



CHAPTER 5

Constructing the ECP lecturer as giver and receiver of care through an analysis of student's reflective essays

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Introduction

In this chapter, we borrow from an ethics of care framework to make sense of our pedagogic practices as lecturers in an academic literacies course. This course is taken by black, first year Humanities students on an extended curriculum programme (ECP) at a historically white, higher education institution in South Africa. ECP students are selected for the course based on their English Grade 12 results. Here, we explore our pedagogic practices, those approaches and activities that inform our teaching of academic literacy practices such as reading, writing and critical thinking. To do this, we conduct a retrospective analysis of two texts which together form reflective moments of our teaching practices. Each text is composed of two parts: The first is one of the reflective essays written by students at the end of the course, which captured their commentary on the course, and the second is a lecturer's retrospective commentary in response to the student's reflective essay. We use these reflective moments as a nexus to heighten our understanding of our responsiveness to students' needs and experiences during the course. However, through the analysis of these reflective moments we show that our pedagogic practices – informed by a pedagogy of discomfort (Boler & Zembylas 2003) – when viewed through an ethics of care framework (Tronto 1993; Tronto 2010), demonstrates that care cannot be established by lecturers alone. We argue that care is relational, or co-created by lecturers and students and therefore, the identity of care-giver and care-receiver can be taken up by both lecturer and students.

Historical and conceptual shifts in the course

The academic literacies course at the University of Cape Town (UCT) originated in the 1980's, a turbulent period marked by violent student protests against the apartheid regime and its racially skewed and restrictive education policies.

Located in what was referred to then as a 'white English university', the course was first termed 'English for Academic Purposes' (EAP) and formed part of the university's Academic Support Programme (ASP). The latter was associated with supplementary programmes designated for small groups of English as an Additional Language (EAL) students, whose status as black and disadvantaged deemed them 'underprepared' for university study.

The EAP's initial focus was to 'help' black students acquire the requisite academic literacy practices needed to succeed at university. However, the 'help' offered to black students undermined the resources they brought along with them. In addition, this approach tended to be insular, generic and separated from the disciplines, which added to EAP's marginal and invisible status in the institution. Since then, concerns about improving the status of black students have accompanied the movement towards developing a deeper understanding of academic literacy. This resulted in an important shift from the perception of EAP as a separate skills-based course to one that is incorporated into the teaching of the discipline, to ensure that black students gain epistemic access to legitimate ways of knowing in the academy. So, emphasis was increasingly placed on developing students' capacity adequately so that they could access disciplinary knowledge (cf. Scott 2017). As mentioned in the introduction chapter, this shift in how EAP was conceptualised at UCT, also epitomised in the movement from the narrow idea of academic support to a broader institutionally based understanding of academic development, which adopts a more longitudinal and holistic view of dealing with the challenge of student diversity across the university (Moore et al. 1998: 11).

The issue of diversity is an important one in our present context since black South African students, who now make up half of the undergraduate student population (UCT 2016: 10), enter our ECP classes from varied socio-economic and schooling backgrounds, ranging from township and rural schooling to private and ex model-C (previously white) schooling. Our course, in its current state, operates independently within an augmenting curriculum model and is located outside of a discipline. However, it acknowledges that reading and writing do not exist in a vacuum but are informed by their contexts (Lea & Street 2006: 370). It therefore draws on academic literacy practices and concepts from multiple disciplinary locations in the Humanities. In so doing, it acts as a conduit for the acquisition of such literacy practices in the disciplines. We adopt a thematic approach to the teaching of academic literacies, using as content, core concepts from the Social Sciences, such as language, culture, gender and race. These are held together by the overarching theme of identity, which is understood as something that is socially and therefore contextually constructed in relation to others (Woodward 2004). We employ a blended teaching approach

comprising three face-to-face teaching sessions and one online teaching session a week. The online platform focuses on the writing of short self-reflective tasks, which make up a portfolio. This serves as a rehearsal space for students' coursework tasks on the one hand, and for their reflections on the nature of their learning on the other.

As part of our pedagogic practice, we ask students to consider ways in which their own contexts have shaped various aspects of their identities and how this relates to other identities they encounter. It is here, as part of these discussions around difference both inside and outside the classroom, that notions of discomfort usually surface and these almost always involve issues related to identity – both conceptually and experientially. We have come to view our pedagogic practice as one of discomfort, in line with the work of Boler and Zembylas (2003) and Zembylas (2015), since new concepts exist in a dynamic and sometimes uneasy relationship with students' brought-along experiences. In this way, we create a space for combining disciplinary knowledge and students' acquisition of academic literacy practices through the acknowledgement and incorporation of students' own discourses, knowledge and lived experiences.

