RESEARCH WITHIN A THEME

Diffracting the present through the past: Engaging socially just art history pedagogies in the context of #RhodesMustFall

Nike Romano
Faculty of Informatics and Design, Cape Peninsula University of Technology
Romanon@cput.ac.za

ABSTRACT
This paper describes a process of classroom encounters where art history, current awareness and students’ lived experience come together to co-construct a learning space in which students’ emerging conceptions of social justice in South Africa are explored. Located in the Design Foundation course at Cape Peninsula University of Technology, the case study describes an interdisciplinary approach whereby difference is explored through the material engagement with artefacts within and across space and time. The students come from diverse and unequal backgrounds that span urban/rural and race/class/gender divisions, as well as cultural and language barriers and differing educational experiences and needs. Focusing on a series of lectures that link ancient Mesopotamian cultural production with the #RhodesMustFall campaign at the University of Cape Town, the chronological and the thematic interconnect in a non-hierarchical web in which the relationship between art and power and how art functions as a symbol of power, are explored. By diffracting the contemporary through the ancient a space is opened up for students to identify themselves as generators of knowledge while they reflect on complex notions within the context of their own lives as young adults in South Africa (Haraway 1988). Following a post-constructivist perspective of the living curriculum (Roth 2014) and the becoming curriculum (Sellers 2014), the classroom becomes a space in which students engage materials, materiality and meaning in a matrix through which teaching and learning co-emerge in an ongoing state of becoming (Ettinger 2006). Intra-action between my practices as a teacher of higher education and visual artist give rise to pedagogical strategies aimed at empowering students to respond to the challenges of becoming designers in a differentiated and changing South Africa. Moving beyond the binary, the fixed and the linear, the paper examines how the educator’s task moves from the epistemological and ontological (Barnett 2009) towards that of onto-epistemological (Barad 2007). Through interweaving threads of matrixial theory (Ettinger 2006) and post-humanist agential realism (Barad 2007), new thresholds of interconnection, co-existence and becoming offer ethico-onto-epistemological possibilities for design praxis in a differentiated world.

Keywords: #RhodesMustFall; art history pedagogies; ethico-onto-epistemological possibilities; design praxis; social justice; curriculum as process; living curriculum; situated knowledges

On 26 February 2015, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) released video footage of militants destroying countless ancient artefacts that were housed in the Mosul Museum in Iraq as part of their campaign to “cleanse” the territory of pre-Islamic art. Eleven days...
later, students at the University of Cape Town hurled human waste over the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, thus heralding the start of the #RhodesMustFall movement which culminated in the removal of the statue from its commanding position on the campus on 9 April. While having very different objectives and concerns, these campaigns shared a common strategy of targeting culturally significant artefacts to further political and ideological ends. Their respective strategies of the defacement, destruction and removal of artefacts raise the following important questions: What do we do with artefacts that embody different world views to our own? Do we deface them? Do we destroy them? Do we remove them? Or do we explore alternative ways of working with them so as to find new expressions of meaning and understanding?

Moreover, what are the implications of these strategies for our understanding of history and how do they affect our understanding and teaching of art history in particular?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In a climate of increasing local and global polarisation, it becomes ever more critical to create opportunities for students to engage with difference in ways that open up new possibilities of understanding, rather than entrench foreclosed binary positions. To this end, the paper engages feminist theoretical frameworks and pedagogies that disrupt dominant hierarchical understandings of difference that are based on exclusion and cuts thereby reinforcing world views that are characterised by notions of either/or. Instead, feminist conceptions of difference(s) within difference open up a space that encompasses notions of both/and.

To this end, the paper will reference the following feminist theories: Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism that offers diffraction as a methodology for understanding difference (2007, 132–185); Bracha Ettinger’s model of the matrixial borderspace that theorises trans-subjectivity through encounter and explains how humans’ primary relationship is one of compassionate co-emergence in difference, an ongoing state of becoming (1992); and Donna Haraway’s theory of situated knowledges whereby objectivity is understood and determined by the agency of the knowledge producer and that of the object of study thus disrupting positivistic notions of knowledge as fixed, finite and universal (1988, 575-99) 1.

