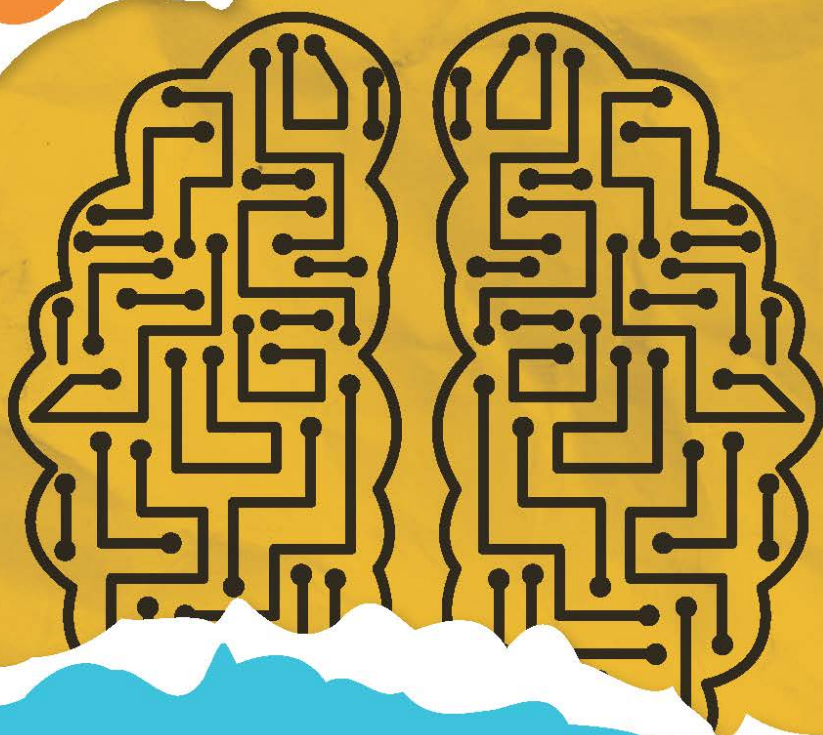


Reimagining South African Higher Education

Towards a Student-Centred
Learning and Teaching Future



Editors: Danie de Klerk, Greig Krull, Tshepiso Maleswena, Fiona MacAlister

CHAPTER 12

UN-DISCIPLINING OURSELVES THROUGH AN ACADEMIC PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CURRICULUM INNOVATION: TOWARDS SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN SCHOLARLY WRITING AND TEACHING

Kasturi Behari-Leak

Centre for Higher Education Development
University of Cape Town
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9744-510X>

Helen Buchanan

Division of Occupational Therapy
University of Cape Town
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5540-9928>

Hanske Flieringa

Division of Occupational Therapy
University of Cape Town
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1422-1352>

Fatima Osman

Department of Private Law
University of Cape Town
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1357-7840>

Liesl Peters

Division of Occupational Therapy
University of Cape Town
<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5353-0724>

Amshuda Sunday

Division of Occupational Therapy
University of Cape Town
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9973-7413>

Walter F. Uys

Department of Information Systems
University of Cape Town
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7709-9326>

Abstract

As we move into an unknown future in higher education, the ability of university teachers, students, and the curriculum to be responsive and innovative is critical.

This need was tested during the pandemic with the expectation of pivoting toward online modes of learning and teaching, when academics had to learn on their feet as they moved their students to online classroom spaces. These moments highlight the need for academic professional learning to support ongoing growth for teachers in higher education. The purpose of this chapter is to share the story of a specific academic professional learning course, which provided opportunities for human connection in times of extreme crisis, such as the pandemic. Framed as a creative curriculum innovation, the course re-imagined scholarly work on learning and teaching as a form of social justice and activism. Using WhatsApp as a pedagogical platform, the facilitator and participants (the authors of this chapter) engaged in a 12-week process of individual and collective learning to stimulate a process of re-imagining new ways of learning and teaching in higher education. We used multi-ethnographic methods to reflect individually and collectively on our experiences and to analyse these collectively. This chapter exemplifies how such curriculum innovation and design are able to trigger deep and meaningful change towards re-imagining academic scholarship of learning and teaching that embodies a socially ACTivist stance. We found that these academics are empowered to introduce these new practices and pedagogies to their students through re-imagining their own repertoires.

