

# Performing Life Stories: Hindsight and Foresight for Better Insight

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## Abstract

We examine the benefits of developing critically reflexive learners through life story performance embedded in a Critical Reflexive Model. Students are invited to work with their life stories in a safe, dialogical space and to deconstruct various forms of power and its influence on their lives. Using a mix of creative and embodied methodologies, students explore their values, agency, and performativity to enable a deeper level of critical reflexivity. As researchers, we track what ongoing contributions reflexivity has made to the lives of students after graduating and currently working in the field as professionals. Our findings indicate that students experience shifts in their perception of self, others, and their contexts, which make them better placed to respond to the many complexities of society in South Africa on both a personal and a professional level.

## Background

In this article, we examine the benefits of experiential teaching and learning work involving life stories that has been done with Health Promotion Masters' students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The relevant module, entitled the "Personal Is the Professional," facilitates interactive and dialogical learning spaces for students to share and deconstruct their personal stories collectively to increase insight and the ability to respond to their own and others' contexts. This process is facilitated using a Critical Reflexive Model. The model focuses on four aspects explored by students in a carefully facilitated dialogical space: the deconstruction of power, values informing identity, agency linked to responsibility, and performance of self in daily life and in a work context (Gilbert & Sliep, 2009; Norton & Sliep, 2018; Sliep & Gilbert, 2006; Sliep & Norton, 2016). Students are invited through a range of mindfully developed experiential exercises to tell and retell their stories and life experiences in the context of the group. In each sharing, we view students as performing aspects of their lives and listening to and being exposed to the stories of others. This adds a rich context to the experience as they are each asked to analyze their stories in relation to each aspect of the model. Use of a narrative approach within this framework deepens the exploration of pathways to critical reflexivity (Sliep & Norton, 2016). Exposing students to stories beyond their own context, invites them to challenge their assumptions and intentions within a social constructivist paradigm. It is argued that such reflexivity is crucial for the development of critical consciousness, revealing power dynamics, enabling agency and to better understand others in context and to walk the talk (Gilbert & Sliep, 2009; Sliep & Gilbert, 2006). Creating spaces that value and support the telling of and listening to personal stories is viewed as an empowering activity that helps create meaning and shape identity (Rappaport, 1995).

The model has previously been interrogated as a tool for promoting reflexivity in health promotion education (see Norton & Sliep, 2018), which details the development and elements of the model and its application to life stories. Findings indicate that the process of sharing and deconstructing stories in terms of this interactive and participatory methodology and the model helps equip students with the reflexive skills necessary to better negotiate their current social contexts. The aim of this section of the research is to more fully explore the question whether such skills are transferrable over time—does reflexivity last? We wanted to find out what contributions this approach has made to the personal and professional lives of students since doing the module and what impact it has had going forward. In an endeavour to answer these questions, we brought together a group of students who had graduated, to track their reflexivity from an educational to a professional setting.

### Critical Reflexivity and Stories in Education

There are a variety of ways to describe critical reflexivity, but we view it here as comprising an appraisal of the self as a participant of collective action. This involves understanding that our actions are formed through interactions with others in our environment (Gilbert & Sliep, 2009). Cunliffe (2004) describes reflexivity practically as “examining critically the assumptions underlying our actions” (p. 407). In education, such an appraisal is aided when viewed as a dynamic process that opens students to developing a critical consciousness that is necessary for them to become self-determining learners and socially responsible professionals (Mangadu, 2014). Sharing life stories in a group through a narrative approach invites students to work with their lived experiences in a way that links their personal discourses to their professional lives (Sliep & Kotze, 2007). Various creative methodology is used like embodiment, performance, poetry, and visual arts to open the way for the development of agency and accountable performance in a learning community (Sliep, 2010).

