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### #Decolonise!

Design educators reflecting on the call for the decolonisation of education

## Student Perceptions on Curriculum Change: Art and Design Theory within a New Bachelor of Visual Arts Degree at Nelson Mandela University.

**Rachel Collet**

*Nelson Mandela University*

**Inge Economou**

*Nelson Mandela University*

### Abstract

This paper seeks to describe changes made to the Visual Studies course at the Nelson Mandela University in light of calls for the decolonisation of curricula, and to assess the impact of these changes by reviewing student responses to the revised curriculum. Using this course as a case study, the paper reflects on students' experiences of attempts at decolonisation, and seeks to contribute directions for further change.

Following requests from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in 2009/2010, the Art and Design National Diploma and B.Tech programmes in the School of Music, Art and Design were re-curriculated. The first year of the new Bachelor of Visual Arts (BVA) degree ran in 2015. Fine Art and Applied Design history and theory subjects were combined in the new degree to form Visual Studies, which spans Photography, Fine Arts, Graphic Design, Fashion and Textiles.

In addition to the need to become interdisciplinary, the planning of the Visual Studies curriculum was influenced by socio-political and educational imperatives, including the University's Vision 2020 policy; #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall in 2015 and 2016, and the 2016 Decolonising Working Group forum at our school. As a start, the re-visioning of the Visual Studies course involved an attempt to focus on African and South African content, and to shift from a timeline-based to a thematic structure, foregrounding overlapping critical cultural concepts such as race, gender, nationhood, theories of identity, the ideology of capitalism and consumerism, environmental concerns, and the impact of technology and social media.

This study used anonymous feedback questionnaires, adapted from the University's Centre for Teaching and Learning, to elicit written responses from students to the changes to content, and mode of delivery within Visual Studies.

By means of student feedback and critical self-reflection, we identify the further action needed to create an authentically affirmative and empowering educational experience.

**Keywords:** *Art and design education, decolonisation, student perception*

## Introduction

### The need for change

Students country wide have been vocally critical of the eurocentrism and alienating teaching methods of many humanities courses. #RhodesMustFall highlighted the way that many students of colour experienced the stubbornly entrenched institutional cultures of universities as dehumanising and alienating, and #FeesMustFall at Nelson Mandela University in 2015/2016 involved a critique of the curricula as eurocentric. In 2016, students from Art and Design shared their experiences of the School as a whole in a Decolonisation Working Group forum facilitated by lecturers, Margot Muir and Nii Botchway, in light of the issues raised by student protests. The critique of our course helped inform changes underway to the new second year (introduced in 2016) and the new third year curriculum (2017).

As may be the case at many other institutions, for us the attempt to re-centre the history and theory of art and design in Africa did not begin in 2015. Africanisation has been approached in various ways in some discipline streams prior to this, hence the backlog of frustration with the slow pace of change. The university embraced the concept of humanising pedagogy as part of their “Vision 2020”, and held a number of workshops in which staff were encouraged to take up this approach.

Humanising pedagogy challenges educators to see all students as rich in cultural, social and linguistic resources and to value the “funds of knowledge” that students have as a result of their culture, communities and families (Salazar 2013, p. 123, p. 136, p. 139). A humanising pedagogy involves engaging with students’ lived experiences in an educational context. Salazar uses the metaphor of the “permeable curriculum” – a space of dialogue between “official” knowledge and the cultural “funds of knowledge” students bring (Salazar 2013, p. 139). However, this is not an end in itself – Freire stresses that the goal of engaging in the development of mutual critical consciousness between teacher and student is to identify, and work towards changing those aspects of society which are dehumanising (Freire in Salazar 2013, p. 127). Humanising pedagogy involves a “problem posing” method of teaching, which would engage both student and lecturer in the co-creation of locally relevant knowledge that is aimed at increased social justice (Salazar 2013, p. 133) and is opposed to the “banking” model that sees students as passive receptacles of knowledge, to be filled by the lecturer (Freire in Salazar 2013, p. 129). Crucially, humanising teaching involves the holistic, not just the academic, growth of the student (Salazar 2013, p. 128). These ideas influenced some of the teaching approaches adopted by staff in both the old and new programme.

What the student protests did in 2015 and 2016 was to show up the flaws in that effort – to highlight the problems with the various strategies of inclusion that had been and were being tried. The idea of inclusivity through the addition of African examples to an existing structure was problematised. In *What is an African Curriculum?* Garuba (2015) outlines two approaches to transformation of curricula: one a “content-driven additive approach” that expands existing curricula, and the other the re-consideration of “how the object of study itself is constituted, what tools are used to study it and what concepts are used to frame it”. He suggests that the second is a necessary complement to the first. Student protests highlighted the fact that what was being called for was the de-colonisation of curricula, as opposed to the accommodation of Africa within a eurocentric version of art and design history.