Students' reflective essays

In 2017, we introduced a reflective essay, written by students at the end of the course. Since our pedagogy acknowledges diversity within the classroom and disciplinary diversity, we introduced the task to incorporate different writing genres and create space for students' brought-along discourses through the use of their personal experiences. Students were required to reflect on their learning journey, with the central question being: 'What happens to your identity when you move across borders?' Broadly, this involved students reflecting on their journeys as they moved through the course, engaging with various authors and concepts. Students could draw on their online writing portfolios as data for how they felt and thought as they engaged with sections of the course. They could also reflect on what they believed about this engagement in the present. We believed that the task would prompt a response that engaged students in a process of thinking and feeling. Our intention was that the task would facilitate a process where our students could reflect on their learning journey; that it would allow them to draw on personal experiences as evidence, outside of seemingly 'rational' responses to texts in conventional academic essays. An unexpected consequence of the task was that it allowed for reflections on our pedagogic practices, as we illustrate below.

An ethics of care framework

To describe our intentions and engagement with the students' reflective texts, we developed an analytical framework to explore if and how care manifested

in the classroom, with student texts and our own reflections forming reflective moments or data for this process. This framework is informed by Tronto's (2010) overarching considerations for ethical care, namely, power, particularity and plurality, and purposiveness, which are explained below. These are in addition to Tronto's five micro elements or actions for care discussed in her earlier work (Tronto 1993): attentiveness (noticing that a need should be met), responsibility (focussing on contributions to those needs being met), competence (ensuring quality care), responsiveness (the care-receiver acknowledging the care provided), trust and solidarity (issues of reliance, but also acknowledging differences in power in the caring relationship).

We envisage care as creating spaces for students to use their lived and personal experiences as tools for writing critically about concepts and ideologies. Tronto's (2010) overarching considerations inform how care is enacted. A consideration of the political nature of care includes acknowledging how power operates in relations within and outside the immediate caring relationship. A consideration of particularity and plurality signals cognisance of diverse needs and diverse attitudes on how these needs should be met. A consideration of the purposes of care signals the necessity for the representation of, and discussion around, the ends of care (Tronto 2010: 162).

ECP lecturer reflections

Below we present two reflective moments, consisting of two student reflections and the lecturers' reflections that these texts prompted.

An extract from Linda's reflective essay

When I began the first reading on identity by Woodward (2004) I took it with a grain of salt and a great deal of doubt and denial. The idea that our identity – the very essence of who we are – was nothing more than a social construct, and furthermore had to be validated by others in order to be real, was unnerving, to say the least. ... As much as a big part of me wanted to hold onto the comfort of what I've always known – even if it was wrong – a much bigger part of me could no longer deny the truth as I read more of the course work and re-examined my own life. ... When I finally understood what a social construct was, ... I began to see how this had affected nearly every aspect of my life without realising it ... mental, emotional and social boundaries. I had no idea to what extent they had been controlling my life, choices and the roles I played... One of the big turning points for me was the McKinney (2013) reading ... feeling like outsiders and often being silenced due to their Cape Coloured accent was a situation that I was all too familiar with. It was at that specific moment that the information and concepts I had been reading about for weeks became real.

Gideon's reflection

Linda was a mature student who had matriculated two years earlier and had studied elsewhere before coming to UCT. As such, I knew that she carried some resentment in being placed on the Humanities ECP. She had made this clear to me during our first encounter. Her first interaction with identity theory through Woodward (2004), was one of reluctance and anger, and so she had purposefully closed herself off to the possibilities that Woodward was proposing. I developed a rapport with Linda; a sense of trust in which intimate realisations and views were shared. I sought out her opinions, her criticisms and her reactions to the narratives that other students were constructing about their lives. Narratives about my life, my students' lives and that of Linda's, became the basis for interrogating the theoretical concepts of the course. Prompts such as: 'So how does this relate to your experiences?' forced a specific type of interaction with the theory that left students such as Linda with information at their disposal, information that they themselves had constructed. In my view, this information offered them possibilities for thinking differently about themselves and their relationships with others and the world. I also felt it offered them a choice, which once made would be difficult to 'unlearn'. This means I knowingly invite risk into my students' lives, motivating them to confront the discomfort of this risk.

An extract from Dineo's reflective essay

Discussing the work of Ngugi and problematizing his argument has opened my eyes in a sense that aside from the colonization of our country...our oppressors found a way to forever keep us subjugated. The best example I can use is that of the Extended Degree Programme at UCT; the programme was initially introduced as an aid for those students that show potential to flourish in University but do not quite have the matric marks to meet the stringent requirements of the University...people of colour are still unable to escape the socio-economic issues that we have been dealing with since the colonial powers first made their appearance. The difference between now and then is that the boundaries are no longer physical...the boundaries have become subliminal and you will only notice it if you are truly conscious...It is epiphanies such as these that I had throughout the course and that has reawakened an anger inside of me reminiscent of the time I first learnt of the system of Apartheid...