Iterations of these theories are interwoven throughout the text in an endeavour to reinforce a both/and approach to being in the world and to explore new possibilities of engaging difference in response to the challenges that #RhodesMustFall, and the subsequent #FeesMustFall movement, have presented to the academy, educators and students alike. For the purposes of this paper, attention is focused on how new pedagogies and open-ended curricula can bring about transformation through material encounters with artefacts across time, by grappling with the complexities of difference as enacted by the contrasting campaigns. Moreover, the paper is concerned with the relationship between pedagogies and curricula with particular interest in how they co-affect one another, in an ongoing state of becoming, rather than seeing them as discrete practices and programmes that are foreclosed.

During the week of the removal of the Rhodes statue, I was scheduled to teach the history of Ancient Mesopotamian Art to design foundation students at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), as part of the compulsory course, History of Western Art. Concerned with the contingencies of the aforementioned events, I decided to reference the respective campaigns in relation to ancient Mesopotamian artistic production in an attempt to explore the pedagogical limits and possibilities of the history of Western art discipline. The intention was to explore ways of engaging students through meaningful encounters with material artefacts that are of personal significance to them in order to affirm that art history matters. The context of foregrounding the symbolic role that artefacts perform in representing ideological and power relations in society provided such an opportunity.

The lectures were constructed in such a way as to link and juxtapose ancient Mesopotamian cultural production, the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad by US forces during the second Gulf War in 2003, the destruction by ISIL of ancient Mesopotamian artefacts in Iraq and the objectives and strategies of the #RhodesMustFall campaign. Crafted so as to
re-present the past within the contemporary, the lectures were designed to intersect with the context of students' own lives as young adults in South Africa. In this way, the case study describes the series of lectures as an event/encounter that generated ongoing possibilities for engaging socially just pedagogies, as will be described and analysed below.

In his paper entitled, "Knowing and becoming in the higher education curriculum", educational theorist Ronald Barnett raises his concern that knowledge has been side-lined in favour of recent higher education emphases on performative pedagogies that seek to train up students to enter the work place. While Barnett (2009, 435) acknowledges the importance of "knowing", as skills and know-how, he argues that how people “come to know” has important transformative possibilities for students' becoming through their encounter with higher education. This linking of the epistemological with the ontological resonates with students' calls for the decolonisation of the university as they interrogate how knowledge affects their becoming. Similarly, the relationship between the onto-epistemological has implications for educators who need to expand the epistemological role – as mediators between students and knowledge so as to develop skills and know-how – to incorporate an ontological role as facilitators while they support students through their ongoing encounters with knowledge (Barnett 2009, 438).

**MATERIAL DISCOURSE PRACTICES – GETTING TO THE HEART OF THE MATTER**

Barad (2007, 131) expands the understanding of the relationship between the ontological and the epistemological in her diffractive analysis of how matter comes into relationship with knowing through material-discursive practices. Emerging out of a quantum understanding of the dual wave/particle nature of matter, Barad’s model of agential realism conceptualises the ethico-onto-epistemological, as she explores the responsibility that researchers have in shaping the future for humans, non-humans and the material environment in our production of knowledge. Rather than adopt a reflexive gaze that sets humans apart from the world, Barad (2007, 132) proposes the diffractive gaze that reveals how the performative role of material-discursive practices offers an understanding of humans positioning as one of being part of the world.

Embodying disruption as its being, diffraction simultaneously tracks the interference effects of intra-acting waves whilst revealing how parts of the original waves are present within the new after their transformation (Barad 2007, 71-83). In this way diffraction offers ethical possibilities as difference is fundamentally implicated in the formulation of new possibilities and connections. As Barad (2010, 265) argues, “…there is no getting away from ethics on this account of mattering. Ethics is an integral part of the diffraction (ongoing differentiating) patterns of worlding, not a superimposing of human values onto the ontology of the world (as if fact and value were radically other).” Therefore, she argues that it is through embodied affective experience that we come to know, thus drawing attention to how meaning matters and what matter means. Flowing from this, it is possible to explore whether an encounter with artefacts has the potential to transform both students' and educators' understanding of their subject positions in relation to the artefacts.

