

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Disturbed: Doing deep transformative work – Reflections on social justice work in South African higher education

Bouleversé : Faire un travail de transformation profonde – Réflexions sur le travail de justice sociale dans l'enseignement supérieur sud-africain

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ABSTRACT

Alternative dispute resolution, anti-discrimination, anti-bullying, diversity and inclusion in higher education has been the focus of my work over the past four years. Spaces in which I have immersed myself include transformation at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) with multiple stakeholders, transformation engagement across the South African higher education system with academics, leaders, and managers and the most recent and perhaps most prominent has been my participation in the University of Cape Town (UCT) Panel which was appointed by its Council at the end of 2022 to investigate governance failures at the university as well as my facilitation engagements in transformation at Stellenbosch University since 2023. These experiences have at times been disruptive, disturbing and about learning “to be comfortable with discomfort”, an idea I discuss elsewhere in ‘Doing transformation: Building transformative practices from the bottom-up’ (Johnson et al., 2024). Consistent with this work, this piece is a reflection about sense-making after a series of interactions of deeply challenging and disturbing yet rewarding experiences. In some ways it takes this work forward by thinking more deeply about going deeper into inter-personal transformative practice beyond the blunt instrument of employment equity. My autoethnographic reflections in this piece are part of my larger body of work on change theory or what we may encounter as activists, professionals, leaders, and managers in doing change. In this article, I consider what doing deep transformative work may entail, what it reveals, how we may come to understand it and what we may consider as tools and ways to engage with our woundedness as expressed within the self, interpersonal relations and systemic relations or, put differently, our engagement with the expressions of the systemic within the self. This work is a reminder that even the most advanced, highly acclaimed, and esteemed colleagues and scholars do not levitate above society, nor do our institutions, as we all carry our humanness and fallibility. It is also a reminder that all scholars are not necessarily leaders. The task however is to confront ourselves in terms of how we can make better contributions in how we lead change.

KEYWORDS

Alternative dispute resolution, restorative dignity, social justice, anti-discrimination, student affairs, doing transformation in higher education

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RÉSUMÉ

La résolution alternative des conflits, la lutte contre la discrimination et le harcèlement, la diversité et l'inclusion dans l'enseignement supérieur ont été au centre de mon travail au cours des quatre dernières années. Les espaces dans lesquels je me suis immergée comprennent le processus de transformation à l'Université de Witwatersrand (Wits) avec de multiples parties prenantes, le travail de transformation à travers le système d'enseignement supérieur sud-africain avec les membres du corps académique, les dirigeants et les gestionnaires, et plus récemment, et peut-être le plus important, ma participation au Panel de l'Université du Cap (UCT) qui a été nommé par son Conseil à la fin de 2022 pour enquêter sur les échecs de la gouvernance à l'université, ainsi que mon travail de facilitation dans le cadre du processus de transformation à l'Université de Stellenbosch depuis 2023. Ces expériences ont parfois été bouleversantes, dérangeantes et m'ont permis d'apprendre à «être à l'aise avec l'inconfort», une idée que j'aborde ailleurs dans «Doing Transformation : Building Transformative Practices from the Bottom-up». Dans la droite ligne de ce travail, cette pièce est une réflexion sur la manière de donner un sens à une série d'interactions et d'expériences profondément stimulantes et bouleversantes, mais néanmoins gratifiantes. D'une certaine manière, cet article fait progresser ce travail en réfléchissant plus attentivement à une approche plus approfondie de la pratique transformative. Mes réflexions autoethnographiques dans cet article font partie d'un ensemble plus vaste de travaux sur la théorie du changement ou sur ce que nous pouvons rencontrer en tant qu'activistes, professionnels, dirigeants et managers dans le cadre de l'action pour le changement. Dans cet article, j'examine ce que le travail de transformation en profondeur peut impliquer, ce qu'il révèle, comment nous pouvons le comprendre et ce que nous pouvons considérer comme outils et moyens d'aborder notre blessure telle qu'elle s'exprime dans le moi, les relations interpersonnelles et les relations systémiques ou, pour le dire autrement, notre engagement avec les expressions du systémique dans le moi. Ce travail nous rappelle que même les collègues et les chercheurs les plus avancés, les plus acclamés et les plus estimés ne lèvent pas au-dessus de la société, pas plus que nos institutions, car nous portons tous notre part d'humanité et de faillibilité. C'est aussi un rappel que tous les experts et chercheurs ne sont pas nécessairement des leaders. Nous devons cependant nous confronter à la manière dont nous pouvons apporter de meilleures contributions à la conduite du changement.

