

Designing the project: Theoretical approaches

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THIS CHAPTER OUTLINES THE KEY THEORIES that informed the development and design of the Community, Self and Identity (CSI) project and those theories that emanated from the implementation of the project. It charts the theoretical exploration as this occurred in three phases during the project, in parallel to the participatory action research approach adopted by the project team. The chapter concludes with a suggestion for future theoretical explorations in relation to citizenship, privilege and difference.

Progression of the theoretical framework

The CSI project was underpinned by particular theories of social justice and critical pedagogy. As academics working in a post-apartheid landscape, we were conscious of apartheid's legacy of social inequality and its continuing effects on teaching and learning in the higher education sector. In this chapter we share the progression of our theoretical framework, broadly sketching three distinct but related phases of the project – the initiation, implementation and post-implementation phases. The first phase of the project drew on pertinent theories of social justice and difference as well as critical and poststructural theories. These theoretical perspectives informed our motivation for initiating the CSI project and provided a structure for the design of the curriculum. In this way they provided us with the conceptual tools to build the framework for the implementation of the project. During the second phase the project drew on the theoretical influence of the pedagogy of discomfort (POD) on the implementation and analysis of the project. The third phase, during which the project was used to inform other such pedagogic initiatives, was motivated by a consciousness of positionality, social inclusion, and notions such as privilege, responsibility, and the political ethic of care. The sequential structure of this chapter is important theoretically and methodologically as it parallels the iterative process

of doing participatory action research in teaching and learning, where theory is both informing and informed by the process. In order to illustrate how this iterative theory/practice process played out, we include some illustrative quotes from the CSI project. The quotes which are used are not emblematic of how successful or not the project was, but are a way of bringing the theory 'to life', particularly in the implementation phase of the project, where the PoD is foregrounded.

Some of the disciplinary and pedagogic concepts not dealt with in this chapter, for example on communities of practice, are taken up in later chapters. This chapter also focuses on theories incorporated during the post-implementation phase of the project, which we anticipate may be helpful to direct the future trajectories of our work in this area.

Theories informing the initial design of the project

Two types of theories informed the initial design of the project, and these are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Theories of social justice and difference

In this section we discuss Nancy Fraser's trivalent view of social justice and Martha Nussbaum's ideas of justice in relation to education, particularly higher education, and their relevance for the CSI project.

Traditional theories of social justice address issues of social justice, fairness and equity. While these are central and important concepts for considering issues of privilege and marginality, they are also limiting because they do not address issues of difference, relationality, particularity, otherness and vulnerability. The focus of the CSI project revolved around relationships between students who are differently positioned across a number of boundaries such as institution, profession, race, class and other social markers. We therefore sought theories of social justice that incorporated the notion of difference, in addition to promoting a concern for equity. Fraser's theory of social justice, for example, is one such theory that incorporates notions of both social equity and difference (Fraser 1997; 2000; 2008; 2009; Fraser & Honneth 2003). Her theory proposes that participatory parity – by which she means being able to interact as equals or peers in social life – should be the goal we should strive for in order to attain social justice. The ability to achieve participatory parity, Fraser maintains, is dependent on equity in the economic, cultural and political realms. These three conditions for equity are dependent on how resources are distributed in society (redistribution), how one's attributes are valued (recognition) and how one is socially included through some kind of political

voice (representivity) (Fraser 2008; 2009). This approach to social justice coincided with our aims in the CSI project to contribute to promoting participatory parity across institutions, disciplines and a number of axes of difference. We aimed to do this by engaging students in relational activities that potentially highlight positions of privilege and oppression, and by providing opportunities for them to reflect on these.