### Implementation of changes

The second and third year of the new Visual Studies curriculum have been both arranged around themes that can be applied to all the disciplines. The second year is divided into four

topics: approaches to the analysis of South African material culture; the construction of national identities in art and design; graphic resistance; and gendered identities in art and design. The intent was to centre the second year on South African historical contexts and examples, with references to international contexts. The third year is divided into: art, design and ideology; sustainability and alternatives to consumerism; the diffusion of ideas – artists and designers using technology and social media; ‘high’ culture meets ‘low’ culture; and space/place. The thinking was to ground the second year in South Africa, and then in the third year to look at international issues that have local relevance.

Attempts to embrace the principles of humanising pedagogy are evident in the teaching methods tried, and the assignments set. More group and class discussions are included in lectures, the use of student feedback mechanisms increased, and including questionnaires and ‘café conversations’ in lectures, where students are prompted to unpack their experiences of Visual Studies. In many of the assignments, students have been encouraged to link the course material to their lived experience: for example, in a third-year assignment, students conceptualised and executed a ten-day intervention in which they identified and disrupted one of the dominant daily ways in which they related to various aspects of consumer capitalism. These interventions were documented, analysed and presented to the class. Although not without their difficulties and flaws, such projects stimulated the connection of concepts taught in the course to students’ lived experiences.

### **Tracking the impact of changes**

What we want to find out with this study is how the redesigned and expanded material is being received by students and are they are finding it empowering. Are students perceiving themselves as becoming independent and critical thinkers? How relatable are they finding the material? Given that most of second year and portions of third year explicitly focus on South Africa, are students still experiencing the course as eurocentric? How much of a barrier is English as a medium of instruction in this course? The aim of surveying the students is to find out to what extent the changes implemented are experienced as humanising by our diverse range of students.

The anonymous questionnaire used a seven-point Likert scale to gauge student attitudes towards the following aspects of the course: humanizing teaching methods, eurocentrism and the africanisation of content, and the implementation of various critical cultural concepts (nationhood, class, gender, and race) within the current curriculum. Open-ended questions were asked to probe student’s responses further. The data has been analysed and interpreted using the theoretical perspectives drawn from Salazar (2013), Mbembe (2015), Delpit (2006), and Garuba (2015).

The survey was voluntary and was administered during the last two weeks of the second term. Out of a pool of 110 students, 30 respondents chose to answer the survey, and 26 chose to provide demographic information.

### **The demographics of our respondents were:**

- *Gender*: Female 22, Male 4, Chose not to be identified/classified 4;
- *Race*: Asian 1, Black 4, Coloured 3, Indian 1, White 17, Chose not to be identified/classified 4;
- *Language*: Afrikaans 4, Bi-lingual (English/Afrikaans) 2, English 14, isiXhosa 4.

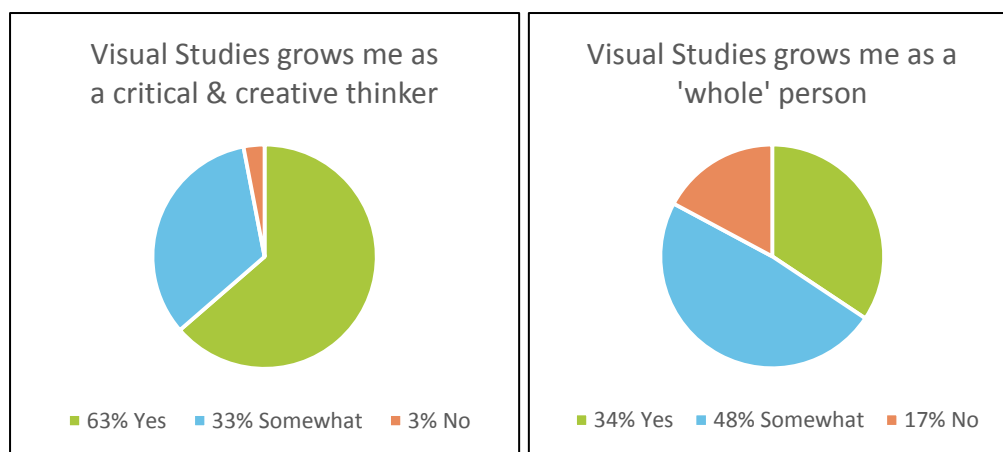
Black students therefore made up 13% of the respondents, but according to the university’s statistical records constitute 33% of the Visual Studies course’s registrations. White students, by contrast, made up 57% of the respondents, and constitute 59% of course registration. As such, our sample is not representative of the demographics of the course, and black students are under-represented, making it unwise to draw conclusions based on this data alone.