MOTS-CLÉS

Règlement alternatif des litiges, dignité réparatrice, justice sociale, anti-discrimination, oeuvres estudiantines, transformation de l'enseignement supérieur

Introduction

The tip of the iceberg of transformation in many developing countries, like South Africa, as pointed out by Pandor (2018), has been changing equity profiles in higher education, like the private sector and the larger public sector. Despite equity changes to the make-up of people in organizations, organizational spaces, practices, values, and cultures may not necessarily have shifted. Transformation is understood in different ways in South Africa: from limited conceptions linked to equity; to broader conceptions related to societal change, anti-discrimination, institutional inclusive cultures whether in historically black or white institutions; and general reforms of the higher education system such as equity, quality, and access. (SAHRC, 2016, p. 20). The latest report on transformation produced by the Human Sciences Research Council for the Ministerial Oversight Committee on Transformation in South African Public Universities (TOC), builds on the SAHRC report, among others, and shares this view while further developing an insightful conceptual frame of different conceptions of transformation in South African higher education institutions. These framings it regards as universities' transformation narratives and maps them in relation to eight of the universities being *diversity-focused universities*, 5

universities being *developmentally engaged universities* and 13 of the universities being *contested universities*, irrespective of the historical or current typology of the total 26 universities in South Africa. A powerful insight of the report is that a combination of these narratives would best serve “multiple complementary commitments to equity and development, as well as to democratisation; quality; effectiveness and efficiency; academic freedom; and accountability” (Luescher et al., 2023, pp. 120–121). In this article I share reflections of experiences of transformation in university spaces, perhaps not in a similarly neatly packaged way, and consider reflections of what may be going on with people as they grapple with themselves within a diverse and complex changed and changing environment.

Alternative dispute resolution, anti-discrimination, anti-bullying; diversity and inclusion in higher education has been the focus of my work over the past four years. The spaces in which I have immersed myself include transformation at University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) with multiple stakeholders, transformation engagements across the South African higher education system with academics, leaders, and managers and the most recent, and perhaps most prominent, has been my participation in the University of Cape Town (UCT) Panel which was appointed by its Council at the end of 2022 to investigate governance failures at the university as well as my facilitation engagements in transformation at Stellenbosch University since 2023.

These experiences have at times been disruptive, disturbing and about learning “to be comfortable with discomfort”, an idea I discuss elsewhere in ‘Doing transformation: Building transformative practices from the bottom-up’ (2024). Consistent with this work, this piece is a reflection about sense-making after a series of interactions of deeply challenging and disturbing yet rewarding experiences. In some ways it takes this work forward by thinking more deeply about going deeper into transformative practice. My autoethnographic reflections in this piece are part of my larger body of work on change theory or what we may encounter as activists, professionals, leaders, and managers in *doing change*. The discussion focuses on the complexity of personal histories that need to be factored into doing deep transformative work.

The impact on people, who previously may not have occupied spaces of privilege, may be a feeling, a sense of discomfort or not knowing whether they belong or fit into the spaces they have entered. People remark that they feel a sense of alienation, that they feel like visitors, that they don’t feel a sense of belonging. Often, they say they can’t put their finger on it. It feels imprecise but they just sense that they do not belong. That even though they are present, they do not fit into the space. Perhaps they can sense that the spaces they occupy are distant from what they sense are spaces of power and are unsure of their own agency. These are feelings of disconnection and with disconnection, Brené Brown probes in her TEDx Talk (2011) presentation, there is shame, excruciating vulnerability, and a sense of not being worthy. We cannot lose sight of how what we are experiencing is caught up in systemic changes towards greater corporatisation in higher education globally. It is this discomfort that makes confronting deep transformative work within us so hard and yet we are challenged to lean into this discomfort in the absence of radical change from below. It points to something powerful, that transformative work

in human relations and social engagement is about the larger social questions and how these resonate within our own humanity.