Such a process opens possibilities for transformative learning (TL) or changes in perception that occur as students develop skills to help them to challenge how they view themselves within their own stories and in society. TL has been defined in a number of ways, but of relevance here is an expansive description by Kroth and Cranton (2014) of TL as a “deep shift in perspective during which habits of mind become more open, more permeable, more discriminating, and better justified” (p. 9). In life story work, such a shift in perspective becomes possible through critiquing one’s own story to better understand the operation of power, leading to a better understanding of one’s internalized habits and beliefs. Stories are not experienced or told in a vacuum, but within the context of the stories that surround us. A full understanding of the self therefore depends on an understanding of our cultural, social, and political lives (Dirkx, 1998). Thereafter, transforming our frames of reference requires critically reflecting on the assumptions we generally take for granted, which is aided by participating in dialectical discourse to validate new judgments formed during this process (Mezirow, 1997, 2009).

Graham (2017) explains the reflective process as one that allows us to examine our meaning-making process, which is influenced by our subjectivity and embodiment of the discourses that affect our lives. She brings together reflection and narrative as “weaving a pattern of knowing and self-inquiry” (p. 4).

By better understanding how they are positioned within discourses, students can develop the ability and agency to critique the status quo and to play a more active role to position themselves more favourably (Sliep, 2010). The power of the self-telling process is that, “[i]n the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (Bruner, 1987, p. 15). The shifts that happen when we come to understand how we interpret our reality, open our potential for building preferred stories and accepting different worldviews. This is transformative as we are then better able to position ourselves differently. Performance then is both in the process (telling, retelling, listening, questioning) and the product. The critical reflexivity process requires that we continuously examine how we act in the world—how we perform.

## Study Design, Aims, and Methodology

This is a qualitative study using creative and dialogical research methodology with a group of students who had completed the module in the last 12 years and were followed up as professionals in the field or furthering their studies. Participants were invited to share their experiences at an intensive two-day participatory data-gathering workshop (the “workshop”) through a variety of experiential exercises in a tranquil and natural setting that was especially chosen to enhance and deepen reflexivity. We wanted to understand more about the reflexive skills that are developed through life story work, whether these skills are transferred from the teaching space into participants’ “real” lives, and what value they may have in different and future contexts. These are not simple questions as we are inquiring about change—a different way of interacting in society. Such understandings are often not immediately apparent and may be hidden below the surface. Stimulating deep, reflective responses from participants required using a variety of experiential and creative methods to tap into their conscious and subconscious understandings of personal change.

### Sampling

We used convenience sampling to gather a group of past students prepared to share their understandings at the workshop. The sample included 10 past students from different nationalities, five male and five female, with six from SA and four from a variety of other countries across Africa. A sampling criterion was that they had completed their master’s degree at least two years prior to the study. The timeline spanned 2006 to 2015.

### Data Collection and Analysis: An Experiential Exploration

We followed a reflexive and participatory approach to collecting and analyzing the data that involved a variety of qualitative methods, including using methods informed by grounded theory, especially in regard to coding strategy and analytical questioning of the data (Charmaz, 2012). Previous research had already provided some evidence of the value of following a critical reflexive approach in education and of the practicality of using the model as a guiding framework for developing critical reflexive skills (Norton & Sliep, 2018; Sliep, 2010; Sliep & Kotze, 2007); however, we still required more rigorous

evidence of this, particularly in relation to *what* the long-term benefits are and *why* the model was proving effective.

We used a variety of creative exercises to generate text for analysis, including structured interviews and presentations, reflecting in nature, reflexive writing exercises, using cell phone photographs, poetry, body work, and a collective collage. Exercises done individually were presented to the group for a deeper probing into the experience through which themes and patterns were identified. This layered approach includes participants as coresearchers, but also allows for emotion and a more sensory understanding of their experiences (Bryant, 2015). Being reflexive is about being open to alternative realities (Gergen, 2009); and as this is a subjective experience, one needs to look towards creative ways to uncover this. A mix of creative methods can also help to give meaning to or explain experiences that are difficult to describe, or that involve emotional as well as cognitive responses (Bryant, 2015). Further, expressive arts are used in research to contextualize meaning in a subjective way to help uncover deeper meaning, experiences, and insights (Brady, 2009; Gallardo, Furman, & Kulkarni, 2009; Rogers, 1993). An overriding aim in facilitating these exercises is for the participants to embody their experiences, and to express (perform) their emotional connection to the experience. For example, participants were invited to work in pairs and interact with statues in the garden to capture a deeper expression of their reflections, and to create their own bodily representation of this (see Figure 1).