As is elaborated in Chapter 2, the common concerns that we wished to address in our project were the inequities that existed across the higher education institutions (HEIs) resulting from the continuing effects of apartheid in which we were located and the lack of contact between students and lecturers across these institutions (Bozalek et al. 2010). An additional concern was the different ways in which human service professions are valued – in other words, recognised or misrecognised – and the effects that these forms of recognition may have on students' and higher educators' identities. Fraser's perspective of social justice and participatory parity thus informed our self-interrogations as a research and teaching team in meeting and deliberating about the best possible curriculum that would promote participatory parity among students from different HEIs, disciplines, races, classes and gendered histories. It was this focus on participatory parity that informed our chosen methodologies of participatory learning and action (PLA) techniques for students to engage with one another about their differences. These are open-ended, visual interactive methods that stimulate or promote flexible, experiential and in-depth learning by encouraging dialogue. We knew that many of the University of the Western Cape (UWC) social work students were differently placed in relation to academic literacy due to their educationally disadvantaged backgrounds and socioeconomic status (Breier 2010) (for more details of the differences between students at the two universities, see Chapter 2 of this book). To achieve participatory parity across these groups of students and to get them to recognise or value their diverse attributes, we deliberately placed them in small groups where they had to interact with one another and engage with aspects of their past. We chose a visual medium in the form of PLA techniques for students to begin engaging with the issues of community, self and identity so that they would not be able to immediately judge one another in terms of their academic literacy. Furthermore, we knew that PLA techniques had the potential to stimulate dialogue about significant and deep issues in a non-threatening environment (Bozalek & Biersteker 2010).

A further incentive to design this project was our concern about the kind of graduates that were being produced as democratic citizens of a complex world. In spite of its inscription in South African policies, as described in the foreword to this book, however, there has been little engagement with how to embed graduate attributes and the social good in curricula in South African HEIs. We saw the CSI project

as an opportunity to begin to consider how these attributes could be embedded into a cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary curriculum.

Nussbaum's (1997; 2010) writings on social justice provided a conceptual platform for considering how to develop a curriculum that incorporated ideas of difference and citizenship. In particular, she highlights three central capacities that graduates need to develop as democratic citizens. The first is a critical examination of oneself and one's own traditions and taken-for-granted practices. The second is the ability to think beyond one's own locality as an international citizen. The third is a narrative imagination, which involves the ability to reflect a compassionate understanding of otherness and difference. Central to this imagination is the recognition of relationality and one's connectedness to others by virtue of others' *and* one's own human needs and vulnerability (Nussbaum 1997; 2010).

Critical and poststructural theories

In addition to being informed by theories of social justice, we used critical literature in the CSI course to expose students to theoretical tools that would assist them to interrogate commonly held assumptions about community, self and identity. These readings were based on critical and poststructural theories that propose that all forms of knowledge are both political and historical in nature (Foucault 1988). Critical and poststructural theories emphasise the shifting and contextualised nature of knowledge and regard it as important to analyse forms of knowledge in order to destabilise them. This is central to developing new and contextually appropriate knowledge forms.

In our project we were cognisant of the euphemistic and taken-for-granted way in which the concept 'community' is regarded across the professions of social work, psychology and occupational therapy. We wished to alert students to different and more critical views of this concept in particular. In our curriculum design, which required students who were from different social and geographical locations in South Africa to think about their communities by depicting them through drawing maps of their communities, we anticipated that the historical complexity of the concept of community would become more evident. We thought that self-reflection, interaction with one another across difference, historicising the concept of community and exposure to critical literature would assist students to reassess how they viewed community from a larger perspective and develop new perspectives on the concept. By giving them the opportunity to engage with their own experiences of community and discuss this across different social parameters, professions and institutions and then engage with critical literature, we hoped that they would gain access to different ways of thinking about community. By doing this we aimed to denaturalise, deconstruct and problematise the concept

of community through critical texts such as Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992), Colombo and Senatore (2005), Dominelli (2002), Lugones (1998), Phelan (1996) and Wiesenfeld (1996). These texts assisted students to reflect on their own experiences of community and those of their peers. This critical literature also exposed students to interdisciplinary social justice and critical perspectives on community and difference, which were not included in their discipline-specific literature.

