

# THE POWER OF EMBODIED AND ARTS-BASED LEARNING IN THE SHARED HUMANITY EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING INITIATIVE AT STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

## **E. Costandius\***

Dept of Visual Arts  
Stellenbosch University  
Stellenbosch, South Africa

## **S.Pryde**

Dept of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies  
University of Washington  
Seattle, USA  
<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5952-9845>

## **R. Andrews**

Division: Student Affairs  
Stellenbosch University  
Stellenbosch, South Africa  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2451-6939>

## **ABSTRACT**

The transformation of higher education in South Africa has tended to focus on issues such as access and representation, leaving curricula insufficiently addressed. This is surprising, considering that much previous scholarship, including the recent Khampepe Report, has called for the implementation of a specific pedagogical framework to foster in students critical and holistic perspectives about social justice issues and dismantle pre-existing biases. Shared Humanity: Lessons in Critical Thinking at Stellenbosch University was designed with these issues in mind and was implemented in 2019 as a pilot by the Division: Student Affairs in the Unit for Experiential Learning. This article discusses the visual arts session of Shared Humanity, which is premised on relational perspectives derived from post-empirical and indigenous knowledge frameworks. By examining relevant literature, specific learning practices and students' reflections from the visual arts session, the article makes a case for the meaningful inclusion and development of embodied and arts-based learning strategies in social justice pedagogical frameworks in higher education. It argues that embodied and arts-based learning strategies offer new ways of thinking and learning about old problems, and, as such, can become powerful tools for engaging students meaningfully in the transformation project. This article, therefore, focuses on student experiences of arts-based embodied methods to enhance teaching and learning related to social justice concerns.

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**Keywords:** Embodied learning, arts-based methodology, Shared Humanity, experiential learning, transformation

## INTRODUCTION

Approaching three decades after the transition, the need for transformation at South Africa's higher education institutions remains of paramount importance. Higher education in South Africa is still beset by the legacy of apartheid and colonialism, such that race, class, and gender inequities remain prevalent and often challenging to address (Leibowitz 2009; Perumal 2016; Ramphela 2008). While acknowledging the progress that has thus far and continues to be made, transformation efforts have thus far been slow and have not adequately addressed inequalities (Becker 2017; Mosala, Venter, and Bain 2017; Ramrathan 2016; Waghid 2016). Analogously, the call to "decolonise" higher education institutions has become all the more prominent in the aftermath of the 2014–2016 student-led fallist protest movements (Clark and Costandius 2020). As Ramrathan (2016) argues, early transformation efforts at higher education institutions have focused on numerical issues of access and representation, whereas the redress of curricula has been largely insufficient. There is a growing urgency in South Africa to ensure that students develop the capability for critical thinking and social justice advocacy as an essential outcome of a university degree. When conceptualising critical thinking as pedagogy, it becomes possible to develop the capacity for critical thinking, self-awareness and social justice within a capabilities framework.

The Shared Humanity: Lessons in Critical Thinking at Stellenbosch University has been implemented as an experiential learning opportunity within the Division: Student Affairs, Unit for Experiential Learning since 2019. The overarching intention of Shared Humanity and the interconnected learning coach framework is to develop a critical mass of young people who will develop and sustain a democratic state that belongs to all its citizens. This requires an empathic, engaged civil society that becomes the guardian of the rights and privileges of all its people. Students who successfully complete the Shared Humanity experiential learning requirements receive academic transcript recognition.

At the historically privileged (white) Stellenbosch University (SU),<sup>1</sup> a number of highly publicised racist incidents have once again raised questions as to the efficacy of the University's existing transformation apparatus, particularly in relation to dealing with the potential biases

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<sup>1</sup> Stellenbosch University was a white-only institution during apartheid. Furthermore, many apartheid founders attended the institution and even began to draft apartheid's discriminatory policies within its walls (see Moradi 2010).

and discriminatory attitudes of students entering the institution<sup>2</sup> (Mabuza 2022). Indeed, it is such incidents that partially prompted the 2022 Khampepe Commission of Inquiry into racism. Among the Khampepe Report's recommendations is the implementation of a compulsory learning module for all students to "facilitate [the] crucial process of introspection and growth" (*Politicsweb* 2022, 19). The report suggests that this module be designed based on the Shared Humanity module.

This article discusses the visual arts session in Shared Humanity to explore its role in the larger framework of the module. The first author is facilitating the visual arts session, and the second author is a research assistant to the first author. The third author is the designer of the Shared Humanity experiential learning initiative. The visual arts session is premised on insights from posthumanism, new feminist materialisms and indigenous epistemologies, which share a recognition of relationality and the importance of the body to learning and knowing. The visual arts session employs embodied and practice-based pedagogies to help students work through the question: How do I find my space and place in a changing world? As such, this article and the work in the visual arts session in Shared Humanity pose the question of how embodied and practice-based learning can facilitate student growth and critical reflection in light of transformation efforts. Arts-based methods enable individual or collaborative learning that include materials and the body, to make, to express and to think creatively through different art forms. This article argues that such practices can be powerful tools for engaging students in what are often difficult and uncomfortable subjects and for cultivating holistic perspectives about socio-political issues. The visual arts session specifically and Shared Humanity, in general, intend to undertake an exploratory process towards designing teaching and learning strategies towards social justice aims.