Fig. 1: Cell phone photographs representing characteristics valued by participants: [1] Empowerment [2] Confidence and freedom, [3] Teamwork and appreciation of the power of the collective

All exercises involved verbal, embodied, or written responses from participants explaining their positions, for example, in relation to the choice of photographs and representations in the collage. These were transcribed and, together with other written texts, were analyzed using a mix of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) coupled with a coding process that used gerunds in terms of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2012). In this way, we coded for both topics and themes (thematic); and actions and processes (gerunds). We did this interactively with the data to make comparisons with the themes identified by the participants. We also critically analyzed the overall findings using questions framed in terms of the model following a dialogical approach to delve more deeply into the question: *why* these results? (Frank, 2010).

With emerging results showing that the central theme and process was one of “change” in the way participants viewed themselves, others, and their context, we went a step further to explore the links between the processes and outcomes to highlight the necessary preconditions for this interaction, and to draw conclusions about the efficacy of the model as a framework for developing critical reflexivity.

Our findings are presented using a mix of tables, explanatory narrative interspersed with quotations from participants, and “found” poetry which uses the actual words and phrases of the participants to form illustrative poems of the results. Found poetry can be used in different ways, either as an analytic inquiry tool or, as we have done, as a form of presentation. Either way, it is considered as a means to “bring the researcher closer to the data in different and sometimes unusual ways that can yield new and important insights” (Butler-Kisber, 2002, p. 235). Cell phone images are added to reveal another layer of the experience performed by participants, but were only analyzed in terms of explanations given by participants and so became part of the textual analysis. In keeping with the principle that no single understanding is ever adequate, the presentation of our data includes photographs, original quotations, and poetry, weaving together the words of participants, to leave our analysis open to further interpretation by the reader (Frank, 2010).

## Results

The results are presented first from the perspective of the participants and then findings from the coding process are offered in a way that shows the interaction between process and outcomes. The findings indicated strong shifts in the changing perceptions of participants in self-, relational-, and contextual awareness.

### Participatory Analysis

We worked closely with participants during the workshops to reveal not only the values they identified for themselves as having crystallized during and after their experience of the module, but also the themes they saw emerging from the overall practice of being reflexive students and practitioners. In the final collage, the participants were asked to identify themes that they felt strongly represented their experiences of reflexivity. They identified seven major themes: the difficulty but value of sharing stories; search of the self; diversity; tolerance; togetherness; happiness; and uncertainty. These themes were very closely tied to the values the participants identified as having crystallized for each of them during and since the module.

These findings are reflected in a collective poem using lines of poetry written by the participants during the workshop to express their reflection on sharing their stories. After the participants gave their reflections in poetic style, the lines that stood out while we listened were captured and are expressed here in a pantoum, showing powerfully the importance of trust, non-judgment, the value of diversity, and the growth in confidence that comes from a deeper understanding of the self. A pantoum is a form of poetry which repeats lines throughout the poem, allowing the words to “circle back” and to add new

meaning to what has been said before (Schuster & Coetzee, 2014). By writing lines that have been identified by the participants in a reversed order, it creates the opportunity for meaning to sink in and be transformed by the reader. In the example below there is a tentative request in the opening line—*Not judgemental where my tree of life grows*. If the same line is read at the conclusion of the pantoum—*not judgemental where my tree of life grows*—it calls up a state of confidence and affirmation. The collected lines reflect the process that participants went through where it is not the essence of their life story that changes, but how it is now understood differently. From uncertainty to confidence, and an emphasis to not judge the life stories of others, the poem reveals the many layers that may not otherwise become visible.