As I have engaged in this work with leaders and managers across the South African higher education system, I have become acutely aware of, at times, raw and unprocessed pain, hurt and woundedness that is brought into organizational spaces without sufficient preparation for the daunting and complex task of leading higher education institutions. Academics are trained to become experts in their respective fields of knowledge, and this happens through their focus on themselves, on the me and my development. If this is the prime reason for the promotion into management and leadership positions, we have lost sight of how scholars are prepared to lead beyond themselves and what is required of them to lead others. Seale (2021) makes this point powerfully in his recent book on deanship in South African, and broader Global South, universities.

In this article, I consider what doing deep transformative work may entail, what it reveals, how we may come to understand it and what we may consider as tools and ways to engage with our woundedness as expressed within the self, interpersonal relations and systemic relations or put differently, the expressions of the systemic within the self.

This work in social justice/diversity, equity and inclusion is an unknown and uncertain space which requires us to give expression to our discomfort, to break free from our internal silencing and to extend ourselves into courageous dialogic engagements to clarify and co-cultivate spaces of recognition of diversity and inclusion we would like to live and work in. While this points to the work we need to do in relation to one another, it also signals the work we must do on ourselves as part of the what and the how we bring to doing change.

Change theory, the ‘self’ and leadership and management

Doing change or being immersed in a change process is what we refer to as change theory. This is in line with Reinholz and Andrews (2020), as this work focuses on “the change that happens in practice or in the doing of transformation – hence drawing a distinction from the theory of change or anticipated change” (Johnson et al., 2024, p. 16).

As discussed elsewhere, I am intrigued by how we practice, live, and do transformative work. Much has been hypothesised about the theory of change and how it can guide us proactively on what to look out for and how to know whether change is taking place, through for example, indicators, targets, and measurements of change. Less is known about how transformation offices in universities and advocates of change and safeguarding, go about bringing about change. Perhaps what we experience is how messy it can be, how overwhelming it can be, how it is centred on emotional labour and thankless giving, and exhaustion without much opportunity to reflect and theorise on the change we do.

The joy in this work is that there are various ways and avenues to engage and catalyse change. We use a rhizome-like change theory in the work we do at Wits University, where we engage with context-informed change in a cyclical manner, from identifying sparks or hotspots of change, which emerge at any point and space, to

learning about and enhancing our practices of change (Johnson et al., 2024, p. 14). Figure 1 below provides a description of our cyclical phases of *doing transformation*.