## CONTEXTUALISING THE SHARED HUMANITY VISUAL ARTS SESSION

Implementing an experiential learning initiative such as Shared Humanity is certainly not a new idea: Many scholars have argued that without a conceptual apparatus specifically designed to facilitate transformation in learning, the systematic and epistemological dominance of whiteness and Western-centrism may remain largely unchallenged within institutions (Oloyede 2009; Weldon 2010, 361). However, it is certainly new to SU and unique in fulfilling a critical gap as a multidisciplinary offering and a first of its kind for the University. Writing of the 2009

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<sup>2</sup> Two of the incidents in question are the Huis Marais incident, in which a white student urinated on the belongings of a black student in the latter's residence room, and the law dance incident, in which an Indian student was subjected to racial and discriminatory remarks after requesting the DJ to play a song representing her culture (see Mabuza 2022).

Ministerial Report on Transformation, Oloyede (2009) argues that there is an absence in higher education of interaction that exposes students meaningfully to narratives of different races, abilities, classes, genders and sexualities, and teaches them how to identify and confront systems of domination. That the Khampepe Report (*Politicsweb*, 2022) makes a similar observation more than a decade later emphasises the urgent need for more effective redress of higher education curricula. The Khampepe Report acknowledges the work being done by Shared Humanity in seeking to address the issues of systemic bias and racism and recommends that the University implement Shared Humanity as a compulsory module “in order to facilitate this critical introspection and growth” (*Politicsweb*, 2022, 181).

Shared Humanity students follow a structured learning pathway that includes opportunities for reflection, engagement with world-renowned subject matter experts, partnership with human rights organisations of their choice and peer-learning coaching. The multidisciplinary nature of Shared Humanity provides students with the opportunity to reflect on and respond to seven critical questions covering science and technology, health, education, law, economics, engineering and visual arts (Andrews 2022). The multidisciplinary focus maps global issues facing humanity. Shared Humanity and the interconnected learning coach framework are developing a critical mass of young people with the intellectual humility and courage to lead and influence communities towards transformation.

The Shared Humanity is an experiential learning experience that is open to all undergraduate and postgraduate students. A few lecturers in the past have also joined the learning experience. Students and lecturers participate on a voluntary basis as it requires additional time apart from their courses or workload. In 2019, 80 students participated in Shared Humanity, while in 2021, 101 students participated in the co-curriculum voluntary course. The number of participants grew to 143 in 2022 and further to 440 in 2023<sup>3</sup>. Participants from a range of faculties participated between 2022 and 2023, including a number of staff members in 2023. This is represented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Faculty representation of the 2022 and 2023 Shared Humanity cohorts

Faculty	2022	2023
AgriSciences	16	17
Arts and Social Sciences	37	52
Economic and Management Sciences	24	21
Education	4	14
Engineering	6	17
Law	14	43
Medicine and Health Sciences	27	223

<sup>3</sup> The project obtained ethical clearance from the Research Ethical Committee at SU (Project ID 9525).

Military Sciences	2	2
Natural Sciences	8	29
Theology	5	15
Staff	0	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>440</b>

The response elicited by transformation discourses in South Africa has previously been mixed (Badat 2010; Becker 2017; Olsson 2023; Ramrathan 2016; Soudien 2010). The question posed by the visual arts session, therefore, is on the extent to which embodied learning practices and recognition of the relationality of human and non-human bodies have the potential to inculcate a creative, critical, and personalised engagement with questions of social justice.

The Shared Humanity Session 5: Visual Arts is titled “How do I find my space and place in a changing world?” It supports the intention of Shared Humanity to ask students to consider their positionality and experiences in relation to others and the broader South African context. The visual arts session comprises six themes, each based on a concept that is relevant to higher education and critical citizenship. The themes are knowledge, values, social structures, resilience, cultural sensitivity and diffraction. Each session theme begins with a talk by a subject matter expert about the chosen concept, after which students are encouraged to reflect, share their thoughts and do further reading. Following this, students participate in practice-based learning activities, where they are encouraged to experiment with linking ideas and imagining new concepts through acts of making. These experiential learning activities centre embodied learning practices that explore relationality: in other words, the interconnectedness of individuals, objects, environments and socio-political phenomena. Arts techniques such as blind contour drawing, moulding clay, photographing objects and mixing colours are incorporated, and practices focused on sensory and embodied acts such as a walking practice, standing practice and sound recording formed part of the Shared Humanity 2021 cohort visual arts session. The themes have been designed to link concepts with reality while avoiding prescriptive conclusions, prioritising instead speculative practice and the discovery of unexpected connections.

Each of the four sections opens with an example of an embodied practice included in the visual arts session, which the reader is encouraged to experiment with. These practices are discussed in light of relevant theoretical perspectives and examined against the reflections of students who attended the 2021 visual arts session. Submitting the reflections in question was a requirement for the successful completion of the module: All participants were required to submit reflective responses to a series of questions at the conclusion of the session. The

practices discussed in this article do not represent the entirety of practices integrated into the visual arts session, but rather serve as examples to illustrate their underlying rationale and participants' reception. Practices engage multiple layers of experience, incorporate the sensory, and centre embodiment.