**DIFFRACTION AS METHODOLOGY**

Diffraction becomes a useful process for writing this paper because it entangles abstract notions, such as art and symbol and art and religion, with students' and my own embodied experience, thus opening up new possibilities of meaningful connections between history, context, materiality and subjectivity. Furthermore, my practice as visual artist – which is characterised as a co-emergence with and through materials and their materiality in the studio – intra-acts with my pedagogical practice whereby the classroom emerges as a space of becoming in which lecturer/students engage with artefacts and their materiality in an ongoing and open-ended way. The diffractions of art making/teaching/learning/becoming intra-act with the process of knowledge production through encounter, thus confirming that matter and meaning are both integral to, and the result of, the ongoing production of knowledge. It follows,
Diffracting the present through the past

therefore, that diffraction brings into being disruptive pedagogical strategies and practices that affect the development of curricula and that open up a space in which students can explore possibilities of becoming through their encounters with knowledge.

CO-EMERGENCE THROUGH ENCOUNTER

In addition to the entanglements of methodologies and disciplines, it is useful to investigate how the subjectivities of the students and myself as teacher co-emerge through the classroom encounter. In this regard, I turn to the matrixial model of subjectivity as theorised by artist and psychoanalyst, Bracha Ettinger. Understood as partial, trans-subjective and co-affecting, matrixial subjectivity is modelled on the asymmetrical and non-hierarchical trans-subjective relationship between the becoming-mother and the becoming-child during the final trimester of pregnancy (Pollock 2004, 6). The matrixial is significant because it emphasises human beings’ primary relationship as co-emerging, unequal and hospitable, thus opening up ethical possibilities of being in the world based on co-emergence, co-existence and compassion.

The concept of co-emergence through encounter also materialises in Marg Sellers’s understanding of the curriculum as a “living and lived experience with/in which learners-teachers are embodied” (2013, 32) and curriculum-as-process in an ongoing state of becoming in which there is no fixed outcome. Sellers (2013, 32) analyses how the reciprocal relationship between students and educators performs the curriculum through engagement, debate and exchange, and reveals how the curriculum activates and facilitates learning for both students and educator alike. This reading is important because it both highlights the nature of the co-affecting relationship between the educator, students and the curriculum, as it foregrounds “how the curriculum processes around us and how we, in turn, process through it” (Sellers 2013, 1). While the reciprocal relationship between learners and educators can be intrinsically inclusive and participatory, it remains unequal. However, this discrepancy can be productively engaged through the living curriculum in which possibilities of tolerance and co-emergence in difference can be modelled and practised. In this way, an opportunity opens up for learners and educators to co-create more socially just pedagogies through the disruption of pedagogical authority and thereby transform unequal power relations within the classroom (Hempel-Jorgensen 2015, 547).

Wolff-Michael Roth’s post-constructivist reading of the curriculum as an “event*-in-the-making” is also helpful. Roth (2014, 6) argues that the living curriculum is characterised by indeterminacy and that it is only fully understood through embodied participation in and witnessing of the curriculum that we come to know. This understanding of the curriculum as generative of ongoing possibilities resonates with the agential realist model in that it emphasises humans’ participative role in the process of knowledge production (Roth 2014, 18). In this way, the curriculum performs as a space in which positivistic notions of knowledge as fixed, objective and value-free can be disrupted.

BACKGROUND TO THE DESIGN FOUNDATION COURSE

Before I present the case study itself, I would like to provide some background to the CPUT course, Design Foundation. Design Foundation is a multidisciplinary course that introduces students to the various design disciplines offered by the Faculty of Informatics and Design. In addition to studio-based projects, theoretical components include: design communication studies; history and theory of art and design; the development of language, numeracy and information skills; and a current awareness programme. The course seeks to deepen students’ understanding of artistic production within a social, political and economic framework, and draws attention to the potential for design to improve people’s lives through addressing issues of economic and social justice. Accordingly, rather than operate as discrete subjects, the theory components are interwoven in a complex web that links the current awareness programme and design praxis with current debates, concerns and projects in the field. Hence we adopt a rhizomic approach to teaching and learning, as this allows for exploration
of relevant themes that intersect within and through a timeline in multiple directions.3

CPUT students come from diverse backgrounds spanning the urban/rural, the local/afar, race/class/gender divisions, language barriers and differing educational experiences and needs. Upon arrival at university, students embark on an intense year in the studio that, unlike a traditional lecture theatre, becomes an intimate, multipurpose space in which creativity and theoretical and practical learning are explored. In addition to a space of learning, the studio also performs as a place and space of social interaction. It follows, therefore, that it is important that educators respond compassionately to the diverse educational and emotional needs of our students as we support them, insofar as it is possible, to deal with the anxieties associated with the first year experience – be they as a result of social, academic, personal or economic pressures. Faced with these challenges, the course aims to develop pedagogical strategies and to design curricula that deal with difference in all its iterations, with particular emphasis on learning to recognise, tolerate and respect difference.