The high proportion of white respondents could be due both to the method of surveying students, and to student perceptions of the effectiveness of lecturer-led surveys as a tool for change. The survey took place in the last week of the first semester when some groups of students had deadlines. Students were informed that their usual class would be replaced with a feedback session. The class venue being on a separate campus from the Fashion and Textiles, and Ceramics courses required students to come in to North campus specifically for the survey. There are many students of colour in these groups. Another notable reason may be the lack of trust in the system’s ability to self-correct that was expressed by students in the pilot study – black students in this group expressed a sense of disillusionment with the effectiveness of surveys which may be linked to wider scepticism about internal review processes within the university. Although this survey is the first to focus on issues of curriculum content and method of delivery as they pertain to de-colonial questions, there have been other forums (such as the Decolonisation working group) for students to voice their concerns, and there may have been resistance to repeating critique. However, the students who did participate offered valuable feedback, particularly in the open-ended feedback.

## Analysis of student feedback

### Student perceptions of critical thinking and holistic growth

In the first part of the survey, focussing on the idea of humanising pedagogy, we sought to understand to what extent the course enables students to: a) engage with various aspects of the world as independent critical and creative thinkers; and b) “grow as a whole person”, that is, as “social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons who participate in and with the world” (Freire in Salazar 2013, p. 126). When asked whether Visual Studies develops their critical and creative thinking, 63% of students answered “yes”, 33% answered “somewhat”, and 3% answered “no”. However, when asked whether the course helps them to “grow as a whole person”, 34% answered “yes”, 48% answered “somewhat”, and 17% answered “no”. These responses indicate that students feel that they are developing as critical and creative thinkers, but are more ambivalent about whether the course facilitates holistic growth and participation (see Figures 1 and 2).



**Figure 1 (left) and Figure 2 (right)**

In response to being asked whether they get value from ideas and perspectives within the course that challenges their perspectives, some students wrote passionately about ‘enlightening’ experiences of moving from a world of not knowing to knowing: “I never really questioned or thought critically about the things around me. This course has opened my eyes to so many things I was oblivious to before” (s23); “visual studies has definitely opened my eyes to the world around me and has challenged me to think critically” (s17); “It is good to have debates within the class and see things from a different perspective. It enriches you

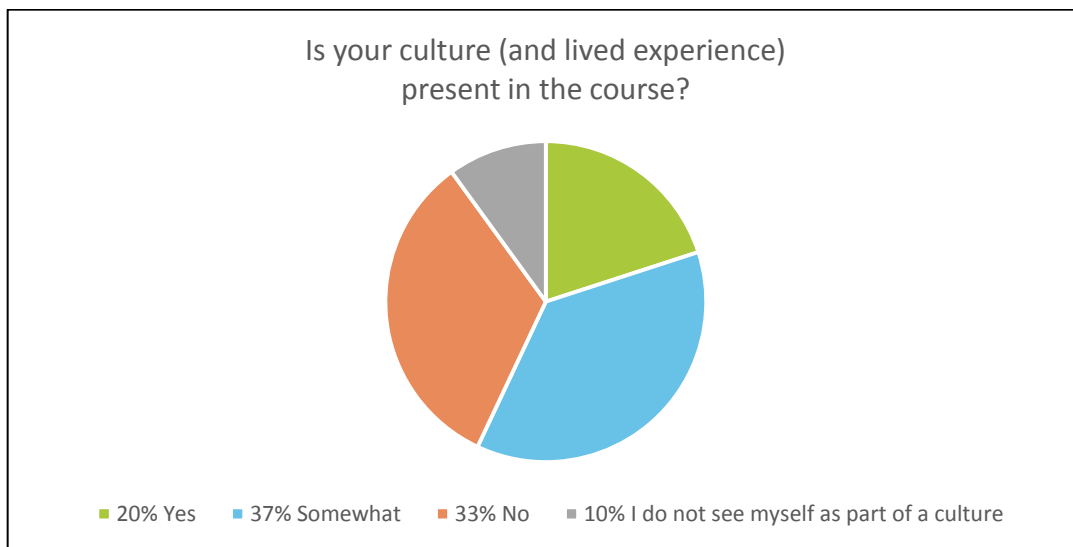
and teaches you to be open about every topic, even controversial ones. Your viewpoint doesn't necessarily mean it's the only right one" (s13). Importantly, one student highlights critical thinking and engagement as an important stepping stone towards contributing ethically to society, "Some of the content could make you rethink certain aspects about society and how we contribute to it. e.g. Gender roles, stereotypes etc." (s29). Sensitised awareness to difference is also evident "because most of the information is new and explained I became more aware of these topics and more supportive..." (s1).