## UNDERSTANDING RELATIONALITY AND THE ROLE OF THE BODY

“We start with a simple grounding practice: standing barefoot and feeling your weight on the ground below. Think about the layers of soil below you and the people who were walking here before you – yesterday, a hundred years ago and more. Think about the history of this piece of land. Let the ideas of interconnectedness of people and nature sink in: What we do influences people after us. Think about our genealogies that are interweaved with one another and with nature. On the place where you stand, turn around 40 degrees and slowly observe, analyse and pinpoint your emotions relating with what you see and hear.”

*Excerpt from course materials*

This practice, at the onset of the visual arts session, asks students to consider multiple spheres of experience, including bodily, sensory, emotional, environmental, and historical. Students are required to ponder the connectedness of all of these things in relation to themselves and their bodies in space. The practice, therefore, exemplifies the relational and embodied approach of the visual arts sessions.

The session themes are premised on a number of overlapping theoretical paradigms that conceive of reality as relational; that is, engaged in the relationality between human and non-human bodies. The precise nuances differentiating post-empiricism, posthumanism and new feminist materialism(s) are beyond the scope of this article, but what these paradigms share is a rejection of the Cartesian mind–body dualism in favour of a holistic ontology of an embodied subject, immanently engaged with other human and non-human bodies (Bozalek and Zemblyas 2016; Costandius 2019; Hickey-Moody and Page 2015). The non-human here includes all matter (objects), as well as that which is relegated to the secondary status of “nature” by much traditional Western thought (animals, the environment) (Dei 2000; Hickey-Moody and Page 2015). The subject does not simply have a body, but is a body, and therefore, the body becomes the “ground of all sense-making” (Macintyre Latta and Buck 2008, 316). Furthermore, this mind–body subject does not simply act upon objects or environments in a linear manner, but rather, it is the intra-action of bodies in any situation that continuously produces experience and knowledge (Manning and Massumi 2014; Revelles-Benavente 2018).

Relationality is also based on indigenous epistemologies, in which such notions in many ways pre-date the post-empirical turn of Western scholarship (Dei 2000; Grosfoguel 2013;

Rosiek, Snyder, and Pratt 2019). Indeed, in South Africa, the indigenous Khoi people conceive of the land, the self and others as mutually formed, equally imbued with agency and interconnected (Klaasen 2018). Dei (2000, 114) highlights how indigenous knowledges have long addressed the human experience as intertwined with the material, the ecological and the spiritual, and argues that incorporating indigenous epistemologies is essential to decolonisation. Grosfoguel (2013, 74) analogously criticises the notion that knowledge produced by “a few men from five countries in Western Europe (Italy, France, England, Germany and the USA)” is constructed as universally applicable and highlights how colonial and imperial exploitation has produced an epistemicide of indigenous knowledge. The failure to acknowledge such connections constitutes an epistemological racism that perpetuates the dominance of Western knowledge: ironically, the very dominance that post-empirical frameworks often seek to problematise (Rosiek, Snyder, and Pratt 2019). Attempting to, as Grosfoguel (2013, 74) advocates, “turn the Western university into a decolonised pluriversity” requires valuing European and indigenous epistemologies and finding new ways to balance multiple knowledges in the academy.

The visual arts session, therefore, begins with a critical, embodied exploration of how different knowledges are valued. The aforementioned grounding practice invites students to experience and consider relationality and investigate their spatio-temporal context as a mind–body subject. This functions vertically (by thinking about historical, social and natural layers below us) as well as horizontally (by engaging the senses, experiencing what is around us and noticing their affects) (Springgay and Truman 2017). The course introductory document explicitly asks students to consider “what we can learn from indigenous knowledges of people and the land”. An opening talk by Professor Dei introduces theoretical frameworks addressing the value attributed to Western versus indigenous knowledges.

Although these activities neither provide predetermined conclusions nor claim to offer direct solutions to the complex problem of decolonising knowledge, what they aim to do is provide opportunities for considering knowledge and experience relationally, and pondering the implications of such a perspective. The power of recognising this entanglement is that it can cultivate an equal respect for all bodies (Constandius, Brand, and De Villiers 2020, 96) and reveal the limits of traditional Cartesian models. While certainly not the only significant factor in social justice education, a position of mutual respect and a criticality towards preconceived ideas are important starting points.

O’Loughlin (1998, 292) points out that education too infrequently makes room for learners to consider how knowledge is connected to everyday experience and to explore how their actions and experiences are tied up in what it means to “know”. The abstraction of “knowledge”

from the body can make it challenging to relate to others, and as such, curricula should devise strategies for coping with this (O’Loughlin 1998, 292). One student’s reflection highlighted the knowledge session specifically, commenting as follows:

“The nature of knowing certain things and why, was significant to me. As a result, it has equipped me to value what I study and learn. Provided that knowledge is not suppose[d] to be an individualistic process, but a tool given to enlighten others.”

The response touches on criticality (asking why we know certain things), respect (in “valuing” what is learned and studied) and connectivity (in that we “give” knowledge to “enlighten others”). Although the notion of “giving” knowledge for others ‘enlightenment’ arguably still indicates a relatively linear, top-down consideration of how knowledge is passed on, it is significant that the student derived value from questioning the role of knowledge and how it is shared. Other students similarly commented that the visual arts sessions had an impact on how they thought of their own lives, writing, for example, “[it] made me think of what is really important in life”, “the module has allowed me a space for self-reflection” and “[it] made me sit down with the content and think about my values in my work”.