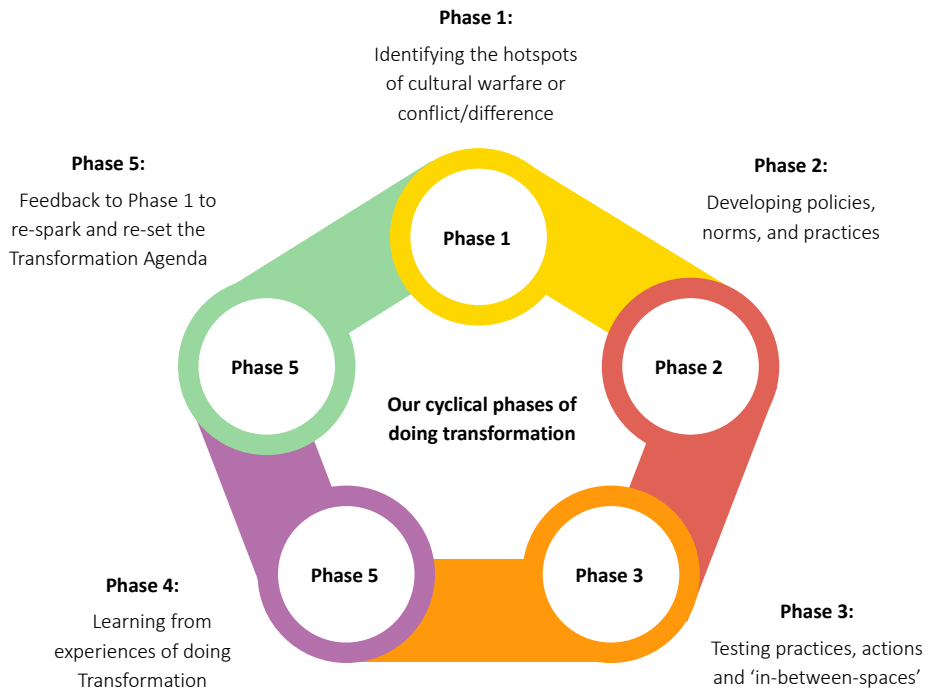


Figure 1: Our cyclical phases of *doing transformation* (cited in Johnson et al., 2024, p. 15)

This work has been on the how of change, the process, and the importance of consciously embracing our own transformation in transformation offices as we engage in transformative leadership and guide doing change (Johnson et al., 2024).

Here, in reflecting on what transformation work unearths within us and the work we need to do on the 'self' as leaders and managers within higher education more broadly, further conceptualisation and work on change theory is needed on the self-reflexivity of leaders and managers in contributing better to change.

Investigating the 'self' at the point of vulnerability, we also gain insight into what may be going on for managers and leaders and what and how they are grappling with living change and deepening transformative practices. For Brown (TEDx Talks, 2011) vulnerability is about really being seen and wholeheartedness, having the courage to show you and your imperfections and having compassion to be kind to yourself and others and so be authentic, which allows for the development of connection. She argues that instead of confronting this, we numb and suppress our vulnerability to cope with the world we live in. We also look for certainty and avoid uncertainty. Presenting vulnerability, is contrary to the notion of management which is about being able to

control and predict processes and outcomes (Brown at TEDx Talks, 2011). If we were to think of management as highly embedded in the context, flow, and reality of people, then understanding people and becoming whole perhaps requires us to reimagine how creative, agile, and engaged managing change in oneself and others can be.

Digging deep: Confronting our woundedness in doing transformation

Doing deep transformative work includes working with our scars, woundedness and supporting people through processes towards deepening understanding through empathy and towards healing. Through immersing myself in this work, I have encountered anger, frustration, irritation and a woundedness around change. Some of us confront our wounds, work on our woundedness and strive to heal our wounds, whilst others may avoid their own wounds by being there for others.

When we are unable to sit in the pain of our woundedness, we may externalise our wounds by blaming others and so becoming the aggressor, creating harm, pain, and humiliation in the ways we communicate and interact with others. In this way the wounded becomes the perpetrator. Race baiting² and weaponizing race³ can be ways in which the wounded aggressor creates ways of coping or creating internal safety by lashing out and harming others. Race baiting and weaponizing race are ways in which we draw people into our hurt and pain to belittle, humiliate and even degrade others. They encourage the dismissal of others' pain and their silencing and withdrawal from critical conversations on race, diversity and towards inclusive culture development work. In this way, through the interplay of interpersonal relations and emotional vulnerability as an expression of systemic presence of harm within the self, the cycle of oppressive relations is intentionally or unintentionally reproduced. By surfacing this, we are engaged in deep transformative practice.

I have heard phrases like “You could never understand where I am coming from because you are not ... (my race, my gender)”. While this may be true, is this not true for all of us in different ways for different reasons? Is it appropriate for one race to say, “Black people can say whatever they want but white people cannot as this would be part of black people healing.” I cannot stop thinking about how crude racial phrases and baiting can be when I have heard that “White women cry and run out of meetings just like coloured women do when they cannot get their way. Black women stay and fight.” Humiliating expressions and drawing on racial categories to divide and infantilise can be powerful weapons to generate fear that one may be besmirched as a racist and so silencing opportunities to seek clarity, develop understanding and create ground for dialogic engagements and deep transformative work towards inclusivity.