Fig. 2: Group collage

*Not judgemental where my tree of life grows*  
*Trust is important in sharing*  
*The importance of diversity and team work*  
*I am a work in progress*

*Trust is important in sharing*  
*There are so many layers to me*  
*I am a work in progress*  
*Beautiful from the inside out*  
*Not ashamed of who I am*

*There are so many layers to me*  
*Like a pearl in an oyster*  
*Beautiful from the inside out*  
*Not ashamed of who I am*  
*The deeper you look the more you see*

*Like a pearl in an oyster*  
*The importance of diversity and team work*  
*The deeper you look the more you see*  
*Not judgemental where my tree of life grows*

Further evidence is provided in cell phone photographs taken by participants and referred to above (see Figure 1). The participants used the images to reveal vivid descriptions of their reflections and these were coded and analyzed as part of the data.

### A Dynamic Interaction of Process and Outcomes

Coding across all the data included taking into consideration the themes identified by the participants and a critical questioning of what was happening during the process. Reflexivity is a dynamic and iterative process and we discovered during the analysis that the process described by participants (experience of reflexivity) interconnected very closely with the outcomes (results of reflexivity) that were identified in terms of the themes. When probing the data even more critically—by asking *why* these outcomes—the themes revealed also a close tie between the manner in which the process was facilitated (necessary preconditions) and the outcomes (see Table 1).

Table 1: *Patterns, Themes and Subthemes Identified in the Data*

<b>PROCESS</b> (Coding in gerunds)	<b>OUTCOMES</b> (Coding for patterns and themes)	<b>PRECONDITIONS</b> (Critical questioning)
<b>Process of change</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Becoming aware</li> <li>• Getting a broader understanding</li> <li>• Starting to appreciate others</li> <li>• Working through uncertainty</li> <li>• Becoming more reflective</li> <li>• Having a more holistic approach</li> </ul>	<b>Change</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change in self</li> <li>• Change in perceptions (ways of seeing the world)</li> <li>• Change in perceptions of others (embracing diversity)</li> <li>• Uncertainty as a result of change</li> </ul>	<b>Developing skills for change</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical and reflective thinking</li> <li>• Questioning and challenging assumptions</li> <li>• Seeing things from different perspectives</li> <li>• Communication and expression</li> <li>• Creativity</li> <li>• Empowerment</li> </ul>
<b>Process of self-exploration</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking time to explore</li> <li>• Digging deeper</li> <li>• Reflecting on past experience</li> <li>• Being critical</li> <li>• Being reflective</li> <li>• Questioning</li> <li>• Understanding construction of the self</li> <li>• Becoming more open-minded</li> </ul>	<b>Self-awareness</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong sense of identity</li> <li>• Confidence</li> <li>• Aware of strengths and weaknesses</li> <li>• Authenticity</li> <li>• Resilience and overcoming obstacles</li> <li>• Focus on values</li> <li>• Positive outcomes: happiness, peace</li> </ul>	<b>Supporting transformation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time, space and opportunity for self-discovering</li> <li>• Space for voice</li> <li>• Witnessing the stories of others</li> <li>• Building trust</li> <li>• Supportive, safe space</li> <li>• Evoking emotions</li> <li>• Guided process</li> </ul>