CASE STUDY

While most students display technological proficiency in that they navigate the world of social media spaces with ease, they need to develop a visual and critical literacy so as to empower themselves as agents in a media dominated world. Accordingly, the power and potential of images are prioritised in lecture presentations to give students maximum opportunity to practise visual literacy skills as they learn the “language” of images. Presentations typically incorporate numerous visuals in the form of maps, diagrams, photographs and videos.

LECTURE 1: THE ART OF ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

Aim: To introduce students to ancient Mesopotamian art.

Students are introduced to ancient Mesopotamian culture as one of the origins of human civilisation and as a “cradle of Western civilisation” – contested terrain but nevertheless significant for the disruption of the grand narrative of progress. Located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, this theocratic society marked a significant transition from nomadic to agrarian culture, with key developments that include the rise of cities, the accumulation of wealth by a ruling class, the emergence of skilled professions, the development of writing systems in the form of cuneiform and the beginning of the practice of recorded history.

Through looking at examples of artefacts from various design disciplines, students are introduced to formal elements and principles that characterise ancient Mesopotamian artistic production. Examples include the characteristic use of patterning, repetition of the modular and the stylised representation of the human form. Students also learn about the function and context of Mesopotamian art and architecture through the introduction of key themes such as the complex relationship between art, power and religion and how art functions as a symbol of both political and religious power.

An example presented is of the hybrid animal-human guardian portals that functioned as protectors of buildings and cities. Embodying divine powers, these monumental sculptures characteristically display a three-dimensional frontal view with the side view carved in high relief. Interestingly, the sculptures have five legs so that they make sense according to the angle from which they are being viewed. Another example shown is the great Ziggurat of Ur, built around 2100 B.C.E. by king Ur-Nammu in honour of city-state’s divine patron, the moon god Nanna. Invested with spiritual meaning, this iconic architectural structure dominated the ancient city with its characteristic profile conspicuous for all to see.

LECTURE 2: MESOPOTAMIA, IRAQ, SOUTH AFRICA: COLLAPSING TIME AND SPACE

Aim: To explore the relationship between “art and power”, “art and religion” and “art as symbol” through a material engagement with artefacts through and across time with a view to recognising and tolerating difference.

The aim of this lecture is to deepen students’ understanding of the themes of art and power, and art as symbol of both political and
religious power, through a material engagement with artefacts through and across time. To this end, the ancient is diffracted through the contemporary in a spatial and temporal swerve that overlays ancient Mesopotamia with modern day Iraq through the very artefacts the students had observed in the previous lecture. In this way, the diffractive gaze reveals how iterations of the past continue to intra-act within the present, thus affirming the role that (art) history plays in our contemporary world. Understood as a process of ongoing intra-actions, students gain insight into how contemporary global conflict can be seen through differentiated lenses, as conflicting US and ISIL ideological positions in Iraq are overlaid. This is done with a view to encouraging students to develop skills of reasoning, dialogue and openness through debate, rather than reinforce binary positions.

Furthermore, through juxtaposing these conflicting ideological campaigns, an understanding is evoked of how the abstract concept of art as a symbol can further ideological positions, regardless of the ideology that is being advanced. This notion is reinforced as students witness how the meaning of artefacts shifts in relation to the ideological position encountered. In this way, the lesson focuses on allowing students to refine their understanding and insight of the relationship between art and power.

To begin, students view images of US troops encountering artefacts studied in the previous lecture. For example, the photograph of the ancient guardian portals is contrasted with an image of US troops perched on a tank between the entrance gates to the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad. Whereas before, the guardian portals appeared to tower over the man standing alongside them, they now appear dwarfed by the massive war machine that protrudes between them. This differentiation in scale is symbolic of the might of the US military, as is the damage caused to

1 Animal-human hybrid portal guardians are a common feature of ancient Mesopotamian art. Photo: Oriental Centre, University of Chicago.