Sean's reflection

Like Dineo, I am drawn to Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Mbembe best expresses it when he states that Ngugi asks us not to teach 'to some generic figure of the student, but to the African 'child' (2016: 35). He calls for a refocusing on the local, not in isolation, but in dialogue with the global. There is diversity in this approach, and a recognition of context. In one of my earliest encounters with Dineo, she related structural inequality to a hip-hop artist she was fond of. This was my own

epiphany. I introduced her to my PhD supervisor who writes about the local hip hop industry. He first introduced me to hip hop as a form of expression and knowledge in my first year. They called him 'Dr Hip Hop'. I had forgotten this and Dineo's writing reminded me about my own entry into the university, having entered the space from the Cape Town township of Hanover Park with an under-resourced schooling background. Since interacting with Dineo, I have drawn on the work of hip-hop artist Dope St Jude in my classroom practices to illustrate the intersections between gender, race and sexuality. Each time I play the track, 'Keep in touch' (Dope St Jude 2015), the introduction which starts with a familiar sound, a *gaatjie* (the equivalent of a train conductor) shouting 'Cape Town!' takes me back to my younger self, prompting a continual reflection on my own historical location and entry into academia. My academic literacy practices now include a sampling of hip hop. I hope this shows how in my pedagogic practice I am able to recognise 'epistemological and discursive diversity' (Cadman 2014), as a way of engaging with plurality and difference.

Discussion

The students' reflections about the course served to help us explore our responsiveness to student needs. We analysed these texts through Tronto's (2010) notions of the political nature of care, plurality and particularity, purposiveness, responsiveness, trust and attentiveness, noting how these were appropriated and, to some degree, applied to our pedagogic practices. What we have found is that care-giver and care-receiver are subject positions jointly shared by lecturer and student. The students' reflective essays became an opportunity for them to trace and reflect on their academic journey through the semester, and in addition, privileges 'attentiveness' on the lecturer's part (Tronto 2010). Attentiveness here is two-fold: attentiveness to students' experiences, and attentiveness to students' feedback about the course and about the lecturer's ethics of care. In Gideon's reflection, he mentions seeking out Linda's opinions, criticisms and reactions to narratives constructed by other students in the class. He goes on to note that he also drew on narratives about his own life to show how these reflect the contradictory nature of identity construction, a key theme raised by the theoretical concepts of identity construction discussed during the course. Here Gideon's narrative serves as a form of attentiveness to particularity (Tronto 2010), namely the uniqueness of the student's experiences. Gideon writes that the narratives of his and his students' lives became the basis for interrogating the theoretical concepts. This also serves to build a relationship of trust, a sense of identification and mutuality enacted through Gideon's vulnerability in sharing his experiences (Tronto 1993).

The reflective essays not only acted as confessions for students, but also occasioned deep empathy from the lecturers. In Sean's reflection, the role of care-giver is not necessarily only occupied by the lecturer but is unwittingly taken

up by the student. When Dineo mentioned that she linked the discussions in class on structural inequality in South Africa to hip hop, it reminded Sean of a moment in his first year when his lecturer, 'Dr Hip Hop', suggested that hip hop was a 'form of expression and knowledge'. This moment between student and lecturer became an 'epiphany' for Sean who then decided to incorporate the work of hip-hop artist, Dope St Jude, in his repertoire of learning materials to illustrate the intersections of gender, race and sexuality. In this instance, it is the student's reflections on the course content that served as a stimulus for Sean to review his own 'historical location and entry into academia'. This 'epiphany' results in Sean adopting an approach to teaching academic literacy that challenges the 'genres of power' (Luke 1996) in institutions such as the academy. He asserts that his academic literacy practices now include a sampling of hip hop. He links this decision to Cadman's (2014: 182) advice that academic literacy lecturers need to recognise and give space to 'epistemological and discoursal diversity' if they want to ensure meaningful access to the academy. One way of doing this is to challenge the hegemony of dominant forms of writing.

Sean's decision to use hip hop results from this moment of interaction between ECP lecturer and student, where the roles of care-giver and care-receiver become fluid and relational (cf. Tronto 2010). While dialogue and the listening that characterises it, is at the core of an ethics of care (Tronto 2012), Bozalek and Carolissen caution that in such relational moments between lecturer and students the activities of the lecturer 'has to be part of a component of engagements that has reflexive self-problematizing' (2012: 15). We argue that, at this point the care-giver/care-receiver relationship became dialectical, in that the care-giver might also require care. Additionally, we saw our weekly staff meetings as an opportunity to share possible realisations, excitement, vulnerability or angst arising from the proximity we shared with our students – thus creating a place where care could also be shared amongst lecturers.