Keywords: autography; decolonial; public intellectual; scholarship; social inclusion

1. Introduction

This chapter offers an overview of our experiences of a novel academic professional learning (APL) innovation, which ran as a non-accredited short course over 12 weeks during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are seven academics from four disciplines, namely the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED), Occupational Therapy, Information Systems, and Law at the University of Cape Town, ranking from senior clinical educator or lecturer to dean.

When the COVID-19 pandemic ripped the proverbial rug from under our feet, academics and students were left on shaky ground. The unpredictability of delivering tertiary education during a pandemic (see Islam, 2021) meant that academics were constantly navigating the slippery slopes of a 'new normal'. Enabling and ensuring the APL of academics in the context of crisis and change is like painting a bus while it is moving. There was pressure on academics to be innovative and responsive, especially in online teaching, which, if not mediated intentionally, could have a de-humanising effect (Laura & Chapman, 2007; Laura & Hannam, 2017). Holding the pedagogical space with integrity and humanity was critical in our attempts to leave no students behind.

As academics, we found ourselves exhausted and focused on the urgent redesign of the new virtual learning and teaching space. However, we simultaneously recognised the need for our own replenishment and creativity, prompting us to sign up for an APL course that could contribute the necessary "sustenance" we

describe and reflect on in this chapter. The APL course was grounded in our participation in an academic development programme offered by the CHED at the University of Cape Town for mid-career academics. Ironically, it was not focused on online support but on discussions of the importance of scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) (see Boyer, 1990; Trigwell et al., 2006) as social activism through academic teaching and writing. By signing up for the course, we acknowledged that this form of APL is the very pool from which academics have to draw as they expand and extend themselves during and beyond times of crisis. In other words, we assert that the APL of academics as social activists has the potential to act as both a lever and catalyst for change.

The APL course described in this chapter provides an example of curriculum innovation, which is responsive to a time of crisis and relative to the affordances of participants (academics as students) at the time. Using decoloniality as a theoretical lens, we, as participants and facilitator of the course and authors of this chapter, reflected on how the course unearthed our ability to dive deeply into our own sense of self as academics, to connect with and find our metaphorical and authorial voice and vision, and to teach and write in ways that foreground scholarship as a call for action, re-centring Africa as a locus of enunciation.

2. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) as Social Activism WhatsApp Course

The SoTL as Social Activism course forms part of the Established and Seasoned Academic Practitioners' Programme (ESAPP), which persevered amidst the conditions of lockdown and physical distancing during 2021. The ESAPP is an example of an institutional professional learning programme aimed at mid-career academics to facilitate the ongoing culture of learning. It is designed to strengthen learning and teaching practices at postgraduate level, to navigate the perplexed field of academic scholarship and its challenges.

As a sub-project of the ESAPP, a group of participants opted to join the SoTL as Social Activism cluster, to deepen their understanding of scholarship from a decolonial perspective. Our identity and agency as SoTL authors with a social activist disposition is critical to challenging the SoTL reproduction of scholarly processes, and traditions that privilege dominant forms of ahistorical and decontextualised knowledge-making and knowing in learning and teaching (Behari-Leak, 2022). Reproducing oppressive academic practices as we bring SoTL into public contexts requires a commitment to critical self-reflection to reimagine SoTL work, seeking various types of justice (Chick & Friberg, 2022). As a way of challenging reproduced practices, we included our reflections on this aspect of the course. This forms part of the data set for the entire chapter (see methodology section).

2.1. Aims of the course

The main aim of the course was to re-focus academics' academic writing to respond to issues affecting higher education – and all its component parts – in ways that engage the academic and the social as entangled parts, always in interplay. The course was designed to enable participants to find their own authorial voices. It intentionally provided the space to connect with those issues that are close to their heart, but to engage with those as a form of legitimate academic scholarship. It was anticipated that, through the deep process of internal deliberations and soul searching, the participants would be able to explore new pedagogical ideas while amplifying social justice concerns. Please note that all quotes are reproduced verbatim and unedited.

My particular interest in creating this short course [...] is to develop a cadre of impactful writers in academia who can engage the social imaginary and rewrite a new social compact for HE and society. By this I mean that we need to think and imagine widely and wildly what a new, inclusive, socially just higher education could be. I believe we can do this by imagining how we can be different, authentic, relevant, and responsive to our students and our contexts and disseminate this through our scholarship. [Facilitator].

The intended outcome was the infusion of participants' "academic" writing and teaching as social activism, a perspective much needed in academia today, as the boundaries and borders between the university and society become blurred and porous.