3. The Great Ziggurat of Ur.
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6b/Ziggurat_of_Ur_001.jpg
the facade of the building during the battle for Baghdad.

Similarly, the original image of the Ziggurat of Ur is contrasted with a photograph of US troops climbing the massive site. Having overseen the restoration of this iconic artefact in the 1980s, Saddam Hussein had parked Iraqi air force fighter jets next to the Ziggurat, in the hope that the US would not bomb the ancient site. However, these hopes were in vain as American and coalition bombardment damaged the Ziggurat.6

The lecture then moves to a video released by ISIL of the destruction of ancient artefacts in order to “cleanse” the territory of pre-Islamic culture. As students witness the obliteration of statues by militants using sledgehammers and power tools, they begin to see the consequence of religious intolerance, and the potential ramifications of the erasure of memory and history.

The decision to mute the narration of the video allows students to experience the images without the mediation of language, thereby transcending language barriers. The encounter with/in the material and materiality of the video footage creates a rich and layered immersive experience, as the images “speaking” to the


5 Destruction of ancient artefacts by ISIL. Video still of video released on the internet by ISIL. http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2015/02/26/261D811500000578-2970270-image-a-1_1424957194042.jpg

6 Destruction of ancient artefacts by ISIL. Video still of video released on the internet by ISIL. http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/multimedia/archive/00862/Mosul_862283c.jpg
students directly had a powerful visceral impact that surpassed the retelling of words and language. By sidestepping language, students registered somatic responses to the images. Some tension amongst students in the room was palpable as the video clip progressed. Later they spoke of how the video had disturbed them, and how witnessing the destruction of irreplaceable ancient artefacts had affected them.

Returning to the Gulf War, students view the toppling of the 12-metre bronze statue of Saddam Hussein that had been erected the previous year in commemoration of Hussein’s sixty-fifth birthday. Situated in Firdos Square, the tearing down of the statue symbolised the US “victory” in the Battle of Baghdad. As an example of a well-documented global performance, students are made aware of the propaganda function of art and media in furthering the ends of politics and ideology.

The strategy of initiating and contextualising the enquiry through the frame of ancient Mesopotamia/contemporary Iraq is to allow students to explore the issues from a distance. Having observed issues from afar, students are now encouraged to examine the relationship between art and ideology closer to home, where they are likely to be more personally invested and affected.

A second spatial swerve is made as the lesson shifts from Bagdad in 2003 to Cape Town in 2015, as the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein on 9 April 2003 is diffracted through the removal of the statue of Rhodes at UCT, coincidently 12 years later to the day. Students listen to interviews with student leaders and UCT management to get a grasp of the diverging issues, perspectives and responses to the #RhodesMustFall campaign. Copies of news clippings about the #RhodesMustFall movement are read and discussed.

While there are some similarities between the two statues – both made of bronze, both commemorating men who wielded enormous amounts of wealth and power in their respective times, their “falls” both public spectacles – their respective fates differ profoundly. The statue of Saddam Hussein was unceremoniously broken below the knees, its ligatures exposed like bones to serve the
Diffracting the present through the past

The removal of the Rhodes statue from the University of Cape Town campus, 9 April 2015. Photo: rbpx.
needs of a propaganda exercise affirming the hegemony of the USA in Iraq. The treatment of the statue of Rhodes on the other hand was more compassionate, as it was ceremoniously removed from public view following a public campaign, to be stored for safekeeping in an archival space.7

- Group assignment: A comparative analysis between ISIL and #RhodesMustFall campaigns

The lectures foregrounded the relationship between art and power, and art and religion with a view to understanding how art can symbolise and further the aims of political and religious ideology. While the boundaries of art, politics, religion and ideology are not fixed, the link between art and religion was illustrated in two ways – by examining ancient Mesopotamian artistic and architectural production within the context of the theocratic state, and by interrogating ISIL’s campaign to destroy ancient pre-Islamic artefacts that did not represent their world view. The engagement of art and politics was framed through an investigation of the effect of the War of Baghdad on artefacts in Iraq, and the #RhodesMustFall campaign to decolonise the university as symbolised by the removal the statue of Rhodes from the UCT campus.

