven educational terrain, with class sizes, access to resources, and levels of support differing widely between rural, small town and metropolitan schools. The end result is an aspirational but potentially academically vulnerable cohort seeking entrance to our programmes. Historically, most of our intake have experienced what Freire (1972:71) (1998:32) refers to as a 'banking' education at school, receiving, filing, retrieving and regurgitating stored deposits of information, bestowed on them by the teacher, in a passive classroom environment. OBE is intended to change this scenario, but we have yet to reap the fruits of this approach.

In 2008 53% of Introductory and 89% of Augmented students had no pre-entry art training. To date there is a lack of visual arts training in the FET band in the Eastern Province, across the whole spectrum of schooling, but most notably in rural, semi-rural and historically marginalized communities. This means that the majority of students who aspire to careers in the visual arts, although they might produce portfolio evidence that indicates a potential to succeed, apply to the programme with no prior art training, and with very little real understanding of the distinctions between the different visual arts disciplines.

Those with art at school should be at an advantage, with research (Jensen 2001:88), showing links between artistic activities at school and cognitive, emotional and creative development, but with so few schools offering art, it would be unfair to make prior art training a pre-requisite. Instead we run a careful portfolio and interview selection process, in order to ascertain the degree of visual, design and textual literacy that aspirant students bring with them. Historically the more advantaged students in

terms of these literacies have been those from the former Model-C schools, where, whether or not they had the benefit of school art, learners experience a fairly privileged and visually enriched learning environment.

At present, we draw an increasingly wide range of students, in terms of demography and cultural background, with a growing number of applicants from what might be termed visually 'un-rich' and under resourced school and home environments. As socio-economic stratification remains inextricably linked to race in our province, the most vulnerable group, in terms of literacy deficit, has a predominance of black students.

On the surface, the students who arrive for interviews, apart from variations in their demographic classification, appear to be a homogenous group, in terms of dress codes, electronic accessories and aspirations. To generalize, what is common to the larger number of our applicants is that they have an understanding of the visual arts, of artists, designers and photographers, that is largely garnered from the popular media, from television, video and the internet. Entrance essays reveal that the future achievements and recognition they aspire to are linked in the eyes of many to a craving for wealth and fame, confirming Beardman's (1982:33) statement that 'the media-generated image of fame or star status, more than any stance on art, is at the root of many students' desire for identity'.

So it is easy to frame each new group of students in terms of a deficit model (Jacobs: 2007:13) highlighting what it lacks in prior art training, focusing on the anticipated academic performance gap, or our concern with their preoccupation with achieving wealth and fame.

The challenge has always been, whilst remaining realistic about the academic vulnerability of our incoming students, to look to developing effective teaching and learning strategies that bring them into the discipline.

The new challenge is to ensure that as students enter the discipline in all their growing diversity, they do not end up leaving their different and often complex social, cultural and familial identities at the door, as they look to conform to the expectations of the disciplinary community.

The ultimate challenge is to facilitate a transformative learning experience, through which all of our students, regardless of background, are able to link artistry to the transformation of self, to the contemplative and the spiritual, to the expression of personal identity, to 'revealing the diverse expressions of a shared longing: the basic and enduring human urge to transcend the ordinary and experience the sublime' (Francis 1996:1).

A reflection on what we accomplish

We introduce students into the visual arts disciplines and the disciplinary discourses (and here I use the term discourse as it is communicated in text **and** through the medium of the artwork), using a mixed-model approach. At the outset the lecturer-practitioner is presented as the expert and the student is styled as an apprentice and is inducted into the discipline using the grammatical approach that artists and apprentices have followed over the centuries, in cultures across the world. As the year progresses the lecturer-practitioner becomes more of a companion / co-creator of knowledge and the emphasis is placed on the establishment of a supportive community of practice, wherein students can forge their identities and develop their disciplinary 'voices'.

In order to introduce the disciplinary grammars we have developed what Jacobs (2007:9) refers to as a collaborative teaching practice, planned by the lecturer-practitioners as a body, with a programme presented as a series of shared teaching blocks, each centred round a common thematic exploration, stepped in conceptual complexity and artisanal challenge, and scaffolded on previously acquired layers of disciplinary knowledge. Students experience various combinations of lectures, demonstrations and workshops, with associated projects, supported by intensive individual tutoring, critique and assessment. There is an ongoing, and not always welcome, project to link practice to theory.