2.2. WhatsApp as an APL platform

The novel aspect of the SoTL as Social Activism course was using WhatsApp as a cost-effective platform for delivery. In many ways, the short course modelled online learning practice with low bandwidth, low-cost data connectivity, and any-time-any-place accessibility as constraints. The choice of WhatsApp was deliberate, as it offered a safe and relaxed space that was intended to divert from the formality and conventions of "writing for publication" courses that suppress a relaxed and generative way of thinking, feeling, doing, being, and writing. In other words, participants were encouraged to be themselves and express themselves honestly and creatively without fear of failure. WhatsApp has been used extensively in educational contexts (see Durgungoz & Durgungoz, 2022) to enable participants to learn differently (see Robinson et al. 2015), create a sense of belonging (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014), and provide a context for social and emotional support for peers (Timmis, 2012). This has significant links with the social justice aims of the APL course where social activism is the key focus of participants' SoTL writing. Before the facilitator established the WhatsApp group, she shared the course outline and guide with participants via email and invited all participants to a ZOOM meeting to discuss

the course overview and methodology. WhatsApp was used for all communication and the upload of course instalments, as well as for checking in when submissions were completed. Participants texted the facilitator in a private message with clarification questions, the exception being when they were specifically asked to post to the group chat. The course encouraged accountability, as participants had to check in every two weeks to indicate that the tasks had been completed.

3. Theoretical Reference Point

The course was informed by the Latin-American scholarship of (de)coloniality of being (see Maldonado-Torres, 2007), which intended to shape the authorial voices and scholarly thoughts in authentic ways, irrespective of the publication pressure placed on academics in higher education (Callaghan, 2016; Von Solms & Von Solms, 2016). From a decolonial perspective, power-wielding journals use their conventions, traditions, and hegemonic writing practices to reject submissions without considering who academics are and where they are writing from (Moya, 2011). By not being supported to assert their geographical and cultural location and ethos, academics voices are further marginalised. Ironically, those voices from the margins are critical to the centre and the socio-cultural revolution discourse in higher education globally. This revolution has enabled others from different spaces and places to expand their global (read: mainstream) understanding of critical theory in praxis and has provided all with a vocabulary to express and understand their own lived reality. This becomes poignant, especially in Africa, where the genealogies and histories of who we are and from where we speak are intertwined and cannot be sanitised or clinically sculpted. The decolonial movement challenges academics in the global South to engage in epistemic disobedience – that is, to reject Western epistemology as being neutral, universal, and detached (Mignolo, 2009; Miles, 2019; Morreira, 2017). Epistemic disobedience calls on academics in the global South to consider drawing on epistemologies that are contextually relevant to producing and using knowledge from Africa. Academics need to re-centre and remember what it means to be human in this space as a form of epistemic justice (Fricker, 2013). Re-authoring and re-authorising our self-narratives and the histories that pre-date us, are critical in the current context where fake news, duplicity, cloning, and social engineering compromise the testimonial justice of those who have been marginalised.

4. Course Design

The WhatsApp course was designed as an asynchronous intervention with a bi-weekly instalment, providing a range of prompts to ignite writers’ creativity to dive into who they are as academics, and what they are passionate about as human beings. The course duration was 12 weeks, with the facilitator sharing a different set of inputs – including poems, photographs, memes,



Figure 12.2 Course calendar

voice notes, songs, movies, and academic articles that she curated with a thematic focus in mind – every two weeks. Each theme brought attention to an aspect of learning and teaching with the (de)coloniality of being (see Mignolo, 2009) in mind. For instance, our usual practices and ways of doing were called forth for reflection using decolonial ways of thinking. Some of the prompts called on participants to meditate, draw, listen to a podcast or song and/or use these as stimuli to respond to a written task. The facilitator used short voice recordings for instructions and tasks that we had to complete. Learning was largely independent.

There was no course registration, fees, course outline, assessments, or even a detailed schedule. Just the commitment to participate in the course and an “I’m in” at the start of a roller-coaster journey of self-discovery [Participant 1].

The focus was on deep engagement as opposed to outcomes. This was facilitated by the exclusion of formal evaluation from the course. Self-discipline was required to maintain accountability and commitment.

The bi-weekly check-ins helped me to be accountable and encouraged me to complete the tasks. Where I really could not complete the task for that 2-week period, I knew I could communicate with [the facilitator]. [Participant 2].

Engaging was important and learning through this was important. It was not about outcomes; it was about engagement. But it was committed engagement, which stood in place of usual outcomes in the form of assessment. This set the stage for what was to come and built the container in which the rest of the course could emerge. [Participant 3].

