ENTRENCHING ACADEMIC FREEDOM THROUGH CONSTRUCTIVIST ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced learning institutions to shut their doors, many resorted to online teaching and learning (OTL) to observe social distancing meant to curb the spread of the virus. Due to the social isolation caused by OTL that substituted face-to-face teaching, students took control and actively engaged in their learning independent of support from their lecturers and peers. Therefore, COVID-19 catalysed self-directed learning (SDL) and constructivism. Research abounds on constructivism as an OTL approach during the pandemic. However, little is known about how constructivism was used to entrench academic freedom among students. This research paper investigated constructivist assessment activities that university instructors used during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they entrenched students' academic freedom. The research question was: "What constructivist assessment activities did university instructors employ during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how did these activities foster students' academic freedom?" Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires sent to a population of 45 lecturers in three teacher education programmes at a Faculty of Education at a university in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. Eighteen responses were received, and five were discarded because they did not address the questions asked. Emergent themes were generated through colour coding and thematic analysis. Results showed that assessment activities such as problem-based learning (PBL), e-portfolios, research, debates and discussions fostered different academic freedoms among students. The recommendation was that university instructors embrace constructivism in teaching, learning, and assessments, as it promises to be a liberating tool for students.

Keywords: constructivist assessments, COVID-19 pandemic, academic freedom, online teaching and learning, self-directed learning

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic forced universities to shut down and the world to introduce lockdowns to curb the spread of the virus. The lockdown, with its concomitant social distancing, affected teaching and learning processes because of the changes in physical classroom settings, reduced contact sessions between students and instructors and limited interaction with their peers (Radhamani et al. 2021). Consequently, universities resorted to online teaching and learning (OTL), which led to social isolation and limited or no social support, guidance, and assistance for students. As bad as the situation was, the social isolation experienced by students forced them to become self-directed, autonomous, and independent learners by default. Self-directed learning (SDL) is about students planning their learning goals, seeking learning resources and developing strategies for achieving them (Knowles, 1975). Maphalala, Mkhasibe and Mncube (2021) conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic catalysed SDL among students.

Not only did the COVID-19 pandemic foster SDL among students, but it also "affected how students construct and reconstruct knowledge" (Pacala and Obiedo 2023, 36). During the COVID-19 pandemic, students actively engaged in constructing knowledge using their realities, as determined by their real-life experiences (Kirthika 2022). This way, constructivist learning became a valuable teaching and learning approach during the COVID-19 pandemic (Allen, Rowan, and Singh 2020; Funa and Talaue 2021; Pacala and Obiedo 2023). According to Pacala and Obiedo (2023) and Funa and Talaue (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic promoted the adoption of constructivism in the Kindergarten to Grade12 (K to 12) Basic Education Programme in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Allen et al. (2020) mention that during the COVID-19 pandemic, instructors designed constructivist activities that engaged students actively in knowledge construction. Therefore, one can safely argue that the COVID-19 pandemic catalysed constructivism.

Constructivism, by its very nature, is liberating and empowering (see Wang 2011). According to Wang (2011, 1) "… constructivism is the basic theory behind the learner autonomy." The surge of constructivism during the COVID-19 pandemic created opportunities for students to be active, autonomous, and self-directed learners who independently found solutions to the problems. To this end, constructivism rejects the notion that curriculum is imparted to a passive student (Vygotsky 1978). Constructivism is the theory portraying students as knowledge creators rather than passively taking in information (University at Buffalo 2024). Therefore, the constructivist approach liberates the students' minds to express their opinions freely without censorship from the knowers. It also allows them to reach divergent conclusions without being forced to produce one correct answer predetermined by the instructors. Based on these facts, one can conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic catalysed students' academic

freedom in teaching and learning.

However, we know that assessments are a curriculum aspect that is rigid, bureaucratic, teacher-controlled and stubbornly resistant to transformation (Ferrell 2012). Although there is much noise about student-centred approaches to teaching and learning, literature on the success of these approaches during the COVID-19 pandemic is scarce. A study that stands out was conducted by Meeran and Davids (2022) on how the COVID-19 pandemic catalysed assessment transformation. Equally notable is a dearth of research that links constructivism with students' academic freedom. Essentially, there is not much research on how, during the COVID-19 pandemic, instructors used constructivist assessments to entrench students' academic freedom. This paper investigated how university instructors advocated for students' academic freedom using constructivist assessments during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research question was: "What constructivist assessment activities did university instructors use during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how did these activities promote students' academic freedom?" The concepts of academic freedom and constructivist assessments are presented in detail in the literature review.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This study was conducted at a Faculty of Education at a select university in the Western Cape Province of South Africa offering undergraduate and postgraduate teacher education programmes (TEPs). Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, instructors predominantly used the contact mode of teaching and learning and assessments. When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, the university offered OTL capacity-development workshops for instructors and students to develop their existing capacities so that they could function effectively in delivering/receiving curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic. While most capacity development activities focused on teaching and learning, others developed online assessment skills.