The student's reflective essays yielded opportunities for them to critique the course and lecturers. This process could induce a level of discomfort and uneasiness for both students and lecturers, while offering possibilities for students to confront how we reinforce and maintain hegemony (Boler & Zembylas 2003: 108). Thus, the process could be regarded as an opportunity to flip the power relations in the classroom, surfacing the political dimension of an ethics of care (Tronto 2010). However, Tronto may not have anticipated the moments of self-critique, where students distanced themselves from their previous selves. For instance, in writing about identity as a social construct, Linda points out her realisation of the extent to which these constructs had been controlling her life. These moments of self-critique also presented some tension about what might lie at the heart of our pedagogy in an ECP. Was the aim of the

ECP curriculum to assimilate students into the academy or was it to validate and nurture heterogeneous voices in academia? To what extent were we as lecturers being complicit in maintaining the hegemonic norms of the institution and possibly sidelining the less dominant ways of being or knowing, under the guise of care? What did it mean to care in an ECP environment?



REFLECTIVE INSIGHTS: Purpose of care

The responses garnered from the reflective task prompted lecturers to ask deep-seated questions about the purposiveness of care, in terms of what and who care was meant for and what it was achieving. If care was meant to ensure that students felt integrated through a process of alienating themselves from their past selves, then ‘care’ would not depart much from the modernist agenda of ‘development’. However, if care is meant to give reassurance to students as they ‘oscillate’ between various ways of being, then our role as ECP lecturers would be that of questioners adding new items on either side of the scale, calling on students to weigh them, rather than that of judges giving finality to any one given response. Gideon knew Linda carried some resentment and thus used prompts that served to offer care in such moments of instability. This care resides in ‘normalising’ the discomfort through dialogue, hence enabling the ongoing flows of critique and self-critique to find a productive place in our pedagogy.

The process of responding to our students’ reflections highlights a central dynamic; a paradox between particularity and plurality that we find productive on multiple levels. Lecturers need care. They require the affirmation that the care they are giving does not harken back to paternalistic or deficit models of care, which involved fixing ECP students into a homogenous category of care-receivers requiring particular, rigid forms of care. In the old models of care, lecturers also get locked into the role of the sole givers of care. Here, particularity can lead to the marginalisation of ECP students who begin to internalise their fixed status as mere receivers of imposed, decontextualised care. In our ethics of care approach, we recognise the heterogeneous nature of student experiences in our classrooms. This requires that we also engage with the particularities of student experiences so that individual needs for specific types of care (revealed in their reflective essays) can be identified and incorporated into the plurality of responses needed on our part to address such needs. At the same time, our need for care and affirmation also surfaces and so we too are constructed through this plurality of responses. It is through this process of recognising, identifying, responding and receiving, that we as lecturers get a sense of the multiple and overlapping levels that make up an ethics of care pedagogy. This kind of pedagogy is dynamic, organic and responsive to the plurality and

particularity of needs that are simultaneously exhibited by both the students and the lecturers.

Conclusion

The reflective moments signal a curious irony when we view our pedagogic practices through an ethics of care framework. Care does not manifest from the lecturer alone. This means that as lecturers we are not anchored in the position of care-giver but are both in need of and beneficiaries of care from one another and from our students. Students prompt us to use our histories and experiences as part of our pedagogic practices as we engage with the course content. The focus on identity in the course allows us to centre discussions on how we see ourselves and how others position us. This is fertile ground for talking and writing about both lecturer and student transitions into the academy. Being located outside of a discipline allows for flexibility, giving us the opportunity to introduce the reflective task, which does not work with a particular rubric and thus is open to diverse responses. The overarching concept of identity and its subthemes, such as culture, language, gender and race, are an entry point for the teaching of academic literacies in this Humanities-based course. Thus, writing becomes a space for students to draw on their own discourses and lived experiences, creating room for the affective aspect in ways which other, discipline-specific courses may not allow. It is in these spaces that care and discomfort manifest. These moments of discomfort are not ignored, nor are they simply resolved but it is in the mutuality that underscores these moments that a relational process of becoming, learning and caring is evident.

Ethics statement

Ethics clearance for the use of student texts granted by the Department of Students Affairs (DSA) and the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) Ethical Review Committee at the University of Cape Town. As part of this process, students gave informed consent to their participation. As far as possible, anonymity has been adopted as a guiding principle.

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