We were empowered to regulate our time, input, and outcomes as part of a less formal learning experience. This allowed open, honest, and authentic reflections, resulting in uniquely curated written and creative pieces. The learner-centred nature of the course encouraged freedom to develop perspectives and voice in authentic ways. Whilst much of the learning experience was individual, there was also recognition of the ‘collective journey’ that provided significant motivation. Participant 3 noted the intentionality of this approach by describing the online, synchronous introduction to the course that occurred before its start:

The facilitator used the analogy of being part of “weight watchers” – a (mostly) easily identifiable cultural reference to a weight loss programme, but importantly, one that happens in a group context. While the weight loss is individual, the journey is collective. I see now, in retrospect, the parallels this has to the experience of the SoTL Whatsapp course. The change was individual, but the journey was collective. [Participant 3].

5. Methodology

In developing our collective voice, we drew on the tenets of a multi-ethnographic approach, which entailed three or more researchers collaboratively analysing and evaluating their understanding of social issues to arrive at new insights after various rounds of interpretation (Gagné et al., 2018). This allowed us to explore our experiences of the course and our contextualised responses to its provocations. The diversity of perspectives by having all authors involved arguably produced a rigorous data generation and analytic process (Orton et al., 2019). In this context, we acted as both the “researchers” and the “researched” (see Gagné et al., 2018).

After the course had concluded, we met to reflect on our participation. We felt that the course had enabled the development of our thought processes towards social activism in our scholarly writing and teaching. During these conversations, we decided to generate individual vignettes about our experiences. Each vignette was uniquely constructed but paid attention to the question: How did engagement in the course enable social activism in scholarly writing and teaching? To construct our vignettes, we each drew on three sources:

- reflections generated as part of our 12-week engagement in the course (May 2021–Aug 2021);
- our response to a set of reflection questions that we had answered as part of evaluating the course (reflection sheet contributions); and
- a short paragraph that each of us constructed in direct response to the above question (March 2022).

The facilitator generated a vignette about her experience designing and facilitating the course. We used the vignettes as our dataset, which further prompted a critical dialogue about our experiences. During these dialogues, we deliberated reflexively, choosing to follow a two-level analysis process (Table 12.1).

First-level analysis	Second-level analysis
We coded our vignettes independently, highlighting engagement, enablement, social activism and thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. We then grouped these codes together to identify emergent ideas. Afterwards, we met face-to-face to share the first-level analysis. An overall theme emerged from the deliberations that best captured the experiences of all participants: “ACTivist” stances – digging up the parts to bring ourselves together.	We constructed a consolidated thematic table that included the emerging theme and the key ideas. After that, each of us added the data from our vignettes, which supported the ideas co-created through our face-to-face dialogues. This allowed us to re-engage with the raw data and served as a further mechanism for consolidation.

Table 12.1: Levels of analysis

Given that we drew on our personal experience of the course and no third parties were affected or risks involved, we did not pursue ethics approval.

6. Co-Creative Sense-Making

Academic conventions tend to straitjacket authors into specific modes of rigidity and sterility, which often belie the rich texture and nuance (see Yoo, 2017) that are vital parts of courses such as this one for participants to think, act and live “outside the box”. Inspired by the tone and tenor of the course itself, we chose to infuse our writing of this chapter with a similar scholarly innovation to include our previously silenced, unique, individual, and collective voices. We see the intentional focus on our authorial voice as a decolonial gesture intended to de-link from the conventions of academic writing that render certain people silent, invisible, and marginal. We wanted to develop the inspiration to find and strengthen our authentic voices in the hope that what we say will not bear punitive consequences from publishers, if not by our institutions as well. We see voice as part of our individual and collective authenticity to illustrate and assert our own signature style and insights that allow us to breathe in academia. As we present and re-member our re-flections and our sense of who we are in sense of who we are in “Afrika” (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 2009) through the collective analysis of our vignettes, we aim to provide enough structure to allow the reader to follow our argument, but we do so by example and by performatively enacting what we say. We believe that it is in the act of being new that the new is born. We hope that this newness finds a captive audience.