The faculty in which this study was conducted offers teacher education, with Piaget's (1964), Vygotsky's (1978) and Dewey's (2001) constructivism as the most dominant theory taught. It was, therefore, taken for granted that the instructors were accustomed to this approach to teaching-learning and assessments and that they would take advantage of students' familiarity with this approach and use it during the COVID-19 pandemic. Formative assessments, focusing on processes, were used to improve students' learning, whereas summative assessments focused on the final marks or grades (Goloi and Osman 2018; Thomas 2023). During the pandemic, formative assessments were conducted online, while summative assessments were sit-in assessments. Because the constructivist approach to assessments is formative rather than

summative (Jena and Behera 2019), lecturers had the best opportunity to use constructivist assessment activities to improve student learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was on this basis that this study was conceived.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section covers the literature review under two sub-themes: Academic freedom and Power and constructivism.

Academic freedom

Academic freedom is a convoluted concept with no single definition. Academic freedom is associated with the right to education, intellectual freedom and autonomy, freedom of opinion and expression/speech, and human creativity (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2023). Other concepts related to academic freedom are autonomy and fundamental human rights (Vrielink et al. 2011), intellectual freedom and democracy (Badley 2009), and critical thinking/attitude and autonomous human rights (Shaheed 2024). For Cronqvist (2022), academic freedom means opportunities to develop a critical attitude and to question and change given structures. The essential elements of academic freedom for students include forming conclusions for themselves and expressing their opinions (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia 2024). Boulton and Lucas (2011) posit that academic freedom fosters independent thinking and expression in academic staff and students.

In existing literature, academic freedom is almost always pursued alongside the freedom of universities (institutional autonomy) (Appiagyei-Atua 2019). Institutional autonomy is defined as the authority given to universities to govern themselves through their leadership structures; the right to make decisions on the academic programs and curricula, methods of teaching and assessment, research, and student admissions; the right to manage their financial resources independently (financial autonomy); as well as the right of universities to develop their own unique institutional cultures (The Council on Higher Education (CHE) 2013; Petersen 2023). Like their institutions, university instructors are free to choose without constriction by prescribed doctrine, the aspects of the curriculum, teaching methods to utilise, and forms of assessments to use. Instructors also have the freedom to engage in scientific research and disseminate and publish the results thereof; to express freely their opinions about the institution or system in which they work; as well as to participate in professional or representative academic bodies (Kodelja 2018; Petersen 2023; UNESCO 2023).

Literature on academic freedom for students as stakeholders in institutions of higher learning is sparse. In South Africa, university students asserted their academic freedom through

the 2015 #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall protest movements by which they protested rampant racism on university campuses and exorbitant tuition fees charged by universities. These movements were an effort to decolonise the higher education system. They began at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and University of Witwatersrand (Wits), respectively, and later spread to other universities nationwide. For a detailed account of these movements, see Mpofu (2017).

Other than a few cases where students are placed at the centre of academic freedom, they are generally sidelined and their agenda is seldom at the centre of academic freedom discourses (Appiagyei-Atua 2019; Dea 2020; Kimizoglu and Vespa 2023; Maxwell, Waddington and McDonough 2019; Moshman 2017). To support this assertion, Appiagyei-Atua (2019, 151– 152) argues that "Students' right to academic freedom in Africa has been given little attention in the literature and regional instruments … Subsequently, academic freedom for students on the continent continues to suffer abuse and neglect …" Dea (2020) further posits that any talk about academic freedom usually centres around academic staff and not students. Similarly, Kimizoglu and Vespa (2023) mourn excluding students' academic freedom in favour of institutions' autonomy and faculty freedoms. Dea (2020) states that students should have a voice in the pedagogy and content taught to them. These concerns highlight the need to include students as partners of learning institutions and academics in the discourses of academic freedom, as argued by Appiagyei-Atua (2019, 1), who laments that "the academic freedom of the three actors (university, academics, students) is indivisible, interdependent and interconnected." One can then conclude that institutions of learning and university instructors enjoy academic freedom that students do not.