2 “Race baiting” refers to when someone (usually an aggressor or perpetrator) notices the vulnerability and hurt related to race within another party with whom they are engaging to draw the second party into an emotive, oppositional and aggressive engagement.

3 “Weaponizing race” refers to the aggressor or perpetrator using this vulnerability and hurt against the person's (the recipient or receiver of the aggression) race to harm, injure and humiliate them for them to experience the injury/hurt the aggressor feels as a consequence of racism and inequality.

Unlike the flogging by the wounded aggressor, the wounded victim internalises hurt and pain, can be negative and feel a great sense of pity for their own conditions without embracing their individual agency in bringing about change. Change is not taking place; conditions never change, and life never improves. I have seen a depressiveness and a sense of one's agency having taken repeated beatings from grappling with how to engage and uncertainty about what is needed from within to better relations.

I have seen people take on these roles possibly from their experiences of their trauma. These reflections of woundedness are perhaps echoed in the transactional analysis of the drama triangle of the rescuer, persecutor and victim in which people may be caught in relationships of toxicity by not taking responsibility and accountability for seeing the roles they play. Standing in a space of neutrality or even hovering above the situation or above these relations, presents an opportunity for un-entanglement (Transactional Analysis, 2018).

We are all embroiled in structural and systemic architectures which allow for the perseverance/stickiness of racialised and colonial structures. How we interact with these systems is further complicated by our complex personal interlocking diversities. We grapple to understand and know how to interact in our diversity which may often lead to cultural clashes/cultural warfare. When we bring our pain and hurt and carry it into our being, into our interpersonal relations and it spills and leaks into our leadership styles, we participate in the creation of potentially explosive, hurtful, unstable, combative, and aggressive leadership engagement. The wounded aggressor carries the social and physical pain of the past into the present to cope with the present reality while not transcending pain.

There is no getting away from the deep work we need to do as individuals. People like to talk about how transformation is not taking place, and nothing has changed, yet when you probe and ask, *“What would need to be happening for us to know that transformation is taking place?”*, it often takes individuals some time to contemplate their responses. Some people then point to their own reality and agency in co-creating what they would like to see. *“How do I engage with power relations in meetings? How do I give my voice expression? What am I doing to bring about transformative spaces, transformative thinking, and dialogic engagements through which deep understandings of difference, and my lack of feeling of belonging is understood and addressed? If transformation is not something that simply happens on the outside, what is my role in doing transformation?”*, are some of the questions we have engaged in with university stakeholders and continue to feel our way through.

It is dangerous to make assumptions when formulating expressions that everyone will have a common understanding of the meaning being conveyed. An example stands out when an academic said to students: *“We can't all be Chiefs, some of us must be Indians”*. Although this is a common phrase most likely to be used by a particular generation, it is not shared by everyone nor understood by younger generations. Students – most of whom are relatively younger – were infuriated, and took to social media, and accused their lecturer of racism while the lecturer had uncritically used the expression. Habib (2021) is a brilliant example of this when he used the “N” word

and was called out by students only a few months into his new directorship position at the University of London's School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS) (Etheridge & Chabalala, 2021). How, when and which words we use to communicate can be received differently by the recipient than what might have been intended by the communicator. In this way, we observe diversity as different interpretations of meaning conveyed. This requires us to become more sensitive to how holistically living diversity can be.

