



## Relational Pedagogies Reimagined: Reflecting on Mattering and Response-Ability in Higher Education

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### Abstract

This paper explores how Pedagogies of Mattering (PoM), grounded in post-humanist theory, can reshape higher education by centring relationality, co-responsibility, and material conditions. Using a Collaborative Autoethnographic (CAE) approach, five academic developers reflect on their facilitation of small-group critical dialogues at the HELTASA (Un)Conference 2024, drawing on lived experience to examine the entangled nature of learning and teaching. Four interconnected themes emerged: (1) ethics, trust, and care as foundations for student voice and agency; (2) relationality and co-creation as means of deepening engagement; (3) material conditions such as infrastructure, access, and linguistic inclusivity; and (4) decolonial pedagogies that affirm indigenous knowledge and multilingual practices. We argue for curriculum co-design, inclusive assessment, and decentralised institutional structures that value both human and more-than-human actors in the academic space. PoM offers a practical framework for transforming higher education into a space of collective flourishing, where knowledge is not merely transmitted, but co-created through care, dialogue, and responsibility.

**Keywords:** curriculum co-creation; decolonial pedagogy; pedagogy of mattering; relationality; response-ability; collaborative autoethnography

### Introduction

In an era marked by calls for transformation in higher education, there is a growing imperative to reimagine pedagogical practices in ways that foreground care, relationality, and shared responsibility. Traditional teaching models characterised by hierarchy and cognitive transmission fall short of engaging students as partners in co-creating meaningful educational experiences. This is especially true in the South African context, where historical inequities and present-day structural barriers continue to shape what is valued in university spaces. The broader contextual issues affecting

higher education in South Africa are deeply rooted in its historical, socio-political, economic, and institutional landscape. These contextual factors create a complex and often contradictory terrain in which transformation is demanded but difficult to implement. In response to these challenges, we advance a pedagogical framework rooted in Pedagogies of Mattering (PoM) and response-ability. These relational approaches imply that we reconsider how learning and teaching is enacted as co-constructed processes that affirm the voices and lived experiences of all participants.

Through the framework of PoM, this is achieved through tailored programmes, workshops, dialogue, and institutional initiatives

that offer a response to complexity by reimagining relationships, knowledge, and institutional purposes. In the South African context, such initiatives are driven by academic developers, which refers to professionals in the higher education space whose role is to enhance the quality of learning, teaching, and academic administration, primarily through developing capacity among university teachers. Their role extends to supporting academics to recognise and be responsive to issues of equity, access, redress, and social justice.

We, the authors, are academic developers at various institutions and are also members of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa's (HELTASA) Professional Learning Project team. Author 1 works at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) as an Academic Development Practitioner; Author 2 also works at the DUT as a Writing Centre Practitioner; Author 3 is a Learning and Teaching Specialist at the University of the Western Cape; Author 4 is based at the University of Fort Hare, serving as the Manager of the Teaching and Learning Centre; and Author 5 serves as the coordinator for curriculum and academic development at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Drawing on Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE), we reflect on the facilitation of small-group conversations or critical dialogues during the first day of the 2024 HELTASA (Un)Conference. We explore how relational pedagogies were not only theorised but enacted during these engagements and offer practical insights for embedding mattering and response-ability into our academic work. The article makes a contribution to the discourse on socially just pedagogies in higher education by contextualising the framework of PoM within the South African context. Through the use of CAE, we offer a practitioner-led methodology that surfaces personal and collective narratives. We also theorise these in relation to post-humanist and decolonial frameworks. In doing so, we bridge abstract theoretical constructs such as response-ability, intra-action, and relationality with grounded insights from lived academic experiences. Our reflections illustrate how PoM

can be enacted through intentional shifts in curriculum design, assessment practices, and professional learning. Importantly, we position PoM not only as an ethical or philosophical lens but as a pragmatic and transformative tool for reimagining institutional cultures. Guiding this exploration is the central research question: *How can Pedagogies of Mattering and response-ability, as enacted through academic development practice, foster more relational, inclusive, and transformative learning and teaching in South African higher education?*

## Literature review and Theoretical framework

Pedagogies of Mattering (PoM) are grounded in Posthumanism Theory which takes a different approach to epistemology and ethics. As Gravett et al. (2024) explain, PoM offers a departure from the traditional cognitivist and humanist lens, placing emphasis on relationality of people, places, structures, environments and contexts. The concept draws on the foundational work of Rosenberg and McCullough (1981), who defined mattering as the feeling of significance and actively being paid attention to, and has, from this early interpretation, been extended and reconceptualised to include post-humanist and feminist materialist theories (Gravett et al., 2024). In the context of higher education, PoM positions the student and lecturer not as detached and individualist, but rather as deeply embedded and relational to other actors (humans) and the material, structural and non-human world that they occupy (Haraway, 2007). This perspective subsequently raises ethical questions about who and what is considered significant in higher education and highlights how pedagogies and responsibility are interconnected.