Within this context, the group assignment sought to raise awareness and understanding of difference through debating the similarities and differences between the removal of the Rhodes statue and the destruction of the pre-Islamic artefacts. Of significance too, was an interrogation of the defacement of art to further ideological ends. The strategies of destruction and removal of artefacts were the key issues in the ensuing debate and highlighted the diverging approaches between feminist understandings of difference that encompass the spectrum of both/and, as opposed to the binary approach of “either/or”. Working in groups of six, students were tasked with conducting a comparative analysis of the ISIL and #RhodesMustFall campaigns. Appointing one member as “scribe”, thereby referencing ancient Mesopotamia cuneiform and the advent of recorded history, they were asked to discuss and take note of their responses to the following questions:

1. List 3 pros of the ISIL campaign to destroy ancient artefacts.
2. List 3 cons of the ISIL campaign to destroy ancient artefacts.
3. List 3 pros of the #RhodesMustFall campaign to remove the statue of Cecil John Rhodes at UCT.
4. List 3 cons of the #RhodesMustFall campaign to remove the statue of Cecil John Rhodes at UCT.
5. List 3 similarities between the above campaigns.
6. List 3 differences between the above campaigns.
7. Brainstorm an alternative campaign for the #RhodesMustFall movement that doesn’t involve the removal of the statue.

- Observations

Inclusive and open-ended process

It was observed that the manner in which the classroom engagement was structured had an influence on how the students came to understand and tolerate difference. The instruction to argue both points of view circumvented an oppositional relationship between students, thus eliciting an inclusive and open-ended response rather than one that was foreclosed. Furthermore, the process sought to empower students through the practice of critical literacy skills as they began to decode and disrupt embedded dominant narratives and symbols in images and texts (Hempel-Jorgensen 2015, 537). This was achieved by instructing students to argue positions that were not aligned with their own subjective positions, so as to expose how the production of knowledge is both socially constructed and embedded with value systems (Miskovic and Hoop 2006, 273).

Co-emergence through encounter

The process also sought to find a way through which students’ co-emergence with and through the material that they were encountering could develop an understanding of the performative role that material artefacts play in the production of knowledge. Related to the above, students began to explore their subjective positions in relation to the artefacts. As they voiced how the destruction of artefacts had affected them, they came to recognise how meaning is embodied in artefacts and by the same token, how meaning is embodied in
their destruction. It was through this embodied encounter with the artefacts, that the potential for students to co-emerge as active producers of knowledge of material culture, became possible (Lenz Taguchi 2012, 265).

Situated knowledges
Students came to understand the relationship between the contemporary and the past through their embodied engagement with artefacts. In this way, complex abstract and theoretical concepts such as art as symbol are brought into the real through everyday language and lived experience (Miskovic and Hoop 2006, 287). Furthermore, through enacting their role as situated knowers, students became aware of themselves as co-producers of knowledge, thereby challenging positivistic notions of knowledge as objective and value-free (Miskovic and Hoop 2006, 273). At the same time, they began to understand how knowledge is embedded with different values and belief systems that are dependent on context and how dominant knowledge systems shift over time (Haraway 1988, 583).

Material discursive practices and the co-construction of knowledge
The direction of the discussion through the “externalised” artefacts freed up students to explore their “internalised” responses and insights in an open-ended way. Rather than having to formulate theoretical positions, the discussion catalysed reactions that stimulated embodied insights in an unpressurised way. This action gives insight on the performative role that artefacts play in the production of knowledge, and how they together with students become co-producers of meaning, thus confirming Lenz Taguchi’s (2012) understanding of the role that material discursive practices play in the co-construction of knowledge.

While there was consensus that the Rhodes statue should not be destroyed, students were divided about whether it should be removed. Nevertheless, mention can be made of the relative failure of students to answer question seven in the above task, which initially, to my mind, was the crux of the assignment. Following a diffractive analysis of difference, in which iterations of the past are both present and implicated in the creation of new possibilities for and in the future, I had hoped to elicit creative responses that would embrace nuanced engagements with difference so as to move beyond the binary remain/remove or remain/destroy. However, only one group came up with a viable strategy whereby they suggested that a statue of murdered black consciousness activist, Steve Biko, be erected next to Rhodes and thereby open up a conversation that interpolates our colonial past/present in relation to the decolonisation movement.