Critical theory also has social justice as its end goal and is concerned with foregrounding the views of marginalised or oppressed people. The traditional binary between educators as knowledgeable experts and students' knowledge and experiences as less valuable or hidden is prevalent in the dominant shape of pedagogical encounters. We viewed it as important to include students as co-creators and shared constructors of knowledge during the CS1 course. As co-creators of knowledge, students were able to relate their own experiences to the literature and interrogate their personal experiences of community, self and identity in relation to the relevant political, social and economic historical contexts.

It was important to facilitate an environment where students could confront difference across the boundaries of discipline, institution or social marker. Davidson (2004), one of the core theorists upon whom we drew in the course, proposes that it is only through interdisciplinary collaboration across boundaries that one is able to interrogate and destabilise taken-for-granted assumptions. He calls this the ability to critically reflect on the 'decentring of the academic self'.

Theoretical approaches during project implementation: The pedagogy of discomfort

When reflecting on the project after the first year, we realised that in addition to the theories that had informed the design of the project, we needed to incorporate further theories capable of addressing the processes involved in the implementation of the project.

We needed an analytical framework to understand the different ways in which students engaged across multiplicities of difference in their interactions with one another. One such analytical framework was the *POD* (Boler & Zembylas 2003). Drawing on critical theory, the *POD* starts from the assumption that hegemony is a process by which socially constructed values and power relations are portrayed as representing the natural order in a commonsense way. Individuals internalise and practise these dominant cultural and political messages and in so doing actively contribute to maintaining the dominant status quo. Members of both marginalised and dominant groups experience discomfort when hegemonic ideas are challenged. Hegemony is likely to prevent individuals from engaging in critical inquiry, thus

occluding a recognition of the effects that institutionalised power relations such as racism, sexism and classism have on all social groups. From this understanding, members of both dominant and marginalised groups need to engage in critical inquiry, because no one escapes hegemony (Boler & Zembylas 2003: 115). For example, both men and women are likely to internalise dominant gendered norms such as the normality of women being responsible for caregiving. Similarly, both black and white people are likely to hold internalised racist assumptions unless these assumptions are directly challenged. For example, a student who participated in the CS1 project in year one wrote:

Because I am 'coloured' I always felt that we did not have a set culture, I found myself sometimes adapting to things I did not want to do, just so that I could fit in. (SU coloured female psychology student, 2006)

The POD is a critical pedagogical approach that aims to disrupt hegemonic taken-for-granted assumptions about social structures and relations. This approach encourages individuals to engage in critical thinking that explores the relations of power inherent in habits, practices and knowledge. Individuals are encouraged to explore the messiness of power relations and avoid neat binaries and stereotypes. Hegemony is a process by which socially constructed values and power relations are portrayed as reflecting the natural order and the commonsense way of doing things. A student on the CS1 course in 2008 learned how these socially constructed relations can be contested:

By really working and engaging with the identity/ies that are imposed on us, we can reshape them as the tools for our liberation. Making the decision to actively ask, challenge, explore and play with what it means for me to be, for example, woman, black, etc. in this life allows these imposed identities to become the very vehicles for the discovery of our own agency and our freedom. (SU white female psychology student, 2008)

Exploring the messiness of power relations is not merely a cognitive exercise, but requires an engagement with emotions. When individuals are confronted by knowledge that contradicts hegemonic beliefs that they hold they may experience discomforting emotions such as guilt, fear, anger and anxiety. In order to incorporate these alternative views, positive emotional labour is necessary. In this way, it becomes possible to reconstruct and expand available discourses and practices through learning:

Our module felt so far from the realities and talks I have to face back at home that it was easy to talk about transformation, or my preference to view any community as interdependent with other communities, forming a national body of communities. Though I won't be able to keep silent for much longer,

the cognitive dissonance (only because of my silence) and the emotional fire inside me cannot be contained. (su white male psychology student, 2006)