6.1. Reflexive deliberations

Our reflective conversations prompted an important question: How did our experiences of the course inspire us to be activists in our disciplinary and teaching spaces? In attempting to respond to this question, we realised a disconnect between our actions and what the university or our disciplines expected us to do, thereby surfacing a tension that we needed to negotiate. In our dialogues, we reflected on how the course had carved out a space through which we were able to explore and learn how we might navigate our own sense of identity, voice, and agency differently. The ongoing process of generating activism in scholarly writing and teaching was recognised as dynamic, disobeying the “boundaries” of the course experience. There was acknowledgement that none of us had in any way “arrived”, and that the introspection and navigation triggered through the course continued. In the sections that follow, we share the key ideas that emerged as part of these deliberations.

6.2. “ACTivist” stances – digging up the parts to bring ourselves together

Engagement in the course prompted the generation of “ACTivist stances” – the product of digging up ourselves as a way of bringing our identities together and reclaiming our voices. We acknowledge the important interplay between agency, identity, and discipline in generating these stances. Critically understanding and negotiating this relationship was prompted through the different course instalments. We could see how this influenced our scholarship and ways of being in the academic space.

As I stand now and stare out of a clear glass window, I am grateful for the experiences that have shaped who I am today. Deeply rooted in how I choose to ACTivist and enact my own sense of agency, is a form of liberation in response to an environment that is saying to you every day to BE someone else. The value I gained from this reciprocal relationship in this course can be described as a symbolic one of growth and change. Because the structure of the course was what it was, and reciprocal exchange of knowledge was structured as triggers that afforded opportunities that valued deep reflection. [Participant 4].

Participant 4's experience resonated with many of us.

The course offered this opportunity for introspection and reflection at a really critical time. We were coming out of years of student protests and in the midst of a pandemic. There is this persistent questioning of academia and whether we perpetuate the harms of the past. The course offered a curated space in which you could contemplate and grapple with issues rather than just seeking to work through it yourself – or not grapple with it because you were so overwhelmed with work and daily tasks. It was directed and intentional which elicited a much deeper engagement with issues. [Participant 5].

Participant 5's idea of a curated space was made possible because of the contextually relevant prompts that forced us to think about ourselves, our thinking, and how this connected to our positionality. Similarly, students' positionality is important in understanding the historical constraints they face as a result of who they are, where they come from, and how they are predisposed to opportunity and challenge in higher education. This foregrounds a student-centredness in our engagements in class.

Participant 3 described the experience of introspection as “digging yourself up” in her vignette, drawing a parallel with the idea of the course operating as an “archaeological dig site” through its pedagogies:

The pedagogical approach continuously worked to bring to the surface (expose), understand and work through myself and its relationships to my teaching and research (process), and then to reflect on and document these in ways that helped me to further process this learning into my teaching and research moving forward (record). [Participant 3].

Some of us connected with how we might extend this learning into our own teaching spaces.

The prompts required me to explore these questions at a deeper level by asking me to reflect on “who I am” and how I greet my students in a socially inclusive way. From this reflection, it appears as if the more authentic our “check-ins” in our classrooms are, the more included our students will feel. On reflection, I realised that if we as educators take a deeper interest in our students and their identities the course becomes more meaningful to them. [Participant 1].

The prompts were recognised as exceptionally powerful triggers for introspection. Participant 5 acknowledged how the organisation of these prompts was critical.

It is a song I had heard before, but never had the same impact. I think the prompts and the song in particular had the impact it did because of the overall way the course was curated. In the sense that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. So put together the prompts could trigger feelings and lead to a greater reaction than if you simply listened/read them alone. [Participant 5].

Different prompts resonated differently for each of us, but we all agreed with Participant 2’s reflection of their significance for the overall introspective process:

A vital part of this journey was the purposeful way in which the content was curated and the bridging between each instalment which helped me make the links on a personal level. The use of multiple media to evoke emotions and the reflective tasks to capture my thinking (which I knew were for me only) were powerful in leading me deeper to bring things to the surface and helped me find my critical voice. [Participant 2].

The experience of introspection during the course elicited the realisation that some of us had become disconnected and needed to reconnect with our authentic selves. Participant 4 reflected on how daunting this can be:

The thought of exposing my authentic self was very daunting. How would I possibly respond to students who look and act differently to me? [Participant 4].

Whilst often uncomfortable, introspection also generated hope by facilitating a reconnection with the past, to find oneself again in the present and in doing so, to re-discover one’s voice.

This course has helped me see that my voice is still there ... I had to make this voice of mine known again, dig it out of its dormancy. It had been filed away ... It needed to be heard once again. [Participant 6].