There is a range of complex literacies embedded in the design grammars that the students engage with through this process. Carter (2008:70) suggests they need academic, visual, societal, material, scientific, mathematical, spatial and graphic literacies. He says each of these is complex and

multilayered and requires cognitive understanding, conceptual engagement, problem-solving ability, technical skills and artisanal mastery, and that each layer should be built on a foundation of disciplinary knowledge, as well as an understanding of the relationship of the discipline to the broader society.

The lecturer-practitioners work in a discursive process with the students to enact and make explicit the grammars, the modes of thinking and making and being. Skills and techniques are modelled, the student(s) consult, listen, question, voice; the lecturer(s) advise, demonstrate, and give formative assessment as the work takes shape.

Few of our incoming students value the opportunity to talk or write about art, let alone aspire to contribute to the academic textual discourse in any significant way. Students recognize qualities they value in art, but find these difficult to put into words. They want to make art, not write about it. At the outset, they show a tendency to plagiarize, and there is little evidence of critical engagement. We have successfully introduced a mixed model for the Theory and Communication modules with a discipline-critical focus on multiple readings. Hodges says that research has shown that teaching *about* writing in a decontextualised way is not as effective as helping students with their writing as part of the mainstream courses they are studying (Hodges 1997:78 in Quinn 2007:1). Based on this thinking, we have formed a transdisciplinary cooperative with language and literature specialists, to 'develop shared literacy practices in the genres of academic writing that are embedded in our disciplinary discourses' (Fairclough 1989). We use a writer-respondent approach to essay drafts, wherein lecturer and consultant work together, firstly to unpack the essay topics in workshops, and then in responding to multiple drafts.

As the year progresses the studio focus on the acquisition of the grammars broadens and the emphasis is placed on more conceptually grounded and experimental outcomes; the theory focus moves from the acquisition of academic literacies and writing skills towards the critical consideration of art production from the perspective of a Neo-Marxist /Freireian model. By the end of the year each student, regardless of whether they entered the programme with a background in art or not, has a theory portfolio of reflective journal and academic essay writing, and a studio portfolio of drawing, photography, graphic design, sculpture and three dimensional design, ceramics, painting and printmaking.

After an interactive, engaged and intensive period of teaching and learning, through a process of apprenticeship, mentorship and community, the students prepare to move up to take their places in one of the senior directions. The evidence of the transformative learning experience they have undergone should be visible in the portfolio of work. The evidence of the efficacy of the programme is to be seen in a continued high pass rate.

Gee (1999) is reassuring about the idea of discourse / disciplinary apprenticeship remaining valid in the present day, suggesting that an academic discipline is a semiotic domain inhabited by an affinity group of 'insiders' who shares practices, goals, values and norms, and that mastering a semiotic domain involves joining an affinity group as an apprentice, and learning the design grammar from the 'insiders' (Gee 1999:182). He describes a discourse as a configuration of knowledge that manifests in particular ways as habitual forms of expression and which is articulated from a particular subject position, and which represents a particular set of interests. It enacts and recognizes specific socially situated identities and activities (Gee 1999:111) and it represents the ways of behaving, acting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, reading and writing that a specific group accepts as instantiations of particular roles within the group (Gee 1999:86).

It stands to reason that the grammars in question do not only induct the apprentices into the practice, they also foreground the world-view of Gee's dominant 'insiders', and this may have its downside. Freire (1998: xiii) warns about the tendency of some academics to 'suffocate' discourses different to their own. The Freireian reading is that a disciplinary discourse is directive, not innocent, and that this is acceptable, as long as there is respect for difference in ideas and positions. In setting out to initiate someone into the discipline it is probably inevitable that there will be an agenda, wherein the lecturer-practitioner represents an own world-view, foregrounds an own cultural understanding, and infuses this into the conversation. Largely depending on the lecturer-practitioner's approach, this could be read as cultural hegemony or it could be interpreted as the proffering of a grammatical structure (albeit

one that might be linked to world view) that can be used and modeled and reconfigured by a diversity of students, according to their different individual and cultural intentions.

There is ample historical evidence that the visual arts discourses are not written in stone. As the constitution of the affinity group changes, so the prevailing ways are challenged and the practices take on different forms. So whilst the discourses have their origin in 'the tradition' and 'the academy,' terms that hardly suggest an affirming transformative practice, the reality is, that over time the tradition has been under constant revision/attack from within. In an ongoing cycle, artists, trained in the grammars of the discipline have reinvented the disciplinary discourse community, and the reading of the theory and praxis of art, from inside/outside/inside the walls of the academies. Our growing diversity of students joins what is in effect a tradition premised on change.