Universities in their present colonial design and structure are 'response-unable', they alienate students from their traditions, histories and knowledges. When viewing higher education through the lens of PoM, there are several implications that affect the curriculum and the learning and teaching experience. According to Gravett et al. (2024), a PoM encourages educators to reconsider how curricula are socially and materially constructed, embracing uncertainty, lived experiences, and fluidity. Learning is framed

as a process of relational engagement rather than individual knowledge acquisition, where students are actively involved in co-designing content and selecting reading materials. Similarly, learning emerges through interactions between students, lecturers, material objects, and learning spaces. Classroom dynamics reveal how power structures materialise in and impact on educational spaces, and consequently, assessments shift towards more flexible and student-centred practices, acknowledging the uniqueness of each student's journey. Assessments are not something that is imposed on students to test their knowledge, but are rather integrated as part of the learning experience, moving away from a rigid, end-of-course, high-stakes approach.

With its focus on relationality, PoM is closely linked to 'response-able' pedagogy. Gravett et al. (2024) explains that a higher education approach of response-ability encourages co-creation, a shared duty towards student success, and mutual, collaborative support in navigating the complexities and challenges of higher education. Relating PoM with the concept of response-ability results in a focus on creating more collaborative, caring and responsive educational spaces that recognise the material, emotional and relational conditions that shape the learning, teaching and academic experience for students and staff (at all levels) at universities.

Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) proposed a conceptual framework for a 'response-able' pedagogy within the context of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa. Drawing from feminist new materialist scholarship, particularly the work of Barad (2007) and Haraway (2007), the authors explored the ethico-political dimensions of pedagogical practices that emphasise relationality, entanglement, and collective responsibility. Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) outline four interrelated practices deemed essential to a response-able pedagogy: attentiveness, curiosity, responsibility, and being rendered capable. These practices underscore the interconnectedness of human and non-human agents in educational settings. By integrating attentiveness, curiosity, responsibility, and the rendering of capabilities, Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) propose a transformative approach to higher education that

moves beyond anthropocentric legacies, and especially individualistic-centred frameworks. Their analysis emphasises the need for pedagogical practices that are cognisant of entanglement, that attend to justice and cultivate new possibilities for collective learning in post-apartheid South African universities.

However, the hidden danger in embracing compassion in response-able pedagogies merits consideration. Zembylas (2017) uses the term 'suffering' to describe challenges faced by students, that need to be recognised to value student perspectives in the PoM framework. Waddington and Bonaparte (2025) caution that the use of such terms may reinforce a victim mentality, portraying students as helpless and dependent, which undermines the very purpose of relationality and mattering. Those authors point out that such language may perpetuate hierarchical power dynamics, and hence remind us that compassion in this sense must be taken to mean that we see through the students' perspectives, and that they truly matter in a relational way.

Recognising and valuing students' diverse perspectives and experiences, especially in the South African context, can encourage deeper engagement, and lead to greater success. Collaborative approaches to learning and teaching, and co-creation involve shared decision-making between lecturers and students and promoting mutual responsibility for the academic exchanges that take place. This also aligns with decolonisation efforts and the addressing of historical injustices and inequalities. Heleta (2018) critiques the Eurocentric curriculum, which perpetuates Western dominance, while Hlatshwayo (2021; 2022) highlights that universities in the global South struggle to define their purposes and goals, remaining trapped in an 'existential slumber'.