In powerful ways, the tensions that are out there in the spaces that aggravate conflict, interact with the tensions we experience individually with change, for example like fear and silencing that result from humiliating experiences of race baiting. In fact, the system is not only out there, it also resides within us. This begs questions such as: *When we have power, what are we doing with it? Are there ways in which we can imagine doing good with power? Creating spaces and opportunities to build connectivity?*

How we undermine dignity

Hicks (2011) argues that the underlying reason for conflict is the violation of dignity or the experience of indignities. She defines dignity as inherent worth or value. The need for transforming how we think and behave in relations can be thought of at multiple levels: the individual, the group, the community or society, the organizational context as well as the systems level. Indignities are experienced in fundamental ways when people experience the absence of their inherent worth or value as being human. In Christian teachings, for example, we are taught that we are made in the image of a God. The pain of indignity through non-recognition of one's value or worth as a human as expressed in the image of God is not just non-humanising, dehumanising, but deeply demonising. Rejection of humanity by one group allows for humanity to be affirmed in one's group of belonging and so for us to feel connection and become shielded from fear of abuse and neglect. Groups take various forms, for example, a black caucus, woman's group, trade unions and organic formations mobilising such as concerned groups formed around specific issues. At heightened moments of indignity organized formations just as individuals can respond to indignity through aggression, violence, hatred, and vengeance.

By drawing on the work of Hicks on how we undermine the dignity of others, in our work on dignity, we usually share the following slide in our awareness training:

Ways in which we undermine/violate someone's dignity.

- Allowing others' behavior to determine your behavior.
- By deceiving others and yourself. Tell the truth.
- Not taking responsibility for what you say and do when you make a mistake.
- Going with the crowd even when they are wrong in order to be praised or receive approval from others.
- Agreeing with others because we want to belong/feel connection and have relationships even though it undermines dignity.
- Agreeing or being silent because we want to avoid conflict. Express yourself and stand up for yourself and others when you see the violation of dignity.
- Assuming that you are an innocent victim in a difficult relationship. Be open to the idea that you may be contributing to creating a difficult and potentially conflictual relationship.
- Resisting feedback. We may be aware unconsciously in an undignified way and criticism allows us to be open to learning and developing in being embracing of diversity.
- Be careful not to blame and shame others. We can end up trying to defend ourselves by making others look bad.
- Falsely connecting with others through gossiping and discussing others when they are not there in demeaning ways.

Figure 2: Slide 2 in TEEO presentation on principles of engagement

This slide powerfully resonates with colleagues, students, and stakeholders as ways in which dignity is undermined. Often people can identify, for example, how they go with the flow, are afraid to go against what most people say, end up presenting themselves as victims and turning to corridor talk as ways of coping with leaders' inability to listen or for them to feel heard. The formation of in and out groups, cabals, factions is powerful, and they can form fast in spaces as ways for people to find new sources of power. As these ways of undermining dignity are replicated, cultural practices are formed over time in the higher education sector. I have received, for example, bullying cases where a situation has festered for 2 years, 4 years and even up to 10 years. But they usually all start off with these subtle ways of undermining dignity.

Indignities take the form of microaggressions, racism, sexism, gender-based violence, domestic violence and conflicts in society and can be experienced within organizations as leadership and management styles, policy frameworks and governance structures.

We pretend that what we say and do does not impact people. We must work on ourselves and what we bring into the world and become far more sensitive and attuned to how we impact spaces and people.

How dignity can be restored

Hicks (2011) offers ten essential elements of dignity. These are: (1) acceptance of identity, (2) recognition, (3) acknowledgement, (4) inclusion, (5) safety, (6) fairness, (7) independence, (8) understanding, (9) benefit of the doubt and (10) accountability. Acceptance of identity entails interacting with people in ways that allow them to authentically express their selves – that are different in diverse ways – without prejudice or bias. It requires recognising what people contribute and acknowledging them by offering full attention by listening and responding to concerns raised. People need to feel

that they are included through them belonging and feeling safe from bodily harm and humiliation or shame so that they can speak without fear. That they will be treated in an even-handed manner and encouraged to engage on their own behalf to allow them to take charge of their lives with a sense of hope and possibility. What people say needs to matter as listening happens with the intention to establish an understanding through trusting people and that their motives are informed by a need to act with integrity.

If in anyway indignities are experienced or expressed, it's important to express remorse through apologising, as part of showing accountability and a commitment to restoring dignity (Hicks, 2021).