<p><b>Process for social cohesion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bringing people together</li> <li>• Learning about other cultures</li> <li>• Learning to trust others</li> <li>• Accepting people</li> <li>• Respecting others</li> <li>• Embracing diversity</li> <li>• Not making assumptions about others</li> <li>• Moving towards collectivist views</li> </ul>	<p><b>Relational awareness</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity</li> <li>• Understanding other perspectives</li> <li>• Collective vs individualist views</li> <li>• Tolerance, respect, and acceptance of others</li> <li>• Value of teamwork</li> <li>• Positive outcomes: togetherness and social cohesion</li> </ul>	<p><b>Facilitating connectivity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being in a group and sharing journey</li> <li>• Finding commonalities in overcoming obstacles</li> <li>• Influence of diversity in group</li> <li>• Facilitating open discussion to challenge stereotypes</li> </ul>
<p><b>Holistic and dynamic process</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyzing context more consciously</li> <li>• Understanding others in context</li> <li>• Taking context and circumstances into account</li> <li>• Holding a broader view</li> </ul>	<p><b>Contextual awareness</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Importance of context</li> <li>• Holistic approach to working with others</li> <li>• Positive outcomes: better understanding of broader issues</li> <li>• Seeing the bigger picture</li> </ul>	<p><b>Linking the personal and the professional</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing personal stories and challenges</li> <li>• Understanding influence of past &amp; present experiences on future choices</li> <li>• Understanding of self in relation to others and wider societal context</li> </ul>

The data revealed four strong overlapping and dynamic themes that were explored separately: self-awareness, relational awareness, contextual awareness, and positive change. The themes were closely tied to the process that evolved through the facilitation of a reflexive and dialogical space: exploring self led to self-awareness; building social cohesion led to relational awareness; and taking the surrounding environment and background into account led to contextual awareness. The “preconditions” for critical reflexivity clearly indicate the importance of communication, creativity, and space for voice (a space to enact your story among others). For example, *being part of a group, sharing the journey, and open discussion*. Interaction is vital for setting a stage for challenging one’s assumptions and beliefs, and for broadening one’s views of self in relation to others and context. This is a necessary foundation for undergoing a process of change (learning that is potentially transformative) that facilitates growth.

### **A Journey of Discovery: A Developing Awareness of Self, Other, and Context**

Attaining self-awareness was closely linked to a discovery of the self. Having once believed that it was better to remain silent and not share her experiences, one participant said she began to understand that it was “ok to share my experiences” and to explore the layers to reveal who she really was. Increased self-awareness was seen to lead to self-acceptance, enabling one to embrace oneself authentically. A better understanding of the self, opened the way for participants to see their identity as one that they could shape and control and thus navigate themselves more effectively through their worlds: “I gained a clearer, firmer understanding of how I fitted into the world, how I had positioned myself.”



Hand in hand with increased self-acceptance came an increase in relational awareness, tolerance, acceptance, and nonjudgment of others: “It’s linked to a shared understanding or feeling that everyone is facing an obstacle no matter what their circumstances and that we must not take people for granted or their circumstances for granted.”

One participant said that as her self-awareness grew, she began to see things from others’ perspectives, to be less individualistic and self-absorbed, and to take a more holistic approach towards others, including her clients. The increased awareness of the importance of connecting with others also translates into a better contextual awareness, an ability to *see the bigger picture*. As one participant stated: “It was an experience of sharing, learning, understanding, embracing, and developing the big picture of commonality and humanity.”

Responding to questions about what these realizations have meant to participants in their professional lives after the module, participants said the following:

*“Professionally I can relate to others with respect irrespective of my perceived superior position or different background.”*

*“I have a much broader and flexible understanding of people, the importance of teamwork, and the advantages of being able to work as part of a multidisciplinary team.”*

*“I believe that I am a more authentic, more holistic professional because of what I learned.”*

*“It’s helped me to be able to communicate with people more effectively, to be able to take into account peoples past circumstances, their backgrounds, environments they have grown up in, different beliefs and respecting that.”*

## **Changing the Story**

In all of the above, participants reveal a process of change—moving from a primarily self-centred approach to a more relational one. This was also reflected in an exercise in which we asked participants to explore their before-and-after experiences of sharing their stories within the group and were formed into a “found” poem showing the shifts that took place:

### ***Before I shared my story***

*I was rigid in my thinking  
Too worried by what others thought  
I was closed in, shy  
Not able to express myself  
I did not want to go deep  
Interrogate my past  
I was lost in a way*

***After I shared my story***

*I was more self-aware, critical, flexible  
The entire picture of my growing up became clear  
I became confident  
I realized that I'm a fighter, a survivor  
Someone who is resilient  
I realized how the world around us  
Impacts our development*

***Before I heard your story***

*I didn't really know who you were  
Just took you at face value  
I was self-centered  
Totally committed to minding my own business  
I viewed you as someone in control  
I was quick to judge  
I didn't understand*

***After I heard your story***

*I learnt to appreciate you  
Respect who you really are  
Built by your situation  
Now I can relate to you, appreciate you  
See you embedded in your context*

***And now***

*I take time to understand  
And appreciate your history  
I am able to express myself  
At a deeper level*

These words reveal a more insightful acceptance of self and others. We learn and grow through our own stories and through the stories of others. Stories in this sense are performative tools for change. For this change to take place, our stories need to be revealed, shared, and acted upon.

**An Illustrative Overview**

A strong illustration of all the themes interwoven into one student's story comes from a participant who was born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, grew up in Zambia, and has now lived in South Africa for 10 years. Navigating her diverse background has been difficult, "I couldn't relate to one country, I couldn't relate to who I am." However, through the process of reflexive storytelling, she says, "I've learnt to embrace myself and my diversity and to relate to all three countries and what I want to pass across to different people (is) that they are who they are and they should embrace themselves."

During the exercise on values and choosing a representative statue, the participant chose an image of herself next to the “Statue of David” and captioned it “resilience,” stressing the importance of being authentic (see Figure 3). She explains why:

... when I was sharing my story, I actually did realise that I have gone through so much, and so the characteristic that came up for me was resilience... I realised that I'm actually very resilient despite everything that I went through I was able to actually bounce back to life...the story was a mirror, a reflection 'cos I actually didn't get the time to reflect on my experiences. So sharing my story was like getting an opportunity to reflect, to actually see myself, ....I had to learn to embrace myself. So this statue being naked, for me it should present the person, showing who they really are.

On the process of sharing her story and awakening to an awareness of her resilience, the participant explains: “Sharing your story is something that actually awakens your eyes, like you get to see things from a different perspective.” The following short segment of a poem written by the participant during the workshop sums up how the process changed her:

*I can relate with you  
Not ashamed of who I am  
Embracing my uniqueness and taking one step at a time  
The beauty of life*



Fig. 3: Cell phone image, caption: Resilience

In regard to taking these realizations into the workplace, the participant, a senior tutor, says:

You know this is who I am and I can actually do something and add some value in people's lives and that's what I try to also embrace—every student's uniqueness, trying to relate to them on the level as well as relating to each person individually, considering their diverse culture and how they were brought up.

## Discussion

### A Transformative Process

The data indicates that a transformative process has taken place among all participants. We see this in terms of their increased awareness of themselves, others, and their social context. Although not all participants change in the same way, and different participants experience aspects of the process in their own unique way, all indicated that some form of a realization that has taken place (about themselves, others, or their work). This is confirmed by the participants in written responses to the question “How did the life story work you did during the module influence how you see yourself in the world?” which are merged into a poem, once again using the actual words of the participants:

*I became  
more self-aware  
more informed, and better armed  
I had a clearer, firmer understanding  
of how I view myself in this world  
of how I fit into this world*

*Stepping into my personal strength, I became  
more open to those around me  
not making assumptions  
taking people at face value*