PoM is therefore relevant in this context, as curriculum transformation through intentionally designed co-creation with students ensures that all knowledge systems are validated. Owusu-Agyeman and Pillay (2023) examined factors that enhance relational pedagogy in a South African university and found ethical care, interpersonal communication, respect, and mattering as

significant factors that foster a learning environment where students feel valued and supported. These views are supported by Tinto (1993, 2006), who has explored student retention and engagement through a sense of belonging and mattering in education. Furthermore, Biggs (2001, p. 222) maintains that “Quality teaching transforms students’ perceptions of their world, and the way they go about applying their knowledge to real world problems; it also transforms teachers’ conceptions of their role as teacher and the culture of the institution itself.” However, the higher education sector is characterised by inertia, which is both useful in maintaining its integrity, but also a barrier to swift transformation. Hodgkinson and Brown (2003, p. 350) note that “changing procedures is relatively easy, changing attitudes is not. Gradualism is likely to be more effective in the long term”. Driving a shift towards PoM, for the collective benefit of all stakeholders, i.e. who or what matters, requires robust, deliberate and meaningful engagements, with a view to intentionally and critically transition in a positive and collaborative manner.

One may address the fundamental question: what is the true purpose of a university? Whilst universities were traditionally entrusted with serving the public good, they are often criticised for prioritising bureaucratic compliance over genuine student interests and positive transformation of society. This raises significant concerns about the commodification of education, where students are seen less as students and more as ‘customers’ to be satisfied (Hlatshwayo, 2021, 2022). With this market-driven outlook, the university’s mission becomes increasingly aligned with economic imperatives, leaving academics burdened with administrative tasks that detract from their ability to engage meaningfully with students (Lemaitre, 2002). Freire (1982) offers a powerful critique of educational systems that treat students as passive recipients of information, rather than as active participants in a transformative learning process. For Freire, true education is rooted in dialogue, not the mere deposit of information. It has been proclaimed that “if higher education is to be reclaimed as a ‘public good’, then, curricula should be transformed to offer all students a fair chance of flourishing and

achieving both public and personal ‘goods’” (Luckett & Shay, 2020, p. 4).

PoM and response-ability are manifested in a culture of care and shared responsibility. This is critical for cultivating a sense of belonging among increasingly diverse student cohorts. Engaging in teaching practices that are embedded in care, empathy and respect, requires that all university stakeholders share the responsibility to drive its implementation, regardless of positionality. Meyers, Rowell, Wells & Smith (2019) point out that from an institutional position, this requires that universities design and implement policies that shift behaviour towards an increase in teacher empathy. Such examples and acknowledgement of positionality and relationality exemplify the recognition that in an entangled entity such as a university, individuals are decentred, to give way to posthumanist philosophies, relational materialism and post-structural ways of thinking (Gravett *et al.*, 2024).

Despite these burgeoning voices and insights, many institutions continue to operate in a top-down, unidirectional and managerial manner. Academics, positioned as unquestionable authorities, disseminate ‘expert’ knowledge to students, who are in turn reduced to consumers rather than collaborators in their own learning (Freire, 1982). Bozalek and Zembylas (2017, p. 66) in their discussion on higher education pedagogies question “the notion of knowledge being located in particular individuals who transmit it to less knowledgeable others”. These authors maintain that:

Students, texts, theories, lecturers emanate through their entanglements—subjects and objects do not pre-exist their relationships. Being rendered capable means that there is no pre-existing knowledgeable other but that all are affected and affect the other (both the human and the more than human), becoming-with the other through relationships (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017, p. 66).

### Methodology

We are members of the HELTASA’s Professional Learning Project team and work within the field of academic development at our

respective institutions. We employed collaborative autoethnography as the research methodology as it offers a variety of modes of engaging with self, or more accurately with selves (group of researchers or participants) (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, p. 2013). In doing so, we used our personal experiences as data to critically reflect on our experiences of facilitating small group conversations at the 2024 HELTASA (un)Conference. Campbell (2016, p. 95) describes this as a form of “self-narrative that places the self within a social context”. As facilitators, we engaged participants in a structured small-group task designed to prompt critical dialogue on collaborative, relational approaches to teaching. The task centred on the guiding question: *How can we, as staff in higher education, support each other in moving beyond hierarchical teaching structures and embrace a collective, relational approach that values the diverse contributions of each staff member?* Participants, who included both academic staff and students from various South African higher education institutions, were invited to first reflect individually on this question, noting their responses on a shared sheet. This was followed by an open group discussion where ideas were exchanged, challenged, and built upon.

Based on the planning and facilitation experiences, we reflect on ways in which we can enhance practices around transforming higher education’s learning and teaching contexts. Collaborative autoethnography enabled us to combine our reflections with our experiences within our complex higher education environments and how it relates to broader cultural, social, and political contexts (Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017). This further empowered us to assert our agency as academic developers and researchers and analyse our own lived experiences and share our academic experiences with participants and invite participants to do the same.