The facilitator offered an image in her reflection, which captured the intention of the course to allow the authentic self to emerge through this process of introspection. By sharing our experiences, we discovered that it was possible to work with the discomfort evoked through this process because of the safe space to reflect honestly, as it was produced intentionally as part of the course design. Participant 5 captured this in her vignette:

I dislike exercises that require you to share private details publicly. The exercises worked so well because there was no pressure to do so. The exercises which required you to be honest could be done so well because no one would judge you and you would not be forced to reveal details to perfect strangers. What you took from the course was really determined by how prepared you were to be honest with yourself and go through the exercises. I think the private reflection allows for real honesty. [Participant 5].

The course also prompted us to think through and use our agency differently in response to the experienced “disconnect”, which strongly affected those of us in leadership positions.

Negotiating the academic environment is difficult. In a leadership position I was struggling to reconnect – the struggle is the tension between making the ‘right’ decision vs. this is what the university is saying, this is what you should be doing. [Participant 4].

Collectively, we reflected on the process of navigating through the discomfort that arose when it dawned on us that what we were required to “do” did not match who we really were. This was related to the realisation of how the academic environment can be dehumanising, resulting in our personal activism being repressed. Participant 2 reflected on this experience:

Understanding at a deeper level how the tension I have experienced between me, the person, and me, the academic (with all the expectations that go with that) and how that has repressed the activism part of me because of fear of judgement from colleagues and the possible repercussions on my career trajectory. So, I have largely towed the line. [Participant 2].

The process of learning how to navigate and challenge this disconnect could be described as a balancing act, which we captured metaphorically as walking a tightrope.

During this process of finding myself, I was also at the same [time] negotiating the academic environment to reconnect. Reconnecting the self was a critical turning point, as I had to walk

the tightrope in balancing my negative and positive traits to find the right me. [Participant 4].

The course enabled us to see how we were conditioned and constrained by ideologies within our academic disciplines. Disciplines give us boundaries within which to operate, but also restrict our freedoms. By adopting decolonial thinking strategies, academics may foster the learning and teaching that could facilitate students to be involved in diverse activities. This has the potential to bring about change and transformation, which may enhance participants' freedom to reflect on de-linking through acts of epistemic disobedience. Re-connection required a sense of discomfort so we could move out of our comfort zones and trigger the learning required to "find your unique voice".

Through this process, I came to the realization that I need to find my own voice, both in my teaching and research, to break out of the mould [excavate] that the discipline and institution expects me to fill. [Participant 1].

I think the timing of the course was critical for me in finding a voice. For so long the rules of the university and academy seemed set. You either did things in accordance with the rules or you would not succeed. The pandemic revealed how flimsy those rules [are] and how they could be challenged and changed when needed. [Participant 5].

The course created the space for academics – often overwhelmed by the demands of the profession – to consider social justice concerns within the pedagogies of learning and teaching. The vignettes of participants revealed that the course ignited much more:

An unintended outcome [of the WhatsApp course] was the deep revelation each participant unearthed about who they are as academics and how they want to shape higher education (HE) positively in this crisis and beyond. Focusing the short course on scholarly ways to imbue SoTL with a keen sense of social responsiveness to tackle challenging societal issues through courageous scholarship, meant that we were learning to engage as public intellectuals with SoTL in Action, not just as academic researchers for journals, publishers, and rankings. Like Chick (2019), I believe SoTL needs to be broadened to engage those we consider to be our public(s). We need to use our research and scholarly writing to create a different ethos, where the public out there (society) can engage with the public in here (university) in a healthy, reciprocal, and robust relationship. By opening up our audiences to include students, peers, society and communities,

we can learn to write with a sense of purpose and the goal of positive change for all concerned. This activism is needed to raise consciousness about solutions and interventions that can add value to our pedagogical problems currently. [Facilitator].

It was clear that the experience of participating in the course marked the start and/or continuation of “un-disciplining” ourselves within the university space. The course offered the opportunity to de-link from and challenge the colonality of being that is most often prescribed for us within the HE terrain. This was not about finding ourselves anew; rather, it was about re-claiming what had been “put aside” in order to breathe again.

6.3. The course experience

Our experience described in this chapter provided an opportunity to re-imagine how students might be centred more intentionally within the HE space. The course, and its facilitation, intentionally disobeyed the usual criteria for a legitimate course within higher education. This happened in two critical ways:

- by intentionally removing peer and teacher scrutiny of participation in the course; and
- by engaging us, as students, in a novel, easily accessible and stimulating learning platform, without formal assessment practices.