## **ACKNOWLEDGING THE CODETERMINACY OF HUMAN AND NON-HUMAN**

“We can start by kneading the clay in our hands. Notice the imprints of our skin on the clay and the clay that stains your hands ... Hold the clay for a while so that the inside of your hand makes a solid impression on the clay. When you open your hand, look at the unique shape that your hand formed. We can also use the clay to reflect on a personal issue related to power relations or binary oppositions .... We are not creating artworks; we are experimenting with what the clay can do when we think of an issue [...]. Experiment with the clay and let your mind go to a personal issue you want to work through and use the clay to express it visually.”

*Excerpt from course materials*

Teaching and learning experiences occur in relation to other human and non-human bodies, and cannot be reduced to cognition within a supposedly disconnected “mind” (Aubrey and Riley 2016, 61; Grosfoguel 2013; Macintyre Latta and Buck 2008, 317). This perspective owes much to the earlier scholarship of Dewey (1998) and Merleau-Ponty (2012). Dewey’s work makes a case for doing and experimentation as fundamental to learning, while Merleau-Ponty conceives of the self as a mind-body subject inherently and dynamically engaged in its environment (O’Loughlin 1998, 285). Collectively, their work demonstrates that cognition begins from embodied events and body perceptions (Macrine and Fugate 2022, 15–16). Later theorists have continued to explicate such notions, discussing the power of embodied pedagogies for socially just education (Bozalek and Zemblyas 2016; Brodsky 2002; Leibowitz 2018; Macintyre Latta

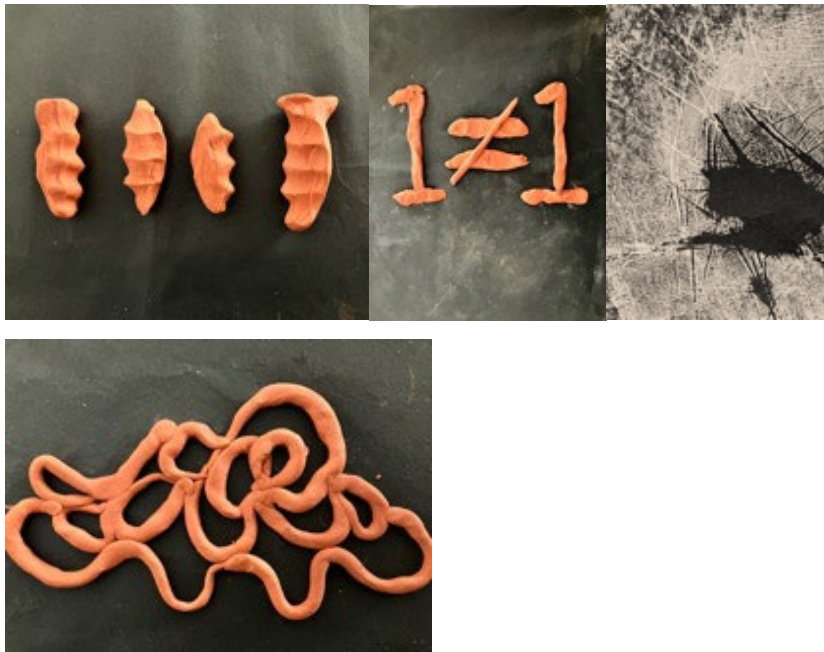


and Buck 2008). In South Africa specifically, Brenda Leibowitz's (2010; 2018) work about socially just pedagogies emphasises the inseparability of knowledge from doing and learning from experience.

The previous section already contemplated the utility of relational perspectives for inculcating mutual respect and connecting personally with course content, but another factor beneficial to the classroom is that understanding human and non-human bodies as codetermining grants objects agency (O'Loughlin 1998; Quinn 2020). Schatzki writes of the artwork that "speaks", and thereby becomes distinguishable as an agential object of knowledge through its capacity to influence human life and behaviour (Schatzki 2005, 20). Barad (2007, 66), often cited under posthumanist and new materialist feminist scholarship, proposes the concept of "agential realism" to describe how "discursive practices" and "material phenomena" inextricably and continuously shape each other. Other theorists link this co-construction directly to the body, noting that inasmuch as we experience the world primarily through the body, manipulating the body and objects also produces experience (Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2009; Macrine and Fugate 2022). The implications of this are beyond simply that bodies are connected, but also that bodies are moved and shaped by their interactions (Aubrey and Riley 2016, 61; Barad 2007; Grosfoguel 2013; Macintyre Latta and Buck 2008, 317). As Hickey-Moody and Page (2015) argue, this suggests that the subject (or perhaps, the learner or human) can be changed by interactions with the non-human. Indeed, this notion is implicit too in indigenous epistemologies, which traditionally do not see humans as subjects with dominion over the non-human, but rather mutually shaped by others (Dei 2000). O'Loughlin (1998, 290) further argues that granting agency to corporeal body/bodies can resist dominant discourses inscribed on the discursive body. Centring the body and its relationality activates student agency by fleshing out abstraction with "all that is experiential and sensuous": agency is not simply cognitively understood but felt and enacted (O'Loughlin 1998, 292).