CAE is a tool to “break through the dominant representations of professional practice, creating new knowledges” (Denshire, 2014, p. 838) and examine the complexities of higher education (Barkhuizen, 2017). CAE allowed for a more nuanced understanding of shared experiences. We were able to narrate our experiences and collectively and inclusively

analyse them. The strengths of using CAE in research includes “self-reflexivity associated with autobiography, cultural interpretation associated with ethnography, and multi-subjectivity associated with collaboration” (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2016, p. 17). In conducting this CAE inquiry, we were guided by Chang et al.’s (2016) five-step plan for using CAE for research. The five-step plan includes forming a team; deciding on the research focus area; selecting a collaborative model; defining roles and boundaries; and considering ethical principles in the research.

For the first step, our team was predetermined as the five members of the HELTASA Professional Learning Project team who were facilitators for small group conversations (Meqoqo) during the first day of the HELTASA (Un)conference. The second step, which calls for identifying the focus area of the research, resulted in the team having several discussions formally and informally via Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp messages and emails. It was during one of these discussions that one of the group members suggested exploring ‘Pedagogies of mattering’. We set up bi-weekly virtual meetings and researched and shared texts. After several online discussions and exchanging of readings and ideas, we were able to plan for the small group conversation sessions. We divided the team into two groups to focus more deeply on each of the selected focus areas. The two groups crafted a plan including key questions and prompts relating to ‘Pedagogies of Mattering’. We further considered Spry’s (2001) argument for a good autoethnography and how it “is a provocative weave of story and theory” (p. 713). The regular meetings further resulted in a common understanding of CAE inquiry, and we discussed how to use it to reflect on our planning and facilitation experiences.

In step three, which is on selecting a collaborative model, we used the MS Teams platform as a space to meet virtually and write together. We engaged in writing up our reflections using prompts, and reflected on the shared participants’ views on creating more inclusive and responsive learning environments for students and staff. We read each other’s narratives, asked

questions, and challenged each other's thinking during our online meetings. This enabled us to reread our stories, refine and engage in deeper critical reflection. The iterative writing process enabled us to revise and strengthen our narratives. The reflections were analysed and themes relating to the PoM and 'response-ability' emerged and were agreed upon.

The fourth step involved defining roles and boundaries. The team created roles within each of the two groups based on each other's strengths. This enabled well thought-out and planned sessions and further contributed to in-depth critical reflections. The final step called for the group to ensure and declare that ethical standards were maintained. Participation in the project and reflections were voluntary and group members could withdraw at any stage of the process.

For the thematic analysis, we immersed ourselves with the data and read and re-read texts to be familiar with the content. We then broke down the data into units and manually coded them. We identified patterns among the codes and grouped them to form themes. Once themes were identified we reviewed them, merged some, split others and finalised our themes. The analysis presented in the next section is the outcome of a combined process and reflects our learning from the collaborative critical dialogues.

## Findings and Discussion

The four themes that emerged from the data were: *Ethics, trust and care: student agency and voice*; *Relationality, co-creation and reflexive praxis in professional learning*; *Material conditions and access*; and *Cultural awareness and decolonial pedagogies*.

### ***Ethics, trust, care: student agency and voice***

Tronto's framing of care is situated in the belief that an ethic of care is both a practice and a disposition rather than a set of principles (Tronto, 2017). An ethic of care should not be discussed in terms of the success or failure to care but rather about "particular acts of caring and a general 'habit of mind' to care" (Tronto, 1993, p. 127). For Tronto, care is a relational act that is fundamentally rooted in the interdependence

among humans, other living species, and the environment (Tronto, 2017). Relational pedagogies draw attention to the significance of acknowledging students as active participants in their own learning rather than passive recipients (Hickey & Riddle, 2024). This shift in higher education learning challenges traditional top-down models that characterise learning and teaching and re-envision the student-teacher relationship as being mutual. When students are embraced as partners in learning this yields greater engagement and ownership. Moreover, relational pedagogies emphasise the importance of students lived experiences (Jimenez, 2022). The following reflections emphasise this:

*"The recognition of students as co-creators of knowledge emerged as a key theme, with an emphasis on peer-to-peer learning models that move beyond unidirectional knowledge transmission" (Author 3).*