A reflection on the construction of identity(ies) and voice(s) in a community of practice

Mead (1934:173 -178), maintains that the individual's identity emerges through the process of 'social experience and activity', with an interconnection between the social structure and the structure of the self. He suggests that there is an 'I' and a 'me' in each open self, the me being the socialized self, the organized set of attitudes that responds to the 'generalized' other, constructing itself as it sees itself in response to how others see it, the 'I' being the 'ongoing moment of unique individuality', the different, mirroring and understanding the world from an own point of view. Mead provides a key to understanding the complex relationship between the inner student 'I', which is creative, conditional and always under construction, and the outer, socialized student 'me', (often a multiplicity of 'me's') which is scaffolded in relation to the nature of the social / discourse community in which it finds itself. His model draws attention to the vulnerability of the 'I' in the face of a hostile or alien discourse environment.

Latchem (2006:43) confirms that identities are changeable and contingent and are shaped by society in general, and also that they can be [re]-formed and changed by the discourses in which they are constructed. We observe that students often self-censor their outside-the-discipline identities, and present only those that they anticipate will be well received, or try to read what the 'dominant insiders' expect of them in terms of a discourse identity, and then mimic this. Over their time with us they assume and shed identities and voices on an ongoing basis.

Ludema (2001:71) describes the strong social bonding and the positive effects of working in a community of practice. He suggests that its members experience a sense of safety, security, and protectedness that frees them up to create new knowledge, new conversations, voices, vocabularies and ways of understanding things.

Lave and Wenger (1998:91-102) explain the community of practice as a diverse and socially complex group that exists in a shared domain, a group who are mutually accountable, and who are engaged in a joint and enabling enterprise in which they collaborate over a period of time, sharing ideas and interacting regularly. In this group 'situated learning' takes place, where active participants construct disciplinary knowledge whilst at the same time constructing shared identities through engaging in and contributing to the practices. Our community exists as just such a social, interactional process, with ongoing negotiation of meaning, and, as they suggest, it is always in the process of change as people move in and out of the domain.

A reflection on the challenges of building a transcultural / transdisciplinary project

We set out to establish a safe space for our diversity of students to work in. Beyond the physically secure space that is a prerequisite because of the unsafe nature of our society, there is a focus on creating an existential safe space, where students feel free to make mistakes and question, where they are emotionally secure, with room to express their prior experience and explore their own sensitivity without facing derision (Brownlee 2003:84).

This space has the potential to function as a social condenser, if, as a sense of community develops between diverse groups of peers, the hegemony of the dominant group (whichever it is), is broken

down in the ebb and flow of artistic engagement, in the fluid process of connection and disconnection, as the students unpack and examine their identities, cultural values and beliefs.

There are well-credentialed proponents of the value of transculturality, transcultural communities and the conceptualizing of transcultural space. Berry and Epstein (1999:137) refer to a transcultural transformational change to a cultural-valuational structure, where existing group identities and hegemonies are deconstructed and altered in such a way that everyone's sense of belonging, affiliation and self would be altered, not just those of the devalued groups. They suggest that people need to be weaned from their attachment to a fixed cultural construction of their interests and identities.

Bhabha (1994)(1996) promotes the idea of a 'third space', a mutable in-between that serves as a space of potential and enunciation, where there is ongoing negotiation and acceptance of difference. He rejects the essentialism of fixed binary categories, of culture, identity, blackness, whiteness, opposites and polarities. Instead he promotes the exploration of the hybrid space in between, a space of 'ambivalence' that encourages the transgression and subversion of categories. He refers to the notion of 'interruptive' space where new identities are formed, and where there is room for innovation, contestation and collaboration. Although not everyone holds with his concept of hybrid space (it can be read as a cross-cultural exchange that devalues and negates the inequalities of power relations, (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2000:37)), Bhabha's model provides us with a conceptual starting point for our project, which is about helping our students to find a safe and accepting space within which they can construct identity(s) and artistic voice(s).

Rushdie (1988:106) envisages a world that 'celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelisation and fears the absolutism of the Pure'.

These writings about hybridity and transculturalism lead to conceptualizations of community and identities that move beyond the discourse engagement; that move into the realm where new social space and social fabric are manufactured. If we are to grow our transcultural community of practice into one that contributes to the world around us, one that promotes Madison's (1997) 'ethic of mutual recognition and reciprocity', we need to engage with the 'problematics of contemporary culture' of which Lewis (2002) speaks, we need to expand the edges of the disciplinary discourse in a way that encourages students (as well as lecturer-practitioners) to interface with the outer world of socio-political-economic-ecological issues, whilst at the same time helping them to interrogate their own internal and macro-cultural realities, as they set out on the path to becoming visual artists and design practitioners.