With these perspectives in mind, students are invited to participate in the clay practice (see Figure 1). The practice visually and corporeally evokes the codeterminacy of human and non-human bodies. The materiality of clay demands to be recognised: press a lump of clay into the palm and observe the transference, the hand's imprints on the clay's surface; traces of clay on the skin. Clay, too, is not a static medium – it can be reworked again and again – and as such, its very nature denies pre-envisioning (Constandius, 2019). In the course, this clay practice is linked to "social structures", which essentially denote the construction of hegemony and power relations between individuals and institutions. Much like structural hegemony shapes our lives and interactions and vice versa, the students are asked to consider their interactions with the clay together with their relationship with these structural societal forces. The visual and tactile

stimulation of making with clay engages a slow, intuitive and sometimes surprising process between the mind and the hand, concurrently giving rise to thoughts and physical forms. De Mits (2008, cited in Lehmann, 2009, 51) describes clay as a “slow medium” that allows room for choices inasmuch as it is not prescriptive about what choices ought to be made. As such, students become independent researchers through the act of making (Hickey-Moody 2015, 169) as they interact with the clay. In relation to complex and contested concepts such as decolonisation, transformation, and social justice, it is important to consider the possibility of new ideas and ways of thinking promised by such embodied processes (Hickey-Moody 2015, 172).



**Figure 1:** Clay practices

One student’s reflection expressed appreciation for how the session enabled him to recognise his abilities to be both creative and critical:

“The visual arts really opened up my critical thinking. It was very hard for me to come up with my own things rather than just following an order. Although there were guidelines, I still felt that I was on my own and I needed to create something new. I loved this part, because it made me really proud of what I could achieve ...all on my own. We know that a rock under pressure becomes a diamond. And this aspect of the module made me feel exactly like that.”

That this student felt proud of his ability to generate something new points to the power of recognising one’s agency. Creativity and criticality are too easily misconstrued as incongruent, but reactions such as the student’s above reveal how they can function together.

## THINKING THROUGH PRACTICE AND DIFFRACTION

“Different places have different sounds; sound is a situated experience of place, and it has an effect on us. Using a walking methodology, starting at the Rooiplein <sup>4</sup>... we will be collecting and recording sounds while walking in groups in different directions. Sound can tell us a lot about the different spaces that we enter. After we made the recordings, we will regroup at the Rooiplein and play all the sounds together as a performance for us all to reflect on embracing diversity.”

*Excerpt from course materials*

Practice-based learning rests on the premise that making is not external to knowledge production, but rather “thought already in the act” (Hickey-Moody and Page 2015, 1). Ryle (1949, 27) points to notions of practical knowing by differentiating between “knowing-that” and “knowing-how”, positing that “intelligent practice is not a stepchild of theory”, but rather that practice itself is central. Similarly, Nelson (2013, 10) locates practical knowledge in a “knowing-in-doing” that must explicitly be practised towards, being inaccessible through only writing and thinking alone. Manning and Massumi’s (2014) important work develops such ideas further, attributing equal importance to all parts of a “research-creation” process to the outcome, including conceptualisation and the active making process. Importantly, they argue against pre-envisioned results that tend to produce more of the same ideas, and instead prioritise the novel possibilities offered by the exploratory, the unexpected and even the playful (Manning and Massumi 2014, 89). While traditional scholarship tends to cast practice-based knowledge production as unserious or lacking in academic rigour, scholars of practice-based research make the case for “making” as a form of research in its own right (Biggs 2006; Nelson 2013). For Van der Tuin (2011), practice-based research in the arts is particularly well aligned with new materialisms, as art-making naturally links bodies, matter and concepts through material and creative processes.

The perspective posed in this article, however, is that embodied learning has implications even beyond the practice-led disciplines (such as the arts and physical education) with which it is traditionally associated. By now, it is common to problematise the application of positivist research models to the arts and to suggest that such models inhibit the possibilities of knowledge production and “deny the intellectual maturity of art practice as a plausible basis for raising significant theoretical questions” (Sullivan 2005, 72). That said, it is less common to apply such insights to educational spaces beyond the arts. Despite decades of research demonstrating the potential and utility of embodied learning, the format of higher education remains principally

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<sup>4</sup> The Rooiplein is a public square on the main campus of Stellenbosch University. It has been a site of many leisure events, student protests, and various types of gatherings.

unchanged. The walking/listening practice described above, for example, is not necessarily an arts practice, and yet it is an example of how embodied learning can be operationalised as a research methodology and knowledge production exercise for students.

Taguchi's (2012) "diffractive reading" proposes a methodology for considering phenomena from multiple perspectives. Instead of following a linear thought path, one thinks (and perhaps moves) through different ideas and frameworks, outward from oneself in multiple directions, interweaving a consciousness of the mind-body, space, objects and the senses. As such, data become not external and passively awaiting interpretation, but rather the subject is engaged and situated in "smell, touch, level, temperature, pressure, tension and force in the interconnections" (Taguchi 2012, 267). If matter and discourse are relational, the researcher, learner or art maker can consider phenomena from multiple embodied perspectives (Hickey-Moody and Page 2015). Diffractive methodologies can, therefore, offer a blueprint for practice-based learning or research by demonstrating relationality and the intertwinement of thinking and experiencing (Hickey-Moody and Page 2015).