*"Participants expressed that universities should provide opportunities and spaces to enable collaboration among all stakeholders. They emphasised the importance of including students in the conversation and as partners in the learning and teaching process" (Author 2).*

*"Creating sustainable and impactful relationships within academic spaces requires intentional efforts to foster trust. The idea that students should take ownership of their learning beyond extrinsic rewards was also highlighted." (Author 1).*

These views highlight that the development of collaborative learning environments in higher education is pivotal to relational pedagogy. It is within these environments that significant interactions take place. Research shows that when meaningful engagement takes place it not only contributes to conceptual understanding but also develops critical attributes such as critical thinking, communication skills and problem solving (Govender & Rathilal, 2022). Collaborative learning spaces in higher education inspire peer-to-peer learning where students are encouraged to challenge, debate and support each other's perspectives. Through collaborative learning, the classroom becomes a more participatory and

dynamic space where all student voices are valued thus reducing the power imbalance found in traditional classrooms.

When students become co-creators of knowledge, and their diverse voices and perspectives are valued, the educational experience becomes an enriching one. This approach requires educators to reflect on their practices and ensure that they are open to pedagogical innovation that is aligned to students' needs. In doing this, higher education can remain responsive and relevant. The following reflections indicate this:

*"In moving beyond a paternalistic model, it is essential that we identify and challenge the hierarchical structures that silence the voices of staff and students"* (Author 1).

*"Students need supportive environments that are responsive to their needs"* (Author 2).

Yet traditional universities operate within deeply hierarchical governance structures. These systems often concentrate decision-making power at the top through senior administrators, departmental heads, or senate committees, which can lead to policies and practices that unintentionally create barriers for both students and academics (Mbembe, 2016; Lockett, 2009). If we want to move beyond hierarchical models, we need to foster an educational experience that is more inclusive and democratic. Traditionally, the teacher is often seen as the fountain of knowledge with students being passive recipients. However, embracing a relational pedagogical approach means dismantling these hierarchical structures and embracing shared learning experiences where students learn from their peers, their educators and vice versa.

Another vital component of relational pedagogy is the inclusion of students in the curriculum design and decision-making as this fosters a sense of agency. This participatory approach not only ensures curriculum relevance but also empowers students to shape their learning. Author 3 reflected that *"To remain relevant, institutions need to include students in, for example, curriculum development and institutional reviews."* Additionally, when students

are involved in the curriculum, it encourages an environment where they feel free to include their lived experiences, which will shape the learning and teaching experience, ensuring that the curriculum is relevant.

Reflection and feedback emerged as important avenues for encouraging agency and voice in a shift to relational pedagogies:

*"We need to create spaces which can be formal or informal where staff and students can reflect on their learning and teaching experiences"* (Author 1).

*"Feedback mechanisms must embody the principles of response-ability by ensuring that student and staff input lead to meaningful action"* (Author 3).

Opportunities for co-reflecting on learning and teaching could include advisory boards, decision-making forums, and class representative meetings where students' suggestions and feedback are acted upon. These spaces must be safe where respect and trust are valued. When students see that their voices are heard, they are more likely to speak about curriculum matters. Student feedback should also be valued and viewed as transformative rather than perfunctory. This suggests that institutions should make a commitment to shift to relational pedagogies where responsibility for learning and teaching is shared, and students are viewed as co-constructors of knowledge.

### ***Relationality, co-creation and reflexive praxis in professional learning***

Relationality, co-creation, and reflexive praxis are interconnected and foundational dimensions of transformative professional learning in higher education. Relationality in learning and teaching plays a pivotal role in fostering meaningful student engagement. Insights from our facilitator reflections of the critical dialogues emphasise that relationality is not a one-sided endeavour. Rather, both staff and students are co-constructors of knowledge, with their interactions forming the foundation for deeper learning experiences: *"The discussions underscored the importance of relationality in learning and teaching, emphasising that both staff*

*and students play a crucial role in co-constructing knowledge” (Author 1).*

Literature highlights that when educators build positive social relationships with students through respectful communication, inclusive pedagogies, motivational strategies, and recognition of learners’ diverse backgrounds, students are more likely to participate actively in the learning process (Owusu-Agyeman & Moroeroe, 2023). The related notion of ‘co-creation’ in higher education is increasingly recognised as a reciprocal process in which all participants, students, lecturers, and academic developers contribute meaningfully, in different ways, to the learning, teaching and assessment process. Rooted in the ‘students as partners’ approach, this collaborative model has been shown to yield numerous benefits for both students and staff (Campbell *et al.*, 2023). It implies moving beyond hierarchical models of knowledge transfer in universities to the co-creation of knowledge, recognising students as partners rather than passive recipients.