This focused our learning within the realm of “being human”, where the intent was for students to find their voices, not for anyone else’s gain or approval, but for our own development as humans who are also academics. Significantly, it demonstrated how “becoming through learning” is intimately intertwined with course design, structure, and content. This compelled us to consider whether innovation in higher education is best served through complying with the usual course conventions. It exemplifies what might emerge when course construction – or any student learning experience – focuses on contextual relevance and student and societal needs when determining how to design learning experiences that are student-centred.

7. Implications for Reimagining Student Success in Higher Education

Imagine a HE system free from the legacies of the past, where success is measured by students’ degree of personal change and transformation with reference to their own starting point, and not by grades, course averages, throughput, or compliance with pre-determined outcomes. The APL course discussed here challenged some of these colonial beliefs (and us as students and academics) by way of a novel course where the only measurement for success was the voluntary participation and bi-weekly check-ins to announce the completion of activities.

Nature of the prompts	Need to: ■ resonate deeply with the facilitator's own being to be effective; ■ trigger a deeper level of reflexivity in students; and ■ provide a broad range of media, including texts that resonate with the facilitator and the students.
Student attributes and dispositions	Willingness to: ■ dig deep in order to surface their own false beliefs and identities; ■ engage with the prompts to develop their own voice; and ■ deeply reflect on the insights gained from the prompts and activities.
Structure of the course in effecting learning	Enable students to: ■ reconnect with their latent identities (in this case as educators in higher education); ■ see how the predominantly colonial beliefs in higher education constrained their own beliefs; and ■ tap into new ways of social responsiveness and activism in their own HE contexts.

Table 12.2: *Key insights in the course and its delivery*

Using decoloniality as a theoretical reference point, we reflected on our ability to dive deeply into our own sense of self as academics, teachers, researchers, and disciplinary experts to connect with and find our voice, presence, and vision. This process also actioned us to find ways to re-centre Afrika as a locus of epistemological enunciation and pedagogical innovation as part of our scholarship. As part of the process of writing this chapter, we, the facilitator, and participants, were able to de-brief with each other on our experiences during the course and share our discomforts in a safe space without having to share the intimate details of our responses to the tasks and activities. This safe forum provided us with some key insights about the course and the nature of its delivery, which can be drawn on for re-imagining learning and teaching in higher education. Whilst the outcome of the course is a collective voice, we deliberately prioritised each of our own analyses of our experiences and were careful not to erase some voices and spotlight others. We recognise that our positionality as individuals, who identified as established or seasoned academic professionals, is different to that of many students in the HE space. Nonetheless, we believe that our experience of the course holds insight into how the HE space could enable social activism in learning and teaching.

8. Conclusion

The past two years have re-emphasised the need for academic professional learning (APL) of academics in the context of online and blended learning. This chapter has presented the experiences of academics as students participating in a 12-week WhatsApp course that aimed to re-position APL as social activism. Using decoloniality as a theoretical reference point, we reflected on and analysed

our experiences of participating in this course. The course allowed each of us to find our metaphorical voice and un-discipline ourselves from how we have been professionalised in our respective disciplines. The significance of the contextually relevant prompts in the course, the deep and meaningful experiences that the reflections provided, the discomfort of sharing these experiences, and the freedom of the WhatsApp platform to navigate and explore this disconnect, resulted in the unintended consequence of delving deeper into ourselves, as academics. The chapter illustrated how curriculum innovation and design, offered through a WhatsApp course, can trigger deep and meaningful change and provide a new possibility for a rich learning opportunity for students towards re-imagining the scholarship of learning and teaching that embodies a socially ACTivist stance. Even though it was never the intention for the participants in this course to replicate the WhatsApp course with their own students, it is hoped that in some ways, the legacy of the SoTL for Social Activism course will continue in our own teaching practices.

Acknowledgements

In 2020, the facilitator engaged in a 10-day academic writing WhatsApp course designed by Associate Professor Moyra Keane (from the University of Johannesburg) for the DHET-HELTASA (Department of Higher Education and Training and the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of South Africa, respectively) doctoral programme. She was so taken with the mode and method that she asked Moyra whether she could use her course as a basis to develop her own. With Moyra's blessing, the facilitator then proceeded to develop, design, and curate all content and material for the short course for her university (as discussed in this chapter) named SoTL as Social Activism for Social Justice.