This recalls Deleuze's "disjunctive synthesis", also similarly expounded by Manning and Massumi (2014) as the "middle". "Disjunctive synthesis" locates the space between things as the site of meaning-making due to its production of difference (Colebrook 2010). Difference in this conception is positive in that it can create more plural possibilities and break down binaries. In addition, if meaning is located precisely at the meeting point of bodies, then no subject exists prior to an incidence of synthesis, meaning that reality is both fluid and situated (Colebrook 2010, 81). This is not to be diminished as relativism, but rather proposes a situated method for devising solutions to similar problems in different contexts (Grosfoguel 2013, 88). Considering phenomena relationally and diffractively, the meeting points between subjects can be identified and explored.

The walking practice employed a diffractive methodology in an embodied manner. Groups of students proceeded outward from a meeting point and collected aural and visual information from different spatial perspectives. Upon returning to the original meeting point, they shared their findings and discovered that the sonic landscapes of different areas of Stellenbosch told different stories. Through sharing and discussion, students noted multiple possible experiences and interpretations of sounds in the city, and began to make links between this experience and the history of forced removals, spatial apartheid and persisting wealth disparity.<sup>5</sup> While students may encounter many articles or descriptions of these phenomena

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<sup>5</sup> The Group Areas Act of 1950 facilitated a series of forced removals of black and coloured residents of Stellenbosch's inner city, which was part of the strategy of spatial apartheid. Spatial apartheid policies, such as the Group Areas Act, segregated living areas for different racialised groups, ensuring

throughout their academic careers, the affective nature of engaging with the space and the sensory makes the associated concepts less abstract and more specifically situated.

One student who attended the walking practice expressed appreciation for the multiplicity of ideas and perspectives that came up, writing:

“I believe Session 5 developed my critical thinking, because it introduced me to many new ways to look at things and interpret them. I think that skill of being able to view a problem in a different way enables us to solve problems more easily or more clearly.”

A number of students also found the in-person workshop format particularly influential:

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

The visual arts one allowed me to understand more of what is happening in everyday life and what we can do to build community, especially the workshop”.

It is worth noting, however, that the impact of COVID-19 meant that many of the other sessions in Shared Humanity were unable to take place in person. In addition, students from the Tygerberg campus, which is a distance away from Stellenbosch Central, where the workshops took place, commented that they were unable to attend and requested greater provisions to be made for them in future. Since the 2022 opportunity, however, the latter has begun to be resolved, as Shared Humanity has been made compulsory for all fourth-year Physiotherapy students at the SU Medical and Health Sciences Faculty.

## ACCOUNTING FOR AFFECT AND EMOTION IN LEARNING

“In this practice, we will taste and mix spices. Try some spices in your package and acknowledge your responses without judgement ... Accept the taste for what it is. Think about the emotion that you experience while you are tasting or smelling it. Combine some of the spices together, and then taste and smell them again. Can you link the smell or taste with something that you have experienced before? Spices are very much entangled in our history and where we are. The spice trade involved historical civilisations in Asia, Africa and Europe. Africa became part of the Spice Route after the Silk Road was closed, and that gave rise to explorations to find new routes, and later led to people from Europe settling in places in Africa.”

*Excerpt from course materials*

To speak of embodiment in education also leads to a consideration of affect. Spinoza (1876, 127) conceptualises affect as “affections of the body which augment or diminish, favour or

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that the most affluent and convenient areas were reserved for white South Africans, while black, coloured and Indian South Africans were displaced to areas outside of urban economic centers. The legacy of this apartheid spatial planning remains today (see Newton and Schuermans 2013).

hinder its power of action; and at the same time the ideas of the affection”, or in other words, the body’s actions along with cognition about those actions. Where Massumi’s middle and Deleuze’s disjunctive synthesis prioritise the middle as a site of meaning-making, Spinoza’s definition similarly names affect as the “middle” intra-action between activity and passivity (Massumi 1995, 93). Affect can be described as the “lived reality of the situation” and an “expres[sion of the] embodied experience of learning”, making it an important consideration for social justice pedagogies (Hickey-Moody and Page 2015, 7). Deleuze and Guattari, as well as many later theorists, link affect with the notion that human and non-human are codetermined, noting that changing ideas and subjects can often be traced back to affect (Hickey-Moody and Page 2015). Massumi (1995, 106) too has discussed how thinking about affect can “aid in finding counter tactics” to discriminatory and reductionist politics. For Hickey-Moody and Page (2015), this is partially derived from how affect can explain micro-political relations that are inherent in broader social issues. Affect has political power because it can move and motivate people to act in the interest of something (Massumi 1995).

In the spice practice exercise, students are encouraged to become aware of the affective qualities and relational engagement of commonplace spices by interacting with them in multiple ways. The practice activates affect in the body by engaging the senses: As students taste the spices, they can also smell, touch and observe their different characteristics. The body sensations connect the spices and the body to the experience. The spices are further linked to the history of the spice trade,<sup>6</sup> which highlights how the objects around us are not simply passive but often carry their historical associations. As such, the practice engages affect to explore the micro-political relations inherent in the spices.