When students see their lived experiences acknowledged and integrated into the learning, teaching and assessment process, they feel valued and included, thereby fostering a deeper sense of partnership and shared ownership of learning. Reflecting on the critical dialogue sessions, facilitators highlighted the powerful potential of co-creation when academic developers and other higher education practitioners collaborate with lecturers and students to design learning, teaching and assessment activities that are responsive to students’ diverse backgrounds, digital literacies, and lived experiences:

*“Academic developers can collaborate with lecturers and students to design activities which take into consideration students’ backgrounds and digital literacies. When students see that their lived experiences are recognised, they feel valued and included. This fosters a spirit of co-creation” (Author 3).*

Relationality and reflexive practice are intertwined because reflection, often perceived as an internal process, becomes enriched when situated within a social context, shaped by dialogue, feedback, and shared experiences. A

facilitator reflected that “... *fostering response-ability is an ongoing process - one that requires continuous reflection...*” (Author 3). In higher education, reflexive practice is grounded in sociological understandings of reflexivity, as articulated by Giddens (1990), and is anchored in continuous reflection as a core mechanism for growth. Encouraging self-reflection among teachers is an ongoing professional commitment. Structured models such as Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb & Kolb, 2018) and Gibbs’ Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988) offer valuable frameworks for educators to critically assess, adapt, and refine their teaching practices. Moving beyond isolated acts of reflection, these models support a sustained process of inquiry and action, fostering continuous improvement in learning, teaching and assessment. Building reflexivity into day-to-day practice enables teaching academics to become more *response-able*, i.e. more attuned and responsive to students’ evolving needs, backgrounds, and learning contexts.

### ***Material conditions and access***

A critical dimension emerging from the reflections is the centrality of material conditions in shaping learning and teaching. As Author 1 reflected: “[*the*] majority [*of*] students from previously disadvantaged institutions come from the lower quintile schools and have not had access to technology prior to attending the university”. Digital transformation has impacted higher education institutions extensively and the introduction of Learning Management Systems (LMS), data analytics and artificial intelligence is reshaping how learning and teaching are experienced (Jakoet-Salie & Ramalobe, 2023; Mabida, 2024). Access is not peripheral; it is foundational to the transformative potential of higher education (Luckett & Shay, 2020). These conditions include digital barriers, technology availability, and physical learning spaces (Czerniewicz *et al.*, 2020).

Digital platforms can exacerbate existing inequalities if these platforms are not implemented inclusively and adaptively (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012). Access must be understood not merely as device ownership, but as the capacity to participate fully in knowledge co-creation, which includes



infrastructure, socio-economic context, and digital literacy (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Morrow, 2009). According to Patel and Ragolane (2024, p. 61), “In many institutions in South Africa, particularly those in rural areas, there is inadequate technological infrastructure and limited internet connectivity, which hinders the effective deployment of AI tools and limits their accessibility to all students.” The digital revolution has exacerbated the digital divide in South African higher education institutions, where underprivileged students are more likely to experience unequal learning opportunities (Moonasamy & Naidoo, 2022). This is further affirmed by Funda and Piderit (2024) who maintain that those stakeholders (students and academics) who are not able to keep up with the pace of AI literacies are at risk of widening already existing disparities, and would be further disadvantaged in the digital era.

The fostering of inclusive learning environments require intentional responsiveness to students’ diverse realities. Working collaboratively, different role players coming together can help to foster more inclusive learning opportunities. For example, Author 1 reflected that: *“Academic developers can collaborate with lecturers and students to design activities which take into consideration students’ backgrounds and digital literacies. When students see that their lived experiences are recognised, they feel valued and included”*. Supporting this, Zembylas (2015) highlighted that designing activities that reflect students’ lived experiences and digital competencies enhances belonging and inclusion.