Similarly, in the positive responses to the open-ended question about holistic growth, students stress increased knowledge and awareness (s1, s7, s15, s16, s22, s27); the ability to better understanding difference (s6, s15, s16, s18); increased critical thinking (s7, s28, s29); and growing independence (s16, s18).

Students who are less positive about their holistic growth focus less on critical thinking and more on their personal relationship to the content. What this points to is that, although the course may facilitate critical thinking through helping students place themselves in the world, students need to personally connect to the material in order to experience personal as well as intellectual growth, and this requires a sense that their identity is accepted and welcomed in class, as well as adequately reflected in the course material.

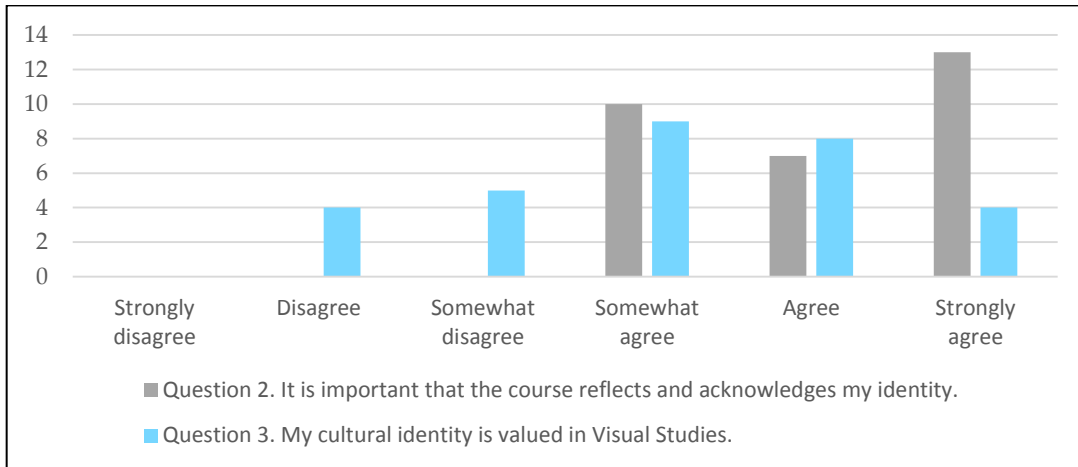
### Acknowledging students' cultural identity and lived experiences

When asked whether students' culture (and lived experience) is present in the course, 20% answered "yes", 37% answered "somewhat", 33% answered "no", and 10% answered that they do not see themselves as part of a culture (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3**

Students feel strongly that Visual Studies *should* acknowledge and reflect students' identities and culture, but are ambivalent about whether the course is in fact achieving this (see Figure 4). A theme that reoccurred is that, while students indicate that they are able to make better sense of the 'worlds' in which they live through critical and creative thinking, they are more ambivalent regarding whether their identity, lived experience, and culture is being affirmed in the course content.