Although developing critical reflexive skills does not cover the entire process of transformative learning as envisaged by Mezirow, these changes in awareness could be viewed as a shifting in one’s meaning perspectives, which can cover a range of interpretations about various social issues and psychological responses (Mezirow, 2008). Relationally, providing circumstances that open us to more integrative and inclusive frames of reference, for example by experiencing others’ cultures and critically reflecting on our own biases, we can become more accepting and tolerant of others (Mezirow, 1997). Cunliffe (2004) describes critically reflexive practice as involving both the examination of our assumptions underlying why we act in certain ways and the *impact* of those actions. Through such an analysis, we are then better able to develop more ethical and collaborative ways of responding to others. When we understand reflexivity as relational in the sense that it arises in interaction with others and occurs in “continuously constructed” contexts, it becomes necessary to be mindful of where, when, and with whom action takes place (Gilbert & Sliep, 2009, p. 470). In this sense, self-, relational, and contextual reflexivity are part of the same dynamic and iterative process envisaged by the practice of moving through the loops of the model within a dialogical space that encourages examining one’s own story amidst the stories of others and not as stand-alone tales.

Transformational learning is a two-way process. The facilitator is continuously formed and informed by the participants during the process. Although it goes beyond the scope of this paper, a poem written

by the second author for the students is included as an example after a discussion on decolonizing the curriculum.

### ***Decolonising the teacher***

*The stone, the mud, the moss, the tree*

*Morphed into more than you, more than me*

*Other spirits mingle in and out*

*New stories germinate and sprout*

*Carried in whispers, a gentle breeze*

*You free yourself from guarantees*

*Liberation narratives weave a twist*

*You free me from forming a fist*

*Social action with an open palm*

*Social action as a healing balm*

*Through you, we decolonise the curriculum*

*You teach, I learn, power to a minimum*

### **Challenges and Potentials**

Although the results show a very positive outcome from a diverse set of students, our sample was not large. Was this particular group of students, who were willing to come to the data gathering workshop, representative of others who have experienced the module? Maybe not, and perhaps not every student or even every group of students will experience such positive results. The research does, however, indicate the overall value of facilitating dialogical spaces for interaction over time for the development of critical reflexive skills for students, and of providing a theoretical framework for strengthening these skills. The data gathered at the workshop showed that reflexive shifts are deep seated and do carry over from the learning space into the professional.

Participants experienced a shift in the way they thought about themselves, others, and the way in which they approach their work and their clients or students, depending on their context. This indicated a shift not only in their thinking, but also in terms of performativity, going beyond their performance during the module itself. However, each individual is different and not all experience reflexivity in the same way or to the same degree. It was apparent during the research that the potential benefits of facilitating a dialogical space and offering the tools for reflexive practice will be limited or augmented by the ability of the particular individual to respond in terms of where they are positioned in their story at that moment in time. This may mean a shift in the self, other, or contextual viewpoints and not necessarily in all domains. The effect of various other factors, such as the developmental stage of the participant,

the homogeneity of the group, personality types, culture, and persistent structural difficulties, need also to be considered and require further research.

It was also made clear to us by participants that we need to find ways to continue the journey. When we asked participants which themes they felt they had neglected in their lives, all participants felt there was still “work” to do on the search for self, happiness, tolerance, and uncertainty, but saw this realistically as part of their ongoing life journey. The seeds are sown, but a growing tree still needs to be nurtured. Finding ways to continue to develop reflexivity by intentionally creating dialogical spaces for deeper reflection and interaction over time is important. We perform with and for each other, tell stories to each other, and are part of a larger forest. We cannot grow in isolation.

## Conclusion

Waghid (2009) highlights the importance of cultivating deliberative democracy (sharing commonalities and respecting differences); compassionate imagining (treating others justly and humanely); and cosmopolitan justice (rights for all, including those considered as other) in universities on the African continent. Effective education then needs to favour a dialogical, egalitarian, and participative practice that is contextually based within the lived experiences of students. This research shows that when given the opportunity, students are more likely to realize their potential through a better understanding and critical reflection of themselves, others, and their social context—bringing together hindsight and foresight to develop better insight as a necessary skill for accountable praxis.

## Acknowledgments

Teaching and Learning Grant, University of KwaZulu-Natal, SA. And the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS).

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