The comparison of the two campaigns opened up a space for self-exploration with particular reference to the imperatives of #RhodesMustFall and it was necessary for students to understand how this encounter affected their being and becoming. After robust exchange of views within the groups, it became clear that the students needed more time to explore the issues in relation to their own subjectivities. On their initiative, it was agreed that the discussions would be continued during an additional session two days later.

LECTURE 3: AN OPEN DISCUSSION ABOUT THE #RHODESMUSTFALL CAMPAIGN

Aim: To have an open-ended conversation about the #RhodesMustFall campaign.

At the start of the third session we established ground rules for the group discussion which included mutual respect and tolerance, to ensure that all participants felt comfortable to share their stories. We also agreed that, as lecturer, I reserved the right to end the discussion immediately should the discussion become un-contained. The participatory process foregrounded the ambiguous relationship between myself as educator and the students, and the need to establish a mutual rapport to nurture meaningful dialogue. At the same time, it created an opportunity to disrupt hierarchical pedagogical power relations in which the traditional role of teacher as “knower” and students as “learners” is challenged by adoption of a more non-hierarchical relationship where students and lecturer potentially participate equally.
• Observations

The relationship between learning and being

By shifting the educator’s role from that of mediator between student and curriculum to a more direct relationship, a more meaningful student engagement with the curriculum becomes possible. When this happened, the emphasis shifted from the epistemological to the onto-epistemological as the educator facilitates issues arising out of participants’ subjective narratives. In this case learning and being become one process, each formed and informed by the other. It was critical to begin with what mattered to the students themselves, how they were affected subjectively by the images and stories, and importantly, what the campaigns meant to them.

Show and tell

The classroom became a space where students and educator were able to see and be seen, listen and be heard within difference, thus paving a way for a potential process of transformation. Given that the students had only been on the CPUT campus for two months, the discussion shifted towards their experience of the secondary school education system in South Africa and how it affected their initial experience of tertiary education. As they began to share their stories, their divergent educational backgrounds soon became apparent. Notwithstanding the complexity of educator as participant, it was imperative that I as educator also shared my own experience of secondary education, both as a white student who had benefitted from Christian National Education under Apartheid, as well as my continued position of privilege as a white middle-class woman. Furthermore, I referenced my continued involvement in secondary education in South Africa, as the parent of children who attend a former model-C school.9

Three key lessons emerged from the discussion, that have informed my subsequent pedagogical practice.

Engaging racism

Firstly, the need to deal with racism head-on within the group. Racism rapidly surfaced as white students on the whole felt entitled, empowered and confident to express their opinions. One student in particular assumed the authority to speak on behalf of fellow black students whom he referred to in the third person as “them”. This attitude was quickly challenged and, as the discussion progressed, and more black students spoke out, some white students began, albeit reluctantly, to understand and begin to acknowledge their continued position of privilege. Based on this experience, I have learned the importance of confronting racism and racial dynamics head-on and therefore, continue to structure lessons that encourage students to work through issues of racism through a diffractive engagement with artefacts.

The need for inclusive pedagogies and curricula

Secondly, black students who had felt marginalised within the schooling system voiced an ongoing experience of exclusion within the university and confirmed how the experience of unequal and inferior education affected their sense of self. For example, one student described her alienation within the dominant white middle-class culture of a former model C high school. At the same time she expressed an ongoing struggle to integrate her home life with her life at school and felt like an outsider in both these communities. Another student who had attended a rural school in the Eastern Cape expressed his lack of confidence to speak up in class since coming to university, thus reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and inferiority within the academic environment. Given these concerns, it becomes imperative to develop pedagogies and curricula that counter these effects in their first year of study.