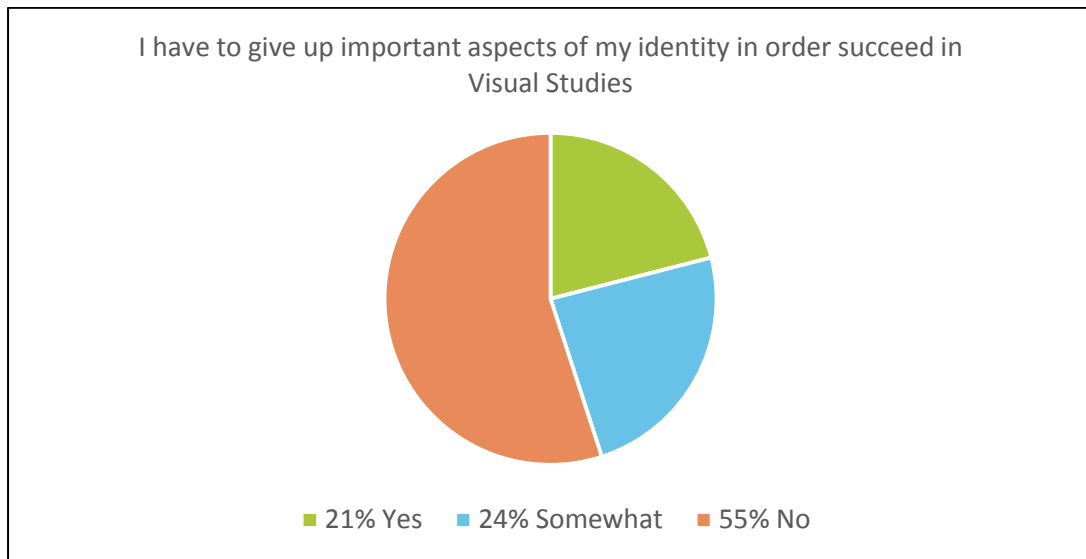


**Figure 4**

Considering that 70% of students indicate that their identity, culture and lived experience is reflected and valued in the course only to an extent or not at all (see Figure 3), it is worth highlighting four thematically linked barriers that emerge as themes in student feedback, as follows:

**1. Pressure to succeed producing conformity:**

55% of the respondents indicated that they did not have to give up important aspects of their identity in order to succeed in the course, but 45% indicated that they did experience this, even if for some only to an extent (See Figure 5). In a pilot study, which had more racially diverse respondents, the majority of students answered “yes” to this question.



**Figure 5**

Students who answered “no” indicated that the course is ‘open’ and encourages students to contribute ideas freely: “expression is optional and any options/views are accepted” (s17, s27). Other students confidently express that they are able to assert themselves without reserve: “I don’t care this is me” (s25) and “I stay myself whenever we have lectures or assignments” (s17), or expressed that the ability to be challenged was part of their cultural identity (s3). However, countering this, other students highlight the pressure to succeed and work strategically, echoing Mbembe’s (2015, p.7) warning that old systems of “measuring, counting and rating” lead to students and teachers “substituting this goal of free pursuit of knowledge for another, the pursuit of credits”. The pursuit of marks is a barrier to authentic

engagement in some students' comments (s24, s20, s27): "I have adopted concepts I don't believe in, in order to get a good grade and had to sacrifice parts of my cultural identity" (s24) and "I write for the sake of passing not necessarily as a form of self-expression" (s7).

## **2. Academic protocols and formal teaching methodology:**

For some students, formal and academically sanctioned knowledge and systems are experienced as discounting students' personal identity and lived-experiences. One student explains that while they understand the value of referencing systems, having to "seek answers [to] critical questions 'outside' rather than within your own experiences" (s11) and use research to validate their ideas, reinforces a value hierarchy that affirms academically validated theory over student 'knowing' and experiences.

Linking to this, students call for more personal teaching and learning approaches as a way of affirming student identity and lived experience, asking for a classroom culture where student voices can be heard. Students want to be considered "as individuals with different backgrounds and interests" (s23, to "have room to speak your mind" (s13) and "toss [around] ideas" (s12). Students feel that in this way, individual lived experiences can be emphasised, and course content can become more interesting, relatable and understandable. This aligns with Salazar's vision of official curricula being "permeable" (Salazar 2013, p. 139). One student suggests lecturers share personal connections to the subject matter and allow students to do this too (s13) – echoing the need for "mutual vulnerability" (Salazar 2013, p.135) within humanising pedagogy.

## **3. Generic course content not able to cater to unique identities:**

When asked about how students' identities could be better affirmed within Visual Studies, a number of students expressed the idea that the course is too 'generic' to affirm their identity and lived experience (s11, s16, s2, s4, s3, s23, s24, s25). While students indicate that their identities are highly unique, complex, cross-cultural and fluid – not easily categorised, nor generalised – they do express the need to explore their identities and lived experience (see figure 4). One student explains that the lived experience is multi-layered and not reducible to racial identity: "That is my life, a mix of this and that according to experience. Do not put me into a box I do not really fit into, but maybe because of the colour of my skin, you assume that I should know about it or live it the most" (s11). Interestingly, a few students deny the concept of culture in their lived experience (s2, s20, s1) and one student says for example, "I never consider culture to be mine or really consider it... I am not invested in culture as to feel part of one" (s1). In response to the feeling of content being generic, students also ask for more contemporary content, which can reflect their current lived experiences (s2, s25).