In view of students' alienated position in the discourses on academic freedom, as alluded to earlier on, and in curriculum decisions (Conner et al. 2024), it is rare to involve their freedom of choice in matters of pedagogy and content. Assessment of students' work is one such area, according to Kim et al. (2012), that is based on outdated theories that emphasise content at the expense of context. However, according to social constructivism, students draw their learning experiences from the social environment where they grow and develop (Vygotsky 1978). Kim et al (2012, 1) further asserts, "In contrast, contemporary cognitive and learning science theories support sociocultural and situated perspectives of learning where students interact with their social and cultural environments (i.e., activities, resources, teachers, and peers) to develop knowledge and understanding of the world."

In teacher-centred classrooms, students are seldom given autonomy, independence, and freedom to participate in the decision-making processes regarding the assessment of their work or given assessments that involve them as agents of their learning. While there is much noise

about learner-centred assessments, the reality is that assessments continue to alienate students by being teacher-centred (Kim et al 2012). It is then important to turn the noise of student-centredness into practice by granting students the academic freedom to learn in ways that make them experience democracy in the classroom. Doing so is commensurate with Rogers' (1969) principles of student-centeredness to restore students' rights to learn, which are independent learning linked to respect for students' freedoms and democracy and acknowledging students as autonomous scholars in higher education. This paper investigated how constructivist assessments during the COVID-19 pandemic fostered students' academic freedom.

Power and constructivism

In a constructivist classroom, the instructor ceases to be a sage on the stage and becomes the guide from the side (Stanton 2019) or a facilitator. As a facilitator, she or he creates a constructivist learning environment by designing activities that allow the students to construct knowledge and meaning using their real-life experiences. Being a facilitator suggests a paradigm shift whereby an instructor relegates power to the students, creating an environment in which the student becomes an instructor, and the instructor becomes a student (Freire 2005), thus balancing the power relationships between the two parties. For a classroom to be constructivist, an instructor must be willing to share power with the students and, by implication, shift the power of asking questions for which he or she has predetermined answers and in which students are asked to identify his or her constructions. The instructor must design activities that facilitate the students' construction of knowledge (University at Buffalo 2024), thereby creating a democratic environment that empowers students to use their diverse experiences and perspectives in a way that the realities and interpretations they construct are their own rather than those of (or expected by) the expert instructor. In the context of assessments, Bheda (2022, 1) maintains that "… democratic assessment is inclusive, transparent, collaborative and yet accountable. It calls for active participation of all involved in and impacted by the assessment – our students and we, and it centres on what is good for all. Specifically, democratic assessments create engaged and involved students and educators focus on the public good through shared decision-making processes." Thus, constructivism balances the power relationships between the instructor and the students, granting them the right to learn.

Unlike traditional assessments, which emphasise the product, constructivist assessments consider the process as important as the product (University at Buffalo 2024). This view differs from traditional assessments in which the product is emphasised, and the instructor's answer is the only correct alternative that all students should arrive at. Echoing this view, Meeran and Davids (2022, 115) claim that in constructivism, the student constructs the meaning instead of

the meaning being imposed externally by the instructor, the latter to which they refer to as "instructive". Therefore, power is inherent in the product, who determines it and how students should arrive at it. On the contrary, emphasising both the process and product validates the choices and voices of students in that students decide how to get to the final product without being constrained by the decisions of the authoritative instructor. Viewed this way, constructivist assessments empower students with autonomy and independent decision-making processes. Students can use various problem-solving strategies to generate the product or arrive at the solution to the problem, including discussion, debate, storytelling and dramatisation (Kirthika 2022) or presentations, small group or class discussions and quizzes (University at Buffalo 2024). Because of these facts, constructivist assessments liberate the students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist theory undergirded this research. The constructivist learning theory positions students as active agents in constructing knowledge and meaning (Dewey 2001; Piaget 1964; Vygotsky 1978). According to Piaget (1964), children develop cognitive skills by interacting with the environment using schemata as advance organisers. Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism built on Piaget's theory by adding social interaction, maintaining that the child should interact with those around him/her- the most knowledgeable others (MKOs) (parents, siblings, extended family members, and the community) in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) to develop cognitive and social skills. According to Dewey (2001), children learn by doing.