Encouraging learner agency and voice

It emerged that of some students experienced anxiety resulting from a lack of confidence to speak out. One student explained how he had attended a school where the hierarchical relationship between learners and educators conditioned him to be passive in the learning environment. As a result, he was struggling to adapt to the demands of the participative nature of the lessons. This insight has deepened my resolve to develop creative
methodologies that empower and engage students who have encountered educational barriers through an unequal high school experience. I have witnessed over time that the more students actively engage with one another and with knowledge, the more they begin to build their confidence and are able to refine their understanding of their subjective positionings in relation to others in the group (Hempel-Jorgensen 2015, 533). In this way the barriers between knowers and learners are disrupted and begin to recognise themselves as situated knowers who actively co-construct knowledge through their lived experience (Haraway 1998, 581).

CONCLUSION

This paper has described and analysed a classroom encounter where art history, current awareness and students’ lived experience came together to co-construct a learning space in which students’ emerging conceptions of social justice in South Africa are explored. There is a risk that this case study might seem dated because it was contingent on events related to 2015, i.e. ISIL’s destruction of ancient artefacts and #RhodesMustFall. However, this is not the case. The case study continues to form and inform a flexible and fluid model whereby ongoing issues relating to art history and students’ lived experience are explored. In this way, the case study has shown how a post-constructivist perspective of the living curriculum (Roth, 2014) and the becoming curriculum (Sellers 2013) activates the classroom as a space in which students engage materials, materiality and meaning in a matrix out of which teaching and learning co-emerge in an ongoing state of becoming (Ettinger 2006). Furthermore, learners emerge as active agents as they simultaneously co-create new pedagogies whilst transforming past unjust pedagogical practices (Miskovic and Hoop 2006, 273; Hempel-Jorgensen 2015, 533).

Moving beyond the binary, the fixed and the linear, the paper interrogates how the educator’s task moves from the epistemological and ontological (Barrett 2009) towards the ethic-onto-epistemological (Barad 2007). Through interweaving threads of post-humanist agential realism (Barad 2007), matrixial theory (Ettinger 2006) and situated knowledges (Haraway 1988), new thresholds of co-emergence, interconnection, co-existence and becoming offer ethic-onto-epistemological possibilities for new pedagogical processes and methodologies.

Having foregrounded diffractional analysis as a methodology, the paper offers new possibilities for the understanding of material discursive relationships as researchers, in this case students and lecturer, co-emerge through an encounter with artefacts. Understood as a diffractional model in the now, this process has ongoing implications for the teaching and learning of art history whereby iterations of the past continue to intra-act in the present, thus affirming art history’s role in the co-creation of ongoing possibilities of meaning and understanding. Moreover, this methodology activates a productive space through which teaching and learning co-emerge, thus offering possible ways forward for higher education in South Africa.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With thanks to the Design Foundation students of Cape Peninsula University of Technology for sharing their insights and stories; and to Professors Viv Bozalek and Lynn Coleman for their encouragement and support through the process of writing this paper.

NOTES

1 Kathrin Thiele explores how Barad, Haraway and Ettinger’s imaginings of difference(s) and diffraction resonate with one another. For further reading see her article entitled Ethos of Diffraction: New Paradigms for a (Post)humanist Ethics.

2 In this context, the term “researchers” refers to students and educators alike.

3 Barad explains intra-actions as “agental cuts that do not produce absolute separations, but cut together apart (one move)” (2014, 168). In this reading, entanglements are read within the agential realist framework and are not understood as discrete entities but as differentiation (Barad 2014, 176).

4 These include industrial design, fashion design, jewellery design, graphic design, surface design, architecture and interior design.

5 Following Deleuze and Guattari’s model of the rhizome as a multidimensional structure that is inclusive, expansive and connects in a non-hierarchical way with no centre. There is no beginning or end; instead each point connects to every other point in increasing configurations allowing for multiple readings and points of view (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).
Note: The following year (2016) I decided to teach the same lectures within the above framework. However, the lectures coincided with UCT administration’s destruction of the #Feesmustfall Shackville installation that was created by students in protest against the lack of student accommodation at the UCT. After this confrontation, some students entered residences and removed artwork from the walls and burnt them. The concerns of the destruction versus removal of artefacts were no longer applicable in the increasingly polarised climate at UCT, although these issues are even more relevant.

Some students had attended private schools, others had been to former “Model C” schools, one had been home-schooled, a few had matriculated at inner city schools, and the rest had attended township and rural schools.

My partner and I actively participate in the life of the school, our children learn in their mother-tongue, and as parents we can assist with homework and projects.

REFERENCES