Embodied learning strategies can create new possibilities for engaging with the often uncomfortable topics that are central to transformation efforts and which students may be hesitant to deal with in traditional ways (Constandius 2019; Leibowitz and Bozalek 2016). Topics central to the transformation agenda in South Africa, such as race and colonialism, elicit complex and often negative responses from students (Schuhmann 2017; Steyn and Foster 2008). Although affect and emotion are sometimes conflated, Massumi (1995, 88) differentiates the two by stating that affect is more intangible, intuitive and unconscious. Affect is attached to the Deleuzian “virtual”: Affect is felt within the body prior to a notion of “experience” and, as such, often precedes emotion (Massumi 2015, 91). It is this intuitiveness that Massumi (1995, 91) argues is “a realm of potential”. As such, beginning the spice practice with exploratory and

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<sup>6</sup> Following the closing of the Silk Route, Africa’s role in the global spice trade became more significant as European traders and settlers began to search for alternative routes to continue their trade. The trade is connected to settler-colonialist histories in South Africa (see Gqola 2005).

sensory activities attempts to activate spontaneous connections and the affective traits of the spices.

That said, emotion cannot be disregarded in embodied learning: Massumi (1995) himself notes that affect can encompass emotion. Traditional curricula underemphasise the role of emotion in knowledge acquisition (Zembylas and Barker 2007). Learners and educators come from diverse socio-cultural and economic backgrounds, bringing different personal histories and emotional landscapes with them into the classroom – all of which have an effect on the experience of learning (Leibowitz and Bozalek 2016; Perumal 2016,759; Zembylas and Barker 2007). Emotions belong to embodied experience precisely because, as O’Loughlin (1998, 280) writes, “as we experience ... emotions, we are affirmed in our spatio-temporal existence”. O’Loughlin (1998, 292) further argues that learning strategies that directly engage “the expressive aspects of individual bodies” and the performative are well poised to foster holistic understandings of situatedness and relations to others. In addition, learning practices and objects (here, spices) become more meaningful when they are linked to real-life experiences (Shor and Freire 1987). As such, students are asked to link spices to personal histories (Can you link the smell or taste with something that you have experienced before?) and difficult emotions are acknowledged.

Later in the same practice, students are asked to use the spices in a colour-mixing exercise (see Figure 2):

“Now that we explored the taste, we can also engage in the mixing of spices. The classification of people according to skin colour is a sensitive issue, but we will try with this practice to ease the sensitivity by practically engaging with mixing spices of different colours to create a skin colour.”

*Excerpt from course materials*



**Figure 2:** Mixing of spices practice

Similar to Berni Searle's "Colour Me" (1998–2000) body of work, students are here asked to interrogate through practice how spices are linked to the construction of race and colonial history. "Colour Me" alludes to the most basic racial skin colour stereotyping (black/white as an alternative for dark brown, red-brown, light red-brown). Smith (2008) argues that the use of spice as a metaphor in Searle's work is connected to colonial trade routes and a history of slavery, but this only refers to the food trade, and in reality, it is also related to other stereotypical connections, such as women and questions about South Africa's and Africa's, complex history. In Searle's "Profile" (2002) too, her skin became a canvas for temporary motifs suggestive of narratives of "oppression suggested by historically significant symbols – a Catholic cross, a Dutch windmill, the British crown – imprinted into the skin" (Paulhan 2019, n.p.). Searle, in her work, aims to challenge this associative history and destabilise these related binaries of light/good and dark/bad (Smith 2008).

Binary modes of thinking and reducing complex occurrences to a set of alternatives (yes/no, past/future, dead/alive) are part of our daily existence. Evidence is often treated as all or none without "tracking the differential impact of graded evidence" (Fisher and Keil 2018, 1848). Society is branded in binary categories such as "masculine/feminine, individualistic/collective, high-power/low-power distance, active/passive or loose/tight, and subtle variations, differences or qualitative nuances that could be more typical of these social bodies are overlooked" (Kim 2007, 28). The challenge, therefore, becomes how to create models that recognise differences without placing them in opposition or a hierarchy. One of the most damaging binaries was created during colonialism, namely the so-called modern West versus the so-called backward rest. New materialist posthuman scholars aim to resist devastating practices predicated on the Cartesian mind-body by including the body-mind practices in learning. Wood and Petriglieri (2005, 36) suggest that a strategy for mitigating the impulse towards polarised thinking emerges and "hold[s] the tension long enough to permit exploration, differentiation, and resolution", becoming what they call a "mediating element". The implication of emotion here is also significant: Holding tension in this way is bound to be uncomfortable. The mixing of spices serves as a mediating element, holding and exploring process such that resolutions can slowly emerge.

It is significant to note that multiple students expressed throughout the course that they appreciated the importance given to emotion in the session. Students expressed frustration with the amount of psychological pressure they experienced due to the demands of their studies and university life, and a perceived lack of provisions for mental health and emotional awareness



within higher education in general. In this light, it is significant to note that when asked in the Shared Humanity student feedback questionnaire about which of the sessions were most impactful or memorable, 12 out of 23 responses mentioned the Shared Humanity visual arts session. Some of the responses have been discussed already, but the general impression of students' responses was that they found the session to be engaging and enjoyable. One response also expressed gratitude for the inclusion of mindfulness practices into the Shared Humanity visual arts session, commenting: "The visual and creativity session offered some mindfulness techniques that have helped a lot with studying and destressing."