Some students experience the course as focussing too heavily on other cultures rather than their own, and as such are not able to relate. Students also caution against a dichotomising focus on white and/or black identities (s3, s29, s9, s12, s13, s15, s24) as diminishing the realities of racial and cultural diversity in South Africa. Students highlight that their cultures are not adequately represented in the course, referring specifically to Coloured, Indian and Asian cultures (s13, s19, s15). One coloured student emphasises, "Sometimes I don't relate to the work. Being the minority in the class and the art school there is little representation and so there are harmful stereotypes that are difficult to break for this reason! I need representation please. Right now I'm a lone woman (at least I feel like it) standing up for my race and I'm frankly getting tired of the debates and insensitivity in this. Please hear my voice!" (s13).

## **4. Silencing of voices, racial conflict, and course content experienced as traumatising:**

Topics that investigate South Africa's past can be painful for students. In dealing with South Africa's racial history in the course, issues such as colonialisation, apartheid and white

nationalism, students may identify (or feel that they are being identified) as perpetrators, or as victims, and as such may experience a range of potentially traumatic and stressful emotions, including guilt, shame, anxiety, fear, anger, self-doubt, inferiority, resentment and/or defensiveness.

A theme that emerges from students who answer that they have to give up aspects of their identity in order to succeed in Visual Studies, is the 'silencing' of their viewpoints in class due to their perception of potential racial victimisation. While two students of colour highlight the need to be able to speak completely freely, even at the risk of being considered "insensitive" – to not have to "sugar coat" sensitive subjects when challenging inequality, some white students feel afraid to let their voices be heard, having been, or concerned that they would be, "victimised" or "labelled" (s3, s8, s16). One student explains: "The lecturers may make the class safe but have no control over what happens outside. I don't want to be alienated so I keep quiet" (s8). Both students of colour and white students experience their identities as being diminished and silenced in this context.

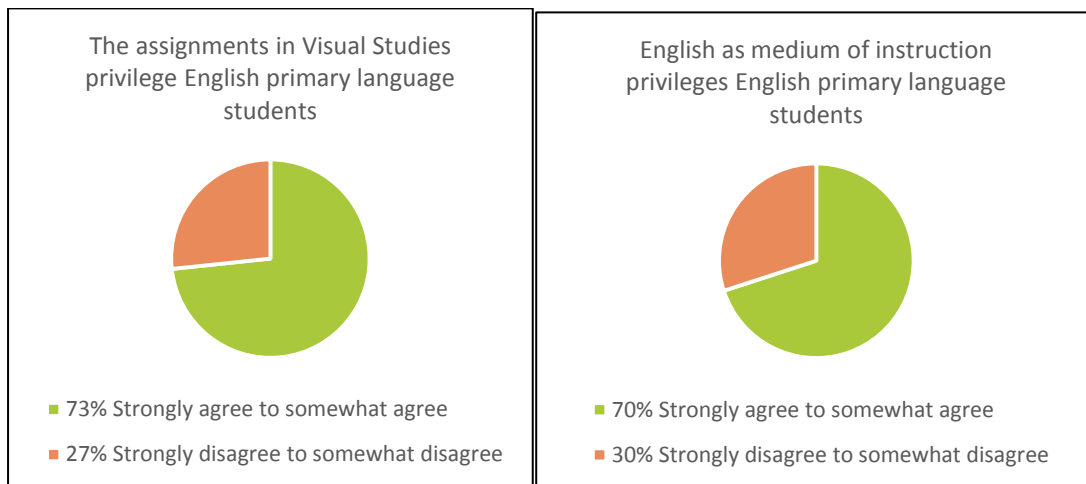
A few students experience aspects of the course as traumatic, as 'reliving' racism through retelling. One student, expresses that the lecturing environment can be a contributing factor, "Some topics bring up unwanted past events, personal events such a racism, these events should be discussed individually instead of in a presentation form" (s10). Related to this, the student emphasises the need for more focus on achievements and breakthroughs of black culture and new "methods of interpreting and analysing" (s10). This is supported by the pilot study.

### **Student perceptions of language**

Questions of decolonisation are related to questions of the language of instruction. Mbembe writes: "A decolonised university in Africa should put African languages at the centre of its teaching and learning project" (2015, p.17). Delpit (2006) and Salazar (2013) also consistently emphasise valuing the use of a student's home or primary language as an important aspect of a humanising pedagogy.