At the heart of constructivism is the construction of knowledge. Constructivism seeks to understand how students construct their knowledge (Adams 2006). Funa and Talaue (2021) assert that constructivism is a teaching approach that portrays students as active knowledge and meaning constructors. Constructivists hold that students learn best when they are actively engaged in learning experiences (knowledge construction) than when they passively listen to the expert instructor (knowledge reproduction) (Herrington and Standen 2000). Constructivism is dialogic, encouraging students to interact, collaborate, dialogue and share ideas (Sekret 2023).

Nxasana et al. (2023) hold that constructivism assumes that students are independent and autonomous and do not rely on the instructor. Instead, they acquire knowledge through personal research and their judgment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students primarily relied on resources independent of their instructors' and peers' guidance and assistance.

A constructivist instructor, therefore, understands that students are not homogeneous but that each student constructs knowledge differently, using a wide range of previous experiences.

This implies that students attach different meanings to the same phenomenon. Consequently, content and pedagogy must cater to the diverse needs of students according to their diverse contexts, experiences and learning styles.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted in March 2021, a year after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. In this qualitative case study, a population of 45 university instructors who taught full-time and part-time in three teacher education programmes: Senior Phase and Further Education and Training (SPFET), Postgraduate Certificate in Education- Senior Phase and Further Education and Training (PGCE-SPFET) and Technical and Vocational Teaching-Senior Phase and Further Education and Training (TVET-SPFET) at a Faculty of Education at one of the universities in the Western Cape Province of South Africa were included in this study. The selection of this population was purposive, as the researcher believed she would obtain rich data from the participants based on their expertise in constructivism. To observe social distancing, the researcher sent an open-ended questionnaire via electronic mail (Email) and Google after several unsuccessful attempts to secure appointments for Zoom and Microsoft Teams interviews. Of the 45 questionnaires sent out, 18 responses were received, with five discarded due to irrelevant responses to the questions asked. Data analysis involved colour coding commonly recurring sentences and words, followed by the generation of sub-themes from which the themes emerged.

Ethical considerations were made, wherein the researcher explained the purpose and benefits of the study in the questionnaire and assured participants of their safety and voluntariness of participation. Participants were advised to make a tick instead of signing the consent form. Ethical clearance was also obtained from the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee. Participants were informed about the confidentiality of the data obtained and the anonymity of the university and participants. The researcher explained that she would use the numbers to conceal the participants' identities, for example, by using Participant 1 or 2. They were also assured of the safekeeping of the collected data and that it would be discarded after five years.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the analysis of the results based on the data collected from participants. This section is organised into four themes: Biographical Data of Participants, Entrenching Academic Freedom through E-portfolio Assessments, Promoting Freedom through Problem-Based Learning and Research, and Fostering Academic Freedom through Debates, Language,

and Authentic Problem-Solving Activities.

Biographical data of participants

Table 1 provides the biographical data of participants whose responses were received and accepted. The designations reflected in Table 1 might have changed, as they were applicable in 2021 when the study was conducted.

Table 1

Participant	Designation	Gender	Subjects Taught
1	Senior Lecturer	Male	Economic Management Sciences (EMS)
2	Senior Lecturer	Female	Natural Sciences
3	Lecturer	Male	Teaching Practice
4	Lecturer	Female	Teaching Practice
5	Lecturer	Female	Teaching Practice
6	Lecturer	Male	English
7	Lecturer	Female	Teaching Practice
8	Lecturer	Male	Mathematics
9	Lecturer	Male	Computer Applications Technology
10	Lecturer	Female	Natural Sciences
11	Lecturer	Female	Education
12	Lecturer	Male	Mathematics
13	Lecturer	Female	Computer Applications Technology

Entrenching academic freedom through e-portfolio assessments

The results presented in this section pertain to the e-portfolios as a constructivist assessment approach and how it fostered students' academic freedom. Ciesielkiewicz (2019) defines an e-portfolio as a platform where students record, organise and formulate a digital presentation using different media for different purposes and audiences. Mapundu and Musara (2019) hold that e-portfolios foster constructivist learning experiences for students, just like Deneen (2014) established that a high degree of learner autonomy is necessary for the e-portfolios to function as intended.