The PoD framework was useful in a number of ways for our project. Firstly, it provided an analytical tool for us to evaluate and write about the extent to which students' prior assumptions about community, self and identity had changed. Secondly, it represented a pedagogical approach that allowed us to incorporate the importance of emotions for new learning to take place. Emotions, cognitions, ethics and rationality are traditionally viewed as unrelated and distinct processes (Zembylas 2007). In this view emotional disengagement is considered crucial for learning to occur. However, many authors (Nussbaum 1997; 2010; Boler & Zembylas 2003; Zembylas 2007) argue that emotional work is particularly pertinent to issues of difference and should not be viewed as a private and individual experience, but as inherently social. Emotions are, in fact, central in motivating political and social action. Moral anger, for example, should therefore be distinguished from other forms of anger, because it often provides the impetus for opposing injustice (Zembylas 2007). Thus the acknowledgement of emotions in educational encounters foregrounds the importance of students' evaluation of their own positions, embeddedness and participation in their own learning.

The PoD also aims to expand opportunities for both educators and students to name their own identities, practices and new ways of being in the world. This can allow people to engage in new kinds of relationships with others who are perceived as different, as a student on the course in year one wrote:

The stage was set for an epic battle of conflicting notions and underlying racism, everyone seemed to be on the defensive. However, this was not the case. We started discussing our notions and found that many of our points, views and ideas coincided. Within five minutes, the atmosphere changed from defensive to concerted and creative. This allowed each of us to understand and accept others points of views and realize that the river of racism, previously vs. currently disadvantage and personal pride, could be bridged, and it was easier than [we] first thought. (su white male psychology student, 2006)

The PoD makes reference to three models of difference (Boler & Zembylas 2003). These models have been a useful analytical tool for students and educators of the CS1 project. The first is termed the celebration or tolerance model, which promotes benign multiculturalism and fails to address power relations. An example of this would be instances where students are asked to share traditional cuisines with each other, thus romanticising and exoticising particular cultural practices. The second model – the denial/sameness model – views all people as the same, thus erasing

possibilities of dealing with power relationships inherent in difference. This model therefore reinforces assimilation to dominant cultural practices and allows those who are privileged to decide when difference is applicable. In the CSI project, one student said: 'The community should not be based on the colour of the people living there... because things are changing we can't base things on race.'

The third model – the natural response/biological model of difference – suggests that all difference and fears thereof are innate and natural. This is demonstrated by the comment of another student on the project: 'I think that discrimination will always be part of our human nature.'

Hegemony prevents people from engaging in critical inquiry and recognising how institutionalised power relations such as racism and sexism affect everybody. The POD enables individuals to engage in critical thinking to explore habits, practices, knowledge and power relations. We are encouraged to explore the messiness of power relations and the avoidance of neat binaries and stereotypes. In order to reconstruct and expand available discourses and practices through learning, it is necessary to engage in positive emotional labour. This refers to students and educators moving outside their comfort zones and embracing ambiguity. Positive emotional labour also expands opportunities for both educators and students to name their own identities, practices and new ways of being in the world. This can allow people to engage in new kinds of relationships with others who are perceived as different. The following quote provides a good illustration of the learning process that the POD may elicit in students. In the excerpt, a coloured male student is able to reflect on the discomfort and self-conflict he experienced in reflecting on how his internalised racism impacted on the way in which he interacted with his peers:

The profound effects of former, not necessarily academic experiences later occurred to me, that is, previous exchanges with family, friends, classmates, lecturers, 'Coloured', Black, and White people, engendered and inadvertently influenced the way I related to my group members. For example, when speaking with Black group members, I tended to unwittingly speak louder, slower, and acted overly amicably towards them, patronizingly explaining what I'd meant by what I may have said; where the complete antithesis was true when engaging White group members, which in retrospect I deeply regret doing but struggled to avoid.