This is not to say that negative emotions should be altogether avoided in learning. Student and teacher discomfort in conversations about race can lead to avoidance – an unproductive result if the aim is to address biases or discriminatory views (Haviland 2008). Venerating consensus and casting conflict as intrinsically negative can preclude the need to challenge dominance and discrimination (Apple 1979). In fact, conflict and resistance can often be driving forces for new knowledge production (Apple 1979). In Freirean tradition, Zembylas (2018) proposes a "pedagogy of discomfort". He suggests that transformation aims can be activated in the classroom by balancing discomfort with proper management and care for students' well-being (Zembylas 2015; 2018). Although there is much work left to be done on how precisely such a balance should be accomplished, embodied learning strategies may offer new solutions for the dilemma between allowing for necessary discomforts versus preventing the alienation or tokenisation of individual students.

Within critical, relational practices, emotions, affect and vulnerability are placed in relation to broader factors and explored through bodily processes. Rather than avoiding or ignoring discomfort, reactions are acknowledged, critically questioned as well as empathised with, and disengaged from dualisms (Zembylas 2015). Recognising relationality and making room for expressions of affect and emotion are not intended to facilitate consensus, but rather precisely for embracing plurality. It is, therefore, not that the power of embodied learning obfuscates conflict, but rather that this conflict is acknowledged as personal, emotional and relational – to examine how the self and others are engaged. The sensitivity of the issue is acknowledged, and although "eased" by engaging with them through practice, students are still asked to "work through" and later discuss their emotions and how these emotions are entwined with socio-political structures. By resisting the urge to categorise ideas into good/bad, this/that and one or another extreme in a binary opposition, students are asked to allow multiple ideas, affective experiences and emotions to coexist and interface with one another. Faced with discomfort, students engage a mediating element to explore their reactions.

Aside from some of the responses previously mentioned, which explicitly noted their

encounter with a multiplicity of viewpoints, one student's response stood out as particularly emotive:

“Visual thinking: this opened my heart to a fountain of thoughts that run from the heart. Apart from talking about things that came up in the spur of the moment, there was a word limit, or rather, the message that could be conveyed had a thousand words and was everchanging because every person has somewhat similar but unique interpretations of the same message.”

The idea of “similar but unique” interpretations suggests that the student took note of subtle differences between responses to a single stimulus, as opposed to perceiving responses as opposed. Although perhaps somewhat idealistic, the recognition of the fluidity (“everchanging”) and multiplicity inherent in exposure to visual stimuli appears to have left an impact on the student. The notion of “somewhat similar but unique interpretations” also suggests a move away from binaristic thought models and easy categorisation to one or another opposed idea.

## CONCLUSION

As discussed, the processes of transformation and decolonisation in higher education spaces in South Africa are complex and require new solutions and strategies to mitigate some of the obstacles preventing more efficient change. In curricula specifically, incorporating and valuing insights from indigenous epistemologies is an essential part of the decolonisation process, and may very well provide some of the new solutions necessary. As such, this article discussed the importance of seeing the world relationally (as much indigenous knowledge tends to do) and the implications of such a perspective for how we design learning opportunities for students. It argued for the power of embodied and practice-based learning strategies in terms of social justice education frameworks. At present, implementing such strategies towards curriculum transformation remains a speculative, exploratory process. However, existing literature about embodied pedagogies and the reception of the Shared Humanity visual arts session are promising, and, as such, should not be discounted.

A number of practices from the Shared Humanity visual arts session were included and analysed alongside participants' reflections to investigate how embodied and arts-based learning can facilitate critical thinking, personal engagement with course material, holistic perspectives and the recognition of the agency of the human and non-human. While the arts seem the obvious domain to lead the charge towards experiential learning, it has also been demonstrated how disciplines outside of the arts can benefit from incorporating practices into learning opportunities. Scholarship dating back to Dewey (1998) and even Ryle (1949) has

formed the basis of a strong argument for conceptualising learning as inseparable from experience and from doing: It is about time higher education begins to operationalise these ideas.

Specific insights that emerged from the literature and from examining student reflections suggest overall that practice-based strategies are positively received and can influence the cultivation of critical thinking. Although it is challenging to qualitatively measure learning experiences, a number of aspects emerged that can be researched further. A relational approach to education can cultivate a mutual respect for all bodies, including the environment and animals, as it encourages students to think of themselves as immanently connected to the people, objects and spaces around them (Constandius 2019). As such, students were able to engage personally with course content, as the practice sessions connected abstract ideas to real life. Explicitly engaging the body can generate new ideas, as students become researchers through making, practising and activating spontaneous, experimental processes between the mind–body and other people and objects (Brodsky 2002; Manning and Massumi 2015). Finally, room for emotion and affect must be included in a holistic approach to education, as they have political power and have an impact on how students learn. We cannot continue to separate student well-being from the process of learning, because doing so reinforces outdated dualisms that see cognition as separate from corporeal experience. At the same time, there is also room for discomfort if we are to truly challenge bias and discrimination.

Although it remains to be seen how and if Shared Humanity will be developed into a framework for all students at the University, it is a small but promising development that the visual arts session as part of Shared Humanity has been made mandatory for all second-year Physiotherapy students at Tygerberg. The critiques levelled by the Khampepe Report ought to be taken seriously in the future development of Shared Humanity and the development, more generally, of comprehensive pedagogical models in higher education designed to address discrimination and bias. Altogether, it is clear from both literature and participant reflections that embodied learning offers a powerful pedagogical tool that can be explored and developed. Further research can be done to investigate the efficacy of specific practices, fine-tune curricula, and investigate the use of such strategies beyond the arts.

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