This section addresses views of Participants 3, 5, 7, and 4, respectively. Participant 3 argued that the e-portfolio gave students many freedoms and learning rights, including process and product autonomy. These choices flowed from the fact that students were given some flexibility in organising some parts of the portfolios, although other aspects were compulsory.

> "E-portfolio provides students with hands-on activities that engage them in teaching and learning and keep them engrossed in learning. Students take the initiative to make footage of all their activities and decide how to organise them in e-portfolios. Additionally, to a certain extent, they can decide which knowledge is most worthwhile and which [knowledge] they can exclude from

the portfolio".

Because of the choices given to students, Participant 3 believed that students felt a sense of ownership of the portfolios they developed.

> "Essentially, it is the students' freedom to decide how the final product should look, how and where they want to store data, and how they wish to present it. Students have inalienable rights and ownership of their portfolios."

Mapundu and Musara (2019) reiterate the role of e-portfolios in providing opportunities for freedom of expression by their users, whereas Crumly, Buckner and Beaty (2007) emphasise how the portfolios enable students to personalise their learning for themselves. Not only do students have ownership of the process and the product, but Participant 3 also held that students had ownership of the outcome of their e-portfolio as well because,

> "The outcome [of the e-portfolio] heavily depends on how the students have organised the portfolios and what they have included in those portfolios. Because the marks they obtain depend heavily on their decisions regarding the process and product, students own the portfolio and the marks they obtain. Each e-portfolio is unique, and the marks students obtain depend on this uniqueness. It is this uniqueness that determines how many marks a student obtains."

Bolliger and Shepherd (2010) maintain that e-portfolios provide students with the intellectual freedom to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills and prepare them to be lifelong learners. Participant 5, for example, raised this fact, claiming that e-portfolios gave students the independence to exercise their critical thinking and creative skills,

> "Even though there is a template that guides students on how to organize the portfolios, it is just a guide that is not cast in stone. At the end of the day, critical thinking and creativity play a big role in organizing this voluminous data, and e-portfolios play a big role in fostering and empowering students with these skills".

Shaheed (2024) furthermore posits that academic freedom enables human beings to be creative, and to develop critical thinking, a similar view held by UNESCO (2023). Therefore, students' use of these skills reflects their academic freedom.

Participant 7 was of the view that the e-portfolio promoted students' freedom to engage in self-directed learning, stating that,

> "Students exercise immense autonomy in the development of e-portfolios. Although there is a deadline on the submission date, still students use their own judgment on when to work on their portfolios to meet the due date. Nobody puts a gun on their foreheads."

Self-directed learning (SDL) is another constructivist learning approach advocated by Knowles (1975) by which students set their learning find strategies and resources to help them achieve those goals. Existing evidence confirms that e-portfolios offer students autonomy to be active, independent and self-regulated learners (Alexiou and Paraskeva 2010; Ciesielkiewicz 2019; Segaran and Hasim 2021).

In the development of an e-portfolio, it is not the teacher's voice that matters, as the teacher's role is to facilitate, guide and support the student instead of giving instructions. Therefore, the e-portfolio affords students the autonomy to assert their voice (Miller and Morgaine 2009) in a constructivist manner. The implication is that the student's voice is central to the e-portfolio development, as asserted by Participant 4.

> "At the end of it all, the student's voice is final. The product of the e-portfolio represents the student's voice and aspirations. It represents the identity of the student and his or her achievements. The teacher's role is to be on standby to guide and assist."

Based on the data presented in this section, it is safe to argue that e-portfolios create a paradigm shift of power from the teacher to the student, which grants the students' academic freedoms that empower and emancipate them.

Promoting freedom through problem-based learning and research

In her article entitled "Finding freedom within structure: Empowering learners through [project-based learning] PBL," Starkey (2023) contends "After creating opportunities to find freedom in your practice, my second invitation is to utilise Project Based Learning (PBL) as the pedagogical approach to bridge the gap between constraints and the freedom to inspire students' joy, wonder and excitement." This invitation sets the tone for the freedom that PBL grants the students who are assessed through it. This section therefore presents the responses of Participants 10, 2 and 11, respectively.

PBL is a project-based instructional strategy that gives students an opportunity to investigate problems, learn content, solve problems and (co)construct knowledge (Bostic, Vostal and Ruffer (2014). PBL grants students the freedom to be creative and innovative under the supervision of an instructor who acts as facilitator. Condliffe et al. (2017) describe the design principles of PBL, emphasising the project as the central vehicle of instruction, and students as active participants in the construction of knowledge. This is the basis why PBL is considered as constructivist. Commenting on the importance of the structure that teachers put in place for PBL activities, Starkey (2023, 3) points out that "PBL empowers a sense of agency through the structures we set in place." In the context of this study, Participant 10 described

the structure she put in place for PBL activities, referring to it as a guide and not a blueprint.