Rashedi et al. (2015) discuss compassion development in higher education, an integral area of study in psychology and religious studies. Thinking about how compassion can be promoted in students as part of their holistic transformative learning in universities. In defining 'compassion', they argue that compassion starts with recognising someone else's pain and suffering which in turn generates feelings of empathy. When empathy translates into an action-oriented affective state to alleviate the suffering of others, then compassion is experienced and is composed of the components of "(a) awareness of another's pain ... (b) a feeling of kindness; (c) a yearning to mitigate the suffering; and (d) doing what is within one's ability to lessen another's suffering ... Thus compassion requires one's strength to be with the suffering" (p. 132).

The political economy of transformation and its various elements, including restoring dignity and compassion, require a social and economic system that is supportive of transformation. Referring specifically to compassion, Spandler and Stickley (2011, p. 134) (cited in Rashedi et al., 2015) state that:

Compassion can be facilitated or significantly inhibited within different social and culture value systems. Yet it appears that dominant values in mainstream society are diametrically opposed to qualities associated with compassion. The neoliberal consensus on the necessity of market capitalism has led to the dominance of values around choice, independence, personal achievement, as well as competition, selfishness, and the pursuit of profit, status, and power.

In thinking about restoring dignity, we need to think about restorative justice and pushing back on all systemic forms of oppression and injustice. The constitutional nature of the South African state has led to a focus on rights as legislative. While this is crucial, it is not a sufficient condition for transformation. We need to look deeper into our frameworks that give content and form to restoration. It is more than justice which at times can be elusive. It has to do with what it means to be human. Thinking about restoring dignity requires society to dig deep into how indignities are experienced and how they can be restored. African societies are deeply rooted in collective practices including their justice systems, which tend to seek restorative justice, where the impact of parties is understood in context and where the community and families can contribute to solutions. So, for example when thinking about bullying, is it not as important to understand what's happening to the bullied as is happening to the alleged bully? In cases of gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) it is equally important to understand the

context and reality of the transgressed and the transgressor. Without this we cannot comprehend our healing. Digging deep to seek alternative solutions is disturbing. For example, thinking about positive masculinity in relation to GBVF.

“Restorative dignity” as a way into and overcoming our woundedness

Transformation is about recognition and restoring dignity. What the individual, the community and society go through is a healing and celebration of experiencing dignity. The process of recognition and restorative dignity requires empathy, compassion, courage, and strength in the ways in which we work. Transformation is not momentary. Transformation is a process composed of sustained and rhythmic transitions. Because of their complexity, transformation and healing work require patience in engagement with the realities of restrictions, counter-movements, and subtle flows. It’s a patient and sustained engagement with restorative dignity and movement towards personal and professional strength and well-being. It can entail the following:

Helping ourselves to think and to be heard

Through her 10 components of creating a thinking environment, Nancy Kline offers us a way of helping ourselves to think and be heard. I have drawn on the slide that follows to capture her 10 components to develop an awareness of what is needed to help us think and do deep transformative work with multiple and diverse stakeholders and settings.