Where we have engaged in transdisciplinary initiatives, with student counseling, applied language specialists and institutional planners, the results have been worthwhile. Both students and lecturer-practitioners would benefit from a greater transdisciplinary engagement with other discourses, with the social sciences, literary studies, political science, philosophy, cultural studies and psychology, with shared projects that take students out into the community, that engage with contemporary postcolonial society, with identities and histories, with marginalized communities, and with the environment; projects that foreground both individual and group work and that allow for multiple and layered interpretations of the world around us.

Freire suggests that it is our ontological vocation to be a 'Subject who acts upon and transforms his world' (*sic*) (1998:14). He advocates a broadening of discursive practice: 'There are no themes or values of which one cannot speak, no areas in which one must be silent. We can talk about everything, and we can give testimony about everything' (1998: 58). In order to do this both lecturer-practitioners and students will need to acquire the requisite literacies and skills. If we examine the power relations within our studios, we have to acknowledge that we have both the 'children of the oppressed' (Freire 1972) and what Van Gorder (2007:8) refers to as the 'children of the oppressors' in our midst. Many carry a familial and community legacy of preconceptions and bigotry with them, however well concealed this may be in the day to day.

The actual experience of facilitating a transcultural community of practice is more fraught than words on paper would suggest. The space has to be constructed and maintained, and it can be disrupted at the voicing of an ill-timed word. When conflicts arise the space takes on a new and hostile reading,

and there is what Vidler (1992:iv) describes as a 'disquieting slippage', 'opening up problems of identity around the self, in relation to the other.' When this happens fault-lines appear, and students regress into stereotyping and labelling. Lecturer-practitioners have to remain attuned to the atmosphere in our studios and intervene.

But both students and lecturers have been socialized in an environment where vigorous discussion around issues of race, politics, gender or religion, around the self and the 'other', is avoided, whilst the stereotypes embedded in our cultures are continually reinforced through jokes and relayed urban legends. As lecturer-practitioners we also have to acknowledge the fact that we are implicated in the reading of the predominantly white power structures within our institutions. The demography of students is changing, but the continued whiteness of staff reinforces the reading that academic power and intellectual wealth and privilege, remain in white hands. When there is a 'disquieting slippage' in our studios we are easily viewed as the gatekeepers of white academic supremacy, as the prescribers of cultural hegemony.

If we aim to create a meaningful discursive transcultural space, one that discomforts hegemonic practices, we need to look beyond our disciplines for literacies and skills that can assist us in making and maintaining connections with our diverse community of students. There are multiple readings that take us beyond our discourse comfort-zones and have the power to shape our understanding of the fluid social space within our community. Freire, Torres and Apple focus on epistemological, political and ethical issues related to transformative education. Bell and Griffin (2007) present methodologies for opening up an interrogation of diversity and social identities within the teaching and learning environment. As a point of departure I suggest that we need to develop the ability to recognize and decode and respond to the hegemonies that Steyn (2007:1-13) suggests are embedded into our South African cultural milieu. Her model for diversity literacy includes a set of cultural reading practices based in critical theory; it lists core grammars that need to be internalized to enable a person to make a perceptive analysis of prevalent social climates, to facilitate discussion and critical analysis, to engage with issues of transformation in an informed way, to recognize the symbolic and material value of hegemonic identities, to interpret coded hegemonic practices, and to recognize the relationship between learned social identities and social practices.

I suggest that the collaborative teaching and learning practice reflected on in this paper, with its high levels of engagement, with its stepped progression, where the student moves from an apprenticeship paradigm towards full membership of the disciplinary discourse community, should be viewed as a responsive and best practice example of transformative education. Our practice maps snugly to theories, specifically those that focus on the acquisition of grammars and literacies, and on the transformation of the individual and the construction of identities within a community of practice.

I have briefly focused on the potential of the transcultural / transdisciplinary project as a way forward, as a means of creating a space where lecturer-practitioners and the growingly diverse body of students can co-construct identity(s) and artistic voice(s), whilst relating their practice to the broader society beyond our doors. I have highlighted some of the challenges that we face, as we move to grow our hybrid community of practice, and I have acknowledged the (urgent) need to expand our range of discourse grammars to embrace the literacies of diversity, and the politics of change.

Each year will bring us a different collective, with different needs, different aspirations and different potential. Each year we will need to marry praxis with theory, theory with praxis, and respond, (differently).

Our teaching project will never be grounded in exact science.

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Short Biography

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