> "I give students PBL projects that focus on solving the current global problems, such as the effects of climate change and pollution. Because movement was limited during the pandemic, I advised students to focus on their neighbourhoods. Collaborative work was thus central to constructivist learning. So, I limited the group size to only two students to observe social distancing. Students were free to navigate around this structure without deviating from the COVID-19 rules."

Participant 10 further described the autonomy, agency, and self-directedness of students' learning in PBL assessments.

> "Students are not given a formula on how to solve the problems they are working on. They are free to identify the strategies for solving problems on their own, and for setting a timetable they wish to follow. How they use those strategies; and collect, organise and present the data rests on the group members."

To support the self-directedness of learning in PBL, Larmer, Mergendoller, and Boss (2015) note that students can make an input on the roles of the team members, tasks to be performed and by whom; questions to be asked/answered, resources to be used, and what the final product should look like, while senior students may be given more control over the learning situation.

PBL activities grant students the freedom to assert their voices and reclaim their agency (Starkey 2023). Supporting this view, Participant 2 described the input that students make in the interpretation of collected data.

> "Students use their own perspectives to interpret and make meaning of the data they have obtained, and the knowledge they have acquired and how they can use it to develop their communities and for their future careers."

Nxasana et al. (2023, 3) concur with Participant 2 that, "Teachers' constructivist learning beliefs align well with PBL as it emphasises the learner's ownership of ideas and personal interpretation of knowledge." Nonetheless, Condliffe et al. (2017) argue that the issues of student voice and choice in a PBL classroom have not been widely explored.

In the context of scientific research, Petersen (2023) defines it as the space for academics and researchers to explore new ideas, engage in rigorous research, share their findings, and express their opinions that are evidence-based without fear of censorship or reprisal. Although this definition does not directly include students as having this freedom, the implication is that when they engage in research activities, they also enjoy this freedom, a view also expressed by Participant 11,

> "I give my students assessments that involve research projects. I give them a topic to work on. They must collect data, analyse it, make conclusions, write a report and present it. By engaging in research, students gain freedom of access to scientific knowledge. They interpret ideas without me breathing over their necks and reach their conclusions."

These statements show that students have immense autonomy in the process of data collection, interpretation, and presentation and product (content). This is not the case in traditional classroom assessments, where students are expected to give a single answer as an interpretation of the question asked. Participant 11's assertion proves that pursuing research advances students' scientific freedom.

Participant 11 also continued to describe how research emancipates the students by stating that,

> "Students gather knowledge in various ways, such as using the Internet from different search engines, and electronic and hardcopy media. Now that it is COVID, they have the freedom to present the results using various media platforms, such as videos, which they can send to me through email, MS Teams, Zoom, and PowerPoint slides."

Participant 11's view was that research empowered students to question taken-for-grated assumptions, as well as to verify facts in existing research.

> "I have noticed that research changes my students' perspectives to transform the status quo. They adopt a spirit of challenging one another in class and verifying information. Research empowers them to question values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, and taken-for-granted assumptions that may be denigrating to some groups of students."

Cronqvist (2022) expresses a similar view that academic freedom empowers students to be critical and to question and change given structures.

This section has demonstrated that PBL and research are valuable tools for entrenching students' academic freedom. It has also been shown that although students exercise freedom in deciding on the process and product, structure is important to guide them in solving different problems through PBL and research.

Fostering academic freedom through debates, language, and authentic problem-solving activities

The results presented in this section were obtained from Participants 1, 8 and 9. On the issue of constructivist assessments, Participant 1 reported that he advocated for a diverse range of engaging activities. The interpretation that could be made is that the diversity of these activities gave students the autonomy to be assessed in different ways, thus increasing their opportunities to succeed. Participant 1's assertion was that,

> "I believe including various online assessment activities, such as case studies, research and writing, high and low-order thinking questions, and problem-based learning projects (PBL) is essential. In this regard, these would consist of online tests, case study assessments and projects."

Bloxham (2018) claims that diversified assessment activities improve validity, authenticity, and inclusivity, with the latter contributing to good student performance, as each student's learning style is accommodated.