Furthermore, material access is deeply intertwined with linguistic and cultural inclusivity. This highlights the need to consider intersectional barriers to access, including language, culture, and socio-economic status. PoM urges educators to ensure that students feel seen, heard, and valued in academic spaces (Zembylas, 2013). In parallel, the concept of response-ability, as proposed by Barad (2007), reframes responsibility as an ethical, relational, and ongoing engagement with students’ shifting needs. Institutions can address digital poverty through targeted interventions such as low-bandwidth content, accessible digital tools, and inclusive learning design that recognises

students’ contexts (Czerniewicz et al., 2020). Additionally, physical learning spaces can be reconfigured to accommodate equity-focused pedagogies, supporting both access and participation.

It emerged staff that are cautious or resistant to change regarding digital transformation and AI implementation in higher education. Resistance to change or embracing technological advancements may stem from fears about job security. This demonstrates the need for ongoing professional learning, as reflected by Author 2:

*“Staff at most universities resist or fear change and this delays meaningful adoption of AI in higher education...staff need training on AI to be able to effectively integrate AI into their teaching practices and institutions need to support professional development in this area...training and professional development opportunities would enable educators to integrate AI effectively into their teaching practices ... Higher education institutions must promote AI literacy among students and staff to ensure that all stakeholders understand the capabilities and limitations of AI technologies”*.

Jakoet-Salie and Ramalobe (2023) similarly assert that digital illiteracy poses a significant barrier to the adoption of technology in higher education institutions. A recent study by Mabida (2024) reports that among the many challenges to implementing digital technology in universities include resistance to change, infrastructure and funding limitations and inadequate training and development. Kanyemba’s (2022) study on academics adopting new digital platforms highlights that academics need to embrace a positive attitude to change for universities to progress in the adoption of technology in learning and teaching. Many researchers (Opesemowo & Adekomaya, 2024; Funda & Piderit, 2024; Mabida, 2024) have indicated the value of AI in higher education particularly in terms of student performance, learning outcomes, creating inclusive and interactive classroom environments and tailoring learning experiences. This is particularly important in the South African context that has

diverse students. Despite these, other scholars (Wang'ang'a, 2024; Patel & Ragolane, 2024) have highlighted cautions around ethical issues such as the accuracy of information and privacy concerns.

### ***Cultural awareness and decolonial pedagogies***

Epistemic diversity is a central tenet of decolonial pedagogy, as is the recognition and inclusion of African and Indigenous knowledge systems. As noted by Author 4 *"Participants openly dialogued on how content and teaching practices must recognise the value of African and Indigenous knowledge"*. Author 4 further reflected: *"Indigenous Knowledge Systems should be integrated into the curriculum. Addressing the diversity of marginalised groups and responding responsibly to this diversity is crucial"*. These views align with Gravett et al.'s (2024) assertion that pedagogy must recognise relational and material conditions that shape knowing.

In our reflections, language emerged as a critical axis of inclusion. African languages are often unrecognised, and many current language policies do not reflect linguistic realities. Translanguaging using students' full linguistic repertoires was identified as a transformative strategy. *"Translanguaging emerged as a key strategy, emphasising the importance of using students' linguistic repertoires as a resource for meaning-making"* (Author 2). The recognition of language as a site of power, identity, and knowledge production is crucial. Integrating multilingual pedagogies affirms the cultural identities of students and disrupts the hegemony of English as the sole medium of teaching and learning. This is a necessary step towards inclusivity and pedagogical justice. In valuing student voice and co-creation, decolonial pedagogy demands that students move from passive recipients to co-creators of knowledge. Author 4 affirms that *"voices and experiences of both staff and students should be valued. They should be included when designing new programmes and types of assessments"*. Co-creation not only empowers students but aligns with Freire's (1982) vision of dialogical, emancipatory education. The reflections emphasise that *"collaboration between staff and students is crucial for normalising student*

*involvement in initiatives like HELTASA"* (Author 4). When students are involved in curriculum design, institutional reviews, and pedagogy planning, they develop a sense of ownership and accountability. This participation fosters belonging and increases engagement.

In terms of structural and contextual constraints, large class sizes, digital inequalities, and limited institutional support pose significant challenges. Author 4 reflected that *"[the] majority [of] students from previously disadvantaged institutions...face numerous challenges to adapt to the university's demands of blending and hybrid learning"*. This awareness pushes educators and institutions to design inclusive, adaptable practices that meet students where they are. Digital literacies, accessible technologies, and culturally sensitive curricula are not add-ons but necessities.