When asked whether the emphasis on correct academic English language and grammar in assessments disadvantage students whose first language is not English, 73% of the group indicated that they somewhat agreed to strongly agreed. Responding to the statement "The predominant use of English language as a medium of instruction in the Visual studies course disadvantages students whose home language is not English" in Likert-scale questions, 70% strongly to somewhat agreed (see Figures 6 and 7). However, when asked whether the language used in class by lecturers was easy to understand, 80% of students agreed to some extent – this number was even higher for the tutors, at 93%. Respondents simultaneously affirmed that they are able to follow the language used, and that the medium of instruction nevertheless still privileged English speakers. This may be partially explained by the high number of English speaking respondents, but may also be explained by the difference between following in class and producing written work in English.





**Figure 6 (left) and Figure 7 (right)**

Students describe the challenge of ‘language being in the mind’ (s11, s7, s8). One second language English speaker writes about the difficulties formulating her thoughts and ideas in English (s8), and another indicates that for English students, writing may be “more intuitive” (s7). The time necessary for the extra steps in the process emerges as a difficult reality for students not writing in their mother tongue (s17, s8) and, furthermore, that there is no differentiation made in marking systems despite these challenges faced (s9).

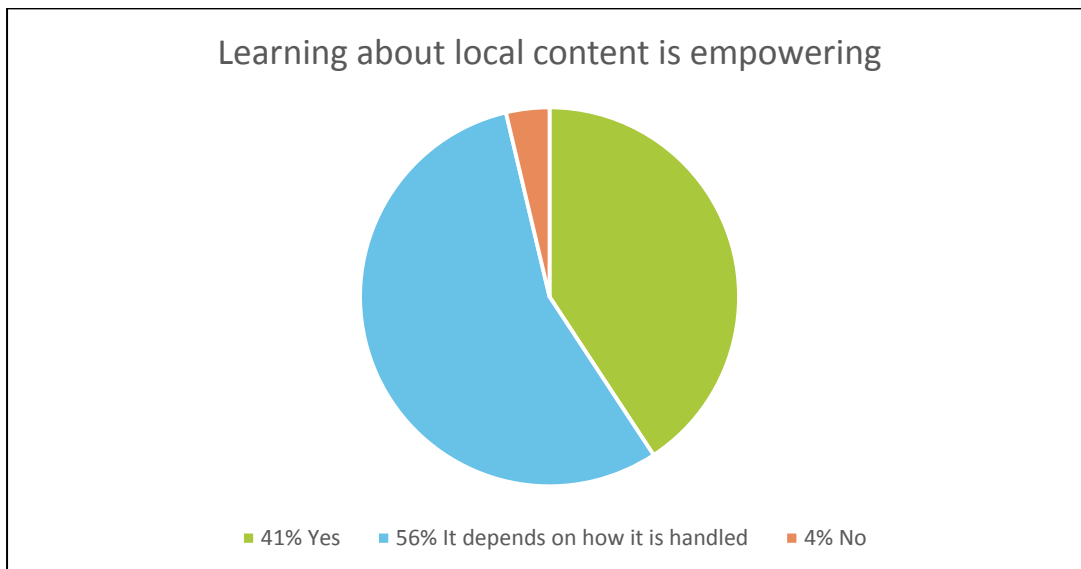
Students make a definite distinction between being the ease of simply conversing in English versus the expectations of ‘academic’ English at university level, noting that a high level of fluency and language skill is required in order using the “formal register” or “proper English” (s11, s13, s19). Oral presentations are not necessarily better (s11, s2, s4). One student explains that orals become particularly challenging and stressful for non-English students, as proper pronunciation of words can challenge a student’s confidence (s4). Similarly, she commented that students who are not at ease speaking in English may also find it difficult to participate in class (s4). One student expresses that relatively straightforward assignments are unnecessarily complicated in their wording (s29).

93% of respondents were tentatively to strongly in agreement that multilingual tutoring as an extra class would be beneficial to students whose first language was not English, while 73% of respondents were in agreement that more spaces should be created in lectures for students to discuss ideas in their home language.

### **Student’s perceptions of Eurocentrism**

Respondents were asked to estimate the number of examples in the course from Europe and America, Africa, South Africa, International, and “other”, and to say where the philosophies or worldviews that informed the course were grounded. The responses varied widely, with some students locating as much as 75% to 85% of the examples and 75% to 97% of the worldview in Europe and America, another group seeing the examples and worldview as fairly evenly spread, and another group seeing bulk of the examples and the worldview, 70% to 90%, as centred in Africa and South Africa. The range of these responses could, however, be due to a number of factors, including whether students are in second or third year, and whether they take the first year, which has a broader global scope, into account. It is worth noting that the pilot study with 4<sup>th</sup> year students stressed eurocentrism as a major issue.