The same student reported how the 'river of life' PLA technique also had an evocative effect on him. He experienced ambivalence in deliberating on the extent to which he was prepared to be open and make himself vulnerable in a group of unknown peers. The extract shows both how he tries to make sense of his thoughts and emotions, and the uncomfortable dissonance that arises from this process:

The exercise led to the arrival of some unexpected realizations, which were not always pleasant, and then I was torn between choosing to share these experiences with group members or not. And even though the latter part of the exercise caused great ambivalence (i.e. 'Do I honestly share the true meanings of my drawings with these strangers and risk judgment?' [which I tried to do as far as possible], or 'Do I withhold the very personal bits?'), it felt absolutely necessary to as far as possible share my depictions with my group members. Finally, being bundled into a group with strangers from diverse cultures, disciplines, races, ethnicity, and socioeconomic backgrounds was anxiety-provoking to say the least, and quite invasive considering that we were expected to share quite personal experiences with these strangers. (uwc coloured male social work student, 2007)

Like the above student, some white students who were conscious of and embarrassed by their positions of privilege were fearful of rejection by their black peers. Because they anticipated rejection, they were surprised when their stories were heard with acceptance and compassion. The PoD suggests that the dialogue central to these encounters enables the disruption and reframing of commonly held and unexplored emotions and assumptions:

I was extremely aware as I was sharing the picture of the well resourced context in which I live. Not only is my own background privileged, but so is the community in which I have chosen to live. Talking about the relative abundance of resources in my community evoked feelings of guilt. My picture was in very stark contrast to those of most of my group members who come largely from communities where 'not-enough-ness' is the norm. What was so humbling was that their responses and questions were accepting, respectful and in no way indicting. (su white female psychology student, 2006)

The quote above is emblematic in that it is one of the many expressions of guilt and shame that more students who were able to recognise their privilege expressed in their reflective essays. The PoD does not explicitly reflect on guilt and shame; however writers such as Zembylas (2008) in his later work and Young (2011) deal with these concepts in more depth from a political/structural rather than an intrapsychic or individualistic perspective. This leads us to consider potential theoretical approaches that we consider to be fruitful for future conceptualisations, analyses and different ways of using the CSI project for innovative pedagogical practices.

Potential theoretical approaches for the future of the project

After implementing three iterations of the CSI course with students across two HEIs and several disciplines, we could theoretically extend the discussion on privilege. Many of the students' drawings and essays referred to their differential positions in relation to privilege and oppression. Their encounters with one another, using the PLA techniques in particular, provided a catalyst for exploration and dialogue about their different positionalities. It is also important to explore and encourage narratives of privilege, as narratives of oppression (among both marginalised and privileged individuals) are generally first to surface. Pease (2010) argues for a complex conceptualisation of privilege in relation to positionalities. He argues against essentialised group-based or individual categories of identities. People occupy multiple identities, which means that those who are privileged also have some form of oppression and vice versa. Tronto (1993) suggests that unless those who hold privileged positions are confronted by their situation they will continue to remain unaware of their privileges and expect to be serviced by the marginalised other. The uncritical acceptance of social relations of domination and oppression thus remain. She argues that those in privileged positions must become aware of marginality and their own privilege. This is an important prerequisite for the practice of responsibility, as opposed to having unending feelings of guilt (Young 2011), as was so commonly expressed by privileged students in our course. In the CSI course all who hold positions of privilege had the possibility to explore these positionalities by being confronted with their experiences of structural inequality and marginality and challenged through dialoguing with others. However, Pease (2010) argues that the right to dialogue is not given, but needs to be earned.

Much has been written about marginality (Hill Collins 1991; 1999; hooks 1984; Ladson-Billings & Donnor 2008; Mohanty 1991; 2003; Smith 1999; Spivak 1988), which we used to inform the conceptual foundations about this project. Even though at the start of the project we recognised the process of undoing privilege as an important component of our work, many of our publications have not concentrated enough on this aspect. We are conscious that it too was an initial motivating rationale for our project as part of the broader social justice and critical perspective. This broad framework did not, however, specifically examine the notion of privilege and responsibility from a theoretical and philosophical perspective. We see this in-depth focus as central to future reflections on the project, using theories such those developed by Chambers (2004), Pease (2010), Tronto (1993) and Young (2011).

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