A recurring theme in the reflections was the need to create safe, reflective spaces. Such spaces embody PoM, offering opportunities for mutual learning and growth and affirm the importance of relationships. The following reflections speak to this:

*"Students need supportive environments that are responsive to their needs"* (Author 3).

*"In combining response-ability with the pedagogy of mattering, we can create learning and teaching spaces which are more collaborative, caring, and responsive"*. (Author 4).

These sentiments are echoed in Owusu-Agyeman and Pillay's (2023) study on relational pedagogy. The dominant model of higher education remains transactional, treating students as consumers and lecturers as knowers and providers. This undermines care, creativity, and ethical engagement. Lockett and Shay (2020) argue that universities must be reclaimed as spaces of public good, and Freire (1982) reminds us that real education is rooted in dialogue. This demands a collective reimagining of institutional cultures, assessment practices, and curriculum. Cultural awareness and decolonial pedagogies are not theoretical aspirations, they are ethical imperatives. These reflections on the HELTASA (Un)Conference *Meqoqo* suggest that embracing PoM and response-ability can reshape higher

education into an inclusive, caring, and contextually attuned space. Integrating indigenous knowledge, linguistic diversity, student voices, and relational ethics requires sustained commitment and institutional courage. But the reward is immense; a higher education system where all students and staff feel that they matter, where knowledge is co-created, and where the university becomes a space for collective flourishing.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

When considering professional learning in higher education, and drawing from the PoM, one finds a need to re-focus on relationships, connections, and care, and to consider the impact of non-human elements such as technology and learning spaces (Gravett et al., 2024). Relational pedagogies, which are encompassed within the PoM, emphasise meaningful relationships as the key to effective learning and teaching in higher education. Hence, a call is made to explore ways of fostering connections, authenticity, and responsiveness.

In this context of professional learning in higher education, the following broad recommendations emerged from the four themes in this study. We offer the following recommendations to explore infusing response-ability and PoM across our institutions. Firstly, a curriculum rethink is required in terms of the fundamental questions of how we view our existing curricula. The pervasive interpretation is one in which the curriculum represents a body of circumscribed knowledge and content, that must be organised and transferred, to realise a purpose or objective. The curriculum is broken down into learning modules, with clear outcomes and evaluations (Biggs & Tang, 2007). Posthumanism imagines a different approach, where the socio-material construction of the curriculum is foregrounded. What matters is the lived experience of students which necessarily guides attention to an open-ended curriculum process, where educators are called on to negotiate and re-negotiate the construction of the curriculum, to privilege who and what matters, rather than the current practice of privileging content. In this approach, curriculum developers and lecturers

should be encouraged to work alongside students to co-create what is learned. The power to design and decide on curricula should be dispersed, creating new openings for student-teacher intra-action and spaces for critical discussion around pedagogy and curriculum design. We need to consider the impact that material spaces have on learning and teaching and make changes to classroom settings or the use of objects/resources to afford a more ethical approach to power dynamics between staff and students. Learning and teaching should be based on context and the needs of students. Furthermore, educators should be open to sharing their own vulnerabilities to build connections with students. Educators need to (and do) recognise the impact of digital spaces and other non-human actors, to promote inclusivity in learning and teaching in higher education.

We recommend that lecturers should seek to enfold into assessments the things that matter to students - their voices, agencies, and lived experiences - so that knowledge is embodied and experienced, rather than perceived as an unattainable standard (Luckett & Shay, 2020). In line with the principles of Pedagogies of Mattering (Barad, 2007; Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017), assessment design can create spaces where students' contributions are recognised as meaningful in shaping the curriculum. Lecturers can be encouraged to adopt assessment techniques that allow students to choose their assessment focus, medium, or mode, aligning with the notion of assessment as learning rather than assessment of learning (Earl, 2013). Such approaches affirm students as active agents in their educational journeys, reflecting the ethics of response-ability (Haraway, 2016) through shared decision-making and mutual responsiveness.

For universities to meet the learning needs of current and future students, it is crucial that students take an active role in co-developing pedagogy and sharing their perspectives (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). This participatory stance aligns with posthumanist and decolonial commitments to relationality and co-creation (Barad, 2007; Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017), ensuring that learning and teaching are not only inclusive but also contextually responsive. All stakeholders stand to gain from adopting a

framework of relationality, co-creation, and reflexive praxis, thereby repositioning professional learning as a collaborative, inclusive, and transformative endeavour within higher education.

### Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported. All authors approved the final version of this article.

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