On the whole, students respond more positively than negatively when questioned about whether they find local content empowering: 41% said “yes”, and 56% said “it depends” and only 1 student said “no” (see Figure 8).



**Figure 8**

Students throughout highlight relatability and relevance as justification for local content in the course (s2, s24, s27, s9, s7). A student emphasises local content as assisting in contextualising oneself better: “it allows us to gain an understanding of our country and the people living in it along with the history etc.” (s16). Students astutely deduce that the ability to identify locally can stimulate creative studio practices that are more personally authored: “It helps inform your work through a unique identity, which will help you enjoy it more, relate to it more and apply it better” (s24). The argument is made that because local content is easier to relate and more applicable to students’ lives, it is easier to understand and more relevant (s2, s24, s27, s9, s7). Students relate this to business success (s23, s22) and explain that it is useful to learn from success stories of local creatives – “we can see what other locals have done and how they have grown and survived” (s22).

Students who answer “it depends” remain largely open and positive about the value of local content, whilst relating some concerns. A few students highlight interest and relatability as a potential barrier to experiencing local content as empowering – relating this to issues of taste and personal interest (s1, s25, s15). Some students caution against a narrow focus on local content, and argue that a balance needs to be maintained between local and global focus (s3, s26). Similarly, the following potential barriers are highlighted as important: Saturation – students becoming tired of similar local content (s30, s18) and marginalisation – content not catering for cultural diversity, as such, disregarding one culture at the cost of another/others (s29, s13). A black student mentions that sensitive awareness is necessary in teaching local content, and that single stories or generalisations must be avoided (s12).

It is clear that sensitivity to the complexity of African and South African content, and its global interconnectedness is needed.

## Conclusion

Through the self-reflective process of this survey, we acknowledge that we are not able to fully achieve what is envisaged by humanising pedagogy – we have adopted only a limited form. There are limitations to the curriculum development and teaching methodology in terms of resources, time, organisational structure, and other obstacles, which are a sobering reality.

Based on our findings, we can outline the focus of our continued efforts in the development of the Visual Studies course, as follows:

### Course Content:

- The “additive approach” (Garuba 2015) of incorporating South African and/or African examples to an existing curriculum is not effective as a de-colonial tool on its own. This approach does not authentically shift focus and worldview, but yet again ‘others’ the local by placing it in a secondary comparative position to a privileged centralised position of a sanctioned westernised worldview.
- We need to collaborate to build local content and resources. Salazar (2013, p. 133) stresses that teachers and students can work together in the generation of locally relevant knowledge that is aimed at transforming existing structures – this collaboration can be extended to other institutions.
- Identities of students from minority cultures need to be reflected in course material, and dichotomising approaches to content, focussing narrowly or in generalised ways on black and white identities, avoided.

### Teaching Methodology:

- A vital message from student feedback has been that active engagement in the classroom between student, course material, and lecturer/facilitator – as a key moment in learning is missing for many students. Finding ways to engage students as ‘whole persons’ and acknowledging their lived experiences in the course needs to be prioritised. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the course with large student groups, the fall-back to a traditional top-down approach of ‘lecturer delivering information and students listening’ has proven to be an obstacle to the holistic, as opposed to merely academic, growth of students. The need for lecturers to develop skills to facilitate student learning in more personal and active ways within the classroom is evident.
- There is a need for some acknowledgement by lecturers of the highly complex and fluid ways that students as individuals occupy cultural and personal identities. At some level students seem wary of being related/reduced to one of the collective identities covered within course material. These, and other similar expressions, highlight the need for lecturers to be explicit about various possible subject positions for students in relation to the course material.
- Similarly, *who* facilitates/lectures is important. The lived experience of the lecturer does matter. Diversity of staff is crucial. As Delpit (2006, p. 45) stresses, white teachers working in isolation will not be effective. Additionally, teaching and learning specialists, counsellors and/or psychologists may prove to be invaluable consultants and curriculum reviewers – able to provide insights that can facilitate student engagement with course material in highly meaningful ways.
- More use can be made of students’ home languages.

Sensitivity to local content and lived experience can be facilitated through greater diversity of teaching staff, and an expansion of the knowledge base of current teaching staff. Without resources (time, energy, and money) put towards this end, this will not happen. Institutional support of this process, in terms of the rewarding and validation of staff time spent on re-curriculation, is vital.

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