References

- Behari-Leak, K. (2022). Going public with SoTL as Social Activism. In N. L. Chick & J. C. (Eds.), *Going Public Reconsidered: Engaging with the World Beyond Academe Through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003445036>.
- Bouhnik, D., & Deshen, M. (2014). WhatsApp goes to school: Mobile instant messaging between teachers and students. *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research*, 13, 217-231. Available: <http://www.jite.org/documents/Vol13/JITEv13ResearchP217-231Bouhnik0601.pdf>. Accessed 6 February 2024.
- Boyer, E. (1990). *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED326149>.
- Callaghan, C. W. (2016). 'Publish or perish': Family life and academic research productivity. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 14(1), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v14i1.727>.

- Chick, N. L., & Friberg, J. C. (Eds.). (2022). *Going Public Reconsidered: Engaging With the World Beyond Academe Through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003445036>.
- Durgungoz, A., & Durgungoz, F. C. (2022). "We are much closer here": exploring the use of WhatsApp as a learning environment in a secondary school mathematics class. *Learning Environments Research*, 25(2), 423-444. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10984-021-09371-0>.
- Fricker, M. (2013). Epistemic justice as a condition of political freedom? *Synthese*, 190, 1317-1332. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-012-0227-3>.
- Gagné, A., Bakbak, S., Chahrour, G., & Wattar, D. (2018). Re/Discovering our Teacher Identities Through Digital Storytelling with Syrian Children and Youth: A Multi-ethnography of Four Diverse Educators. *The MT Review*. Available: <https://mtrj.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/mtrj/article/view/29368>. Accessed 7 May 2023.
- Islam, S. (2021). Unlearning, relearning, and paradigm shift to online tertiary education during the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh. *Bangladesh Journal of Medical Science*, 20, 65. <https://doi.org/10.3329/bjms.v20i5.55399>.
- Laura, R., & Chapman, A. (2007). Educational Compuphilia: The New Assault on Mental Health in Schools. *Education Research and Perspectives*, 34(2), 80-90. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1080189>.
- Laura, R. S., & Hannam, F. D. (2017). The Technologisation of Education and the Pathway to Depersonalisation and Dehumanisation. *Asian Journal of Social Science Studies*, 2(2), 1. <https://doi.org/10.20849/ajsss.v2i2.155>.
- Maldonado-Torres, N. (2007). On the coloniality of being: Contributions to the development of a concept. *Cultural studies*, 21(2-3), 240-270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548>.
- Mignolo, W.D. (2009). "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom." *Theory, culture & society* 26(7-8), 159-181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409349275>.
- Miles, A. P. (2019). Unbound Philosophies and Histories: Epistemic Disobedience in Contemporary Latin American Art. *The International Encyclopedia of Art and Design Education*, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118978061.ead039>.
- Morreira, S. (2017). Steps Towards Decolonial Higher Education in Southern Africa? Epistemic Disobedience in the Humanities. *Journal of Asian and African studies*, 52(3), 287-301. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909615577499>.
- Moya, P. M. L. (2011). Who We Are and from Where We Speak. *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1(2), 79-94. <https://doi.org/10.5070/T412011809>.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. (2009). *Re-Membering Africa*. East African Educational Publishers.
- Orton, L., Ponsford, R., Egan, M., Halliday, E., Whitehead, M., & Popay, J. (2019). Capturing complexity in the evaluation of a major area-based initiative in community empowerment: what can a multi-site, multi team, ethnographic approach offer? *Anthropology & Medicine*, 26(1), 48-64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13648470.2018.1508639>.

- Robinson, L., Behi, O., Corcoran, A., Cowley, V., Cullinane, J., Martin, I., & Tomkinson, D. (2015). Evaluation of Whatsapp for Promoting Social Presence in a First Year Undergraduate Radiography Problem-Based Learning Group. *Journal of Medical Imaging and Radiation Sciences*, 46(3), 280-286. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmir.2015.06.007>.
- Timmis, S. (2012). Constant companions: Instant messaging conversations as sustainable supportive study structures amongst undergraduate peers. *Computers & Education*, 59(1), 3-18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2011.09.026>.
- Trigwell, K., Martin, E., Benjamin, J., & Prosser, M. (2000). Scholarship of Teaching: A model. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 19(2), 155-168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/072943600445628>.
- Von Solms, R., & Von Solms, B. (2016). Publish or perish-but where?. *South African Computer Journal*, 28(1), 44-58. <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC193783>.
- Yoo, J. (2017). Writing out on a limb: integrating the creative and academic writing identity. *New Writing*, 14(3), 444-454. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2017.1317274>.