Participant 1 also mentioned that his students engaged in debates and discussions of controversial issues, which is uncommon in the traditional curriculum, and he said, "I have found that these activities during synchronous teaching and learning spark considerable debates and discussions."

Lapworth (2023) highlights the freedom of students to debate contentious or discomforting topics without constraints. This type of freedom is not commonly found in a curriculum underpinned by the Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire 2005), where the dominant teacher's voice silences the passive students' intellectual voices. Participant 1 further mentioned that students engaged in controversial topics.

> "For instance, a few weeks ago, we discussed language's influence on teaching and learning during a synchronous lesson and found out that most of the learners were quite passionate and emotional regarding their views concerning language… We had another heated discussion about the current war in Ukraine and its impact on the South African economy…"

Participant 8 highlighted the freedom of mother tongue usage, stating that,

> "Home language is the best tool we can use to express our ideas. Because I am multilingual, I acknowledge this and allow my students to use isiXhosa or Afrikaans if they cannot express their views clearly in assessments and assignments conducted in English. Even in class, when I ask questions in English, they are free to answer in these two languages, and then I translate their answers for English-speaking students. "

From these assertions, one can assume that engaging in controversial language issues fostered

linguistic freedom and freedom of expression that students could only fathom within constructivist classroom spaces. In addition, expressing one's views in one's language or a language of choice might have liberated the students' minds from subjugation by what they may have perceived as an oppressive prescribed language (English). According to Freire (2005), language is a word that empowers one to describe the world, without which one's description of one's worldview becomes limited and distorted.

In a different vein, Participant 9 described how his constructivist assessment activities granted students the democratic right to participate in solving authentic problems that affect their communities or problems related to their future employment, as opposed to using simulations or dramatised content, and said: "Students learn best when they solve authentic problems that affect the community they live in or problems that are relevant to their future employment."

Participant 9 further mentioned that his assessment activities gave students the freedom to develop their content and justify their relevance to what they were doing. This differs from traditional, teacher-centric classrooms where the teacher, as the primary source of knowledge, has the freedom to choose content and pedagogy (MIT Vishwaprayag University 2024, Moshman 2017).

> "When they are given the freedom to develop their content and justify its relevance to what they are doing, in most cases, students come up with new ways of solving problems, formulate new ideas, or use existing knowledge in new situations better."

Participant 9's contention was that his assessment activities granted students the right to learn by developing their content, which equipped them with problem-solving skills, formulating new ideas, and preparing them for the workplace.

> "Most assignments and tasks are designed to promote students' initiative skills with the digital tools they have. In this way, they construct basic content material they use for teaching practice."

Moshman (2009 cited in Moshman 2017) holds that "The academic freedom of students also includes a right to be taught in a manner that respects students' intellectual autonomy, including their right to academic discussion and dissent." In the constructivist assessment activities presented here, one discerns the participants' respect for students' intellectual autonomy and freedom of opinion and expression.

CONCLUSION

This research investigated the constructivist assessment activities that the university instructors used to foster students' academic freedom. The results revealed that they used diverse activities that entrenched many academic freedoms for students. Results also showed that the assessment activities emphasised both the process and the product, unlike traditional classrooms that emphasise the product. Students' freedom of expression and opinion, freedom of access to information, agency, self-directedness, creativity, individual and group problem-solving and decision-making processes, and critical thinking were some of the freedoms that these activities endowed students with. The student-centred assessment activities given to the students helped them solve problems and express their opinions and ideas freely without being censored by lecturers. These activities differ considerably from traditional classrooms, where students reproduce knowledge instead of constructing it.

If universities are to fulfil their core mandates, functions and missions, which are the pursuit of knowledge, they must promote teaching, learning and assessment practices that foster students' academic freedom. Suppose teaching, learning and assessment are not underpinned by constructivism. In that case, students will not receive high-quality education to develop into productive citizens who will participate and contribute meaningfully towards democratic dispensation.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The limitation of this study is that it used a small sample and questionnaires. A larger sample consisting of participants from different disciplines and universities might have helped the researcher to obtain diverse perspectives on this topic. The questionnaires yielded a low response rate. It is possible that face-to-face interviews might have yielded richer data than questionnaires, as the researcher would have probed for answers.

RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE STUDIES

Since research that connects constructivism and academic freedom is scarce, further research must target the relationship between these two constructs.

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