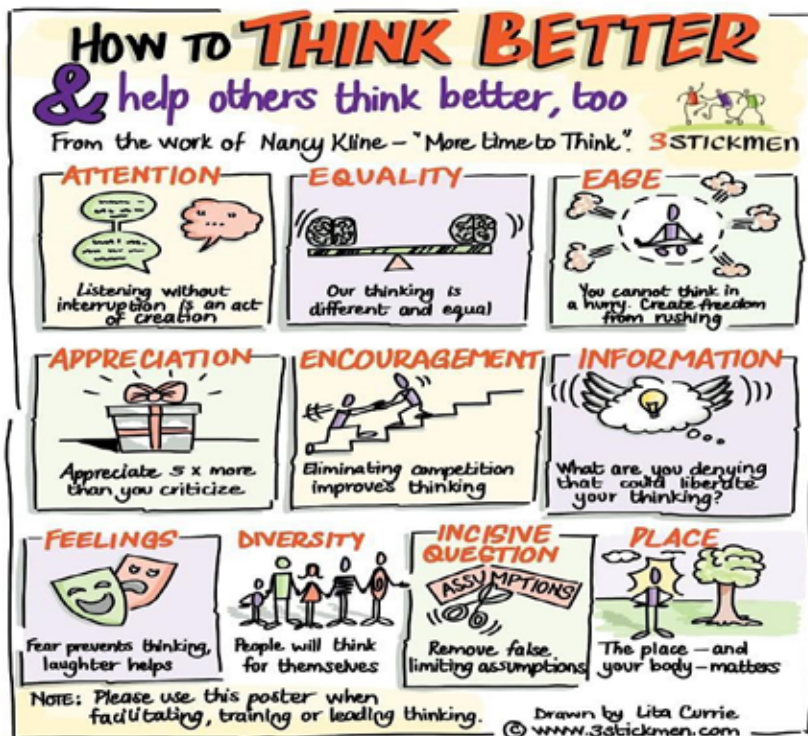


Figure 3: Slide 3 in TEOO presentation on principles of engagement

It takes us to a place of really thinking about what people are saying with curiosity and interest and digging deep into what is underlying what people are saying. This requires us to suspend what we are saying. It means we must also suspend our ideological, political, and religious preferences to discover, investigate and understand meaning for sense-making. It means

- considering whether I am present and attentive.
- Do we allow for equality?
- Are we at ease and comfortable?
- Am I appreciative of what is being said, including criticism?
- How are we encouraging each other through collaboration?
- What are we avoiding getting to know?
- How are we feeling?
- Are we appreciative of difference among us?
- Are we challenging our own assumptions as part of sense-making?
- And are we comfortable holistically, including our physical presence and space?

The thinking environment is about catalysing a supportive, creative, and generative thinking space within the university community to claim its own humanity.

Doing deep transformative work with leaders and managers

To listen to someone, you need to do your own healing. Healing may mean therapy if there is unresolved trauma. It can also mean coaching for heightening skills of listening and your impact on others and to experience being listened to and creating that environment. It is not only about thinking but also about doing and living through the learning, which often can be avoided because of potential discomfort and disturbance in feelings and bodily sensations. Yet this is the treasure chest of transformative work that needs to be unearthed and explored. George et al. (2007, p. 130) refer to this as discovering your authentic leadership, which allows one to share a passion for one's purpose, to live one's values and lead with not only the head but also with the heart; all of which are discovered through getting to know oneself and becoming self-aware. Such integrity helps to sustain organizations through good and bad times.

Space for one-on-ones and bigger spaces for healing which involve groups/teams and engagements with people who are and think differently need to be strengthened and encouraged. This allows us to get to know ourselves better. Perhaps there are layers of healing that create transformational spaces. Perhaps transformation is about re-humanising academia itself through connectivity/engagement. It's not an isolated endeavour or way of being.

Coaching offers the personal growth space for individual leaders and managers to reflect and challenge themselves in their own growth for personal, professional, and organizational well-being. During the coaching process, leaders and managers are able, through reflecting on their practice, to develop an acute sense of themselves, their impact on others and can engage with the interplay of self and systems in ways that enhance individual and collective agencies for change and well-being.

Bertrand's research on the practice of executive coaching to improve leadership capacity in academic deans at American higher education institutions shows intellectual stimulation towards transformational leadership, greater empathic behaviour and improvements in self-awareness and habits of self-care as outcomes experienced by deans personally and professionally because of their executive coaching experience. What made this possible for coaches to achieve is "the superior quality of their listening skills, their ability to offer useful perspectives and by building trust" (Bertrand, 2019, p. 110).

Coaching offers an opportunity for leaders and managers to reflect on their being, how they do change and how they confront difficulties, tensions, and conflict.

Creating more opportunities for alternative dispute resolution

In universities there tends to be a far greater focus on grievance procedures which may lead to disciplinary action, with the worst possible outcome being dismissal. There is a need to develop greater opportunities to gain clarity, understanding and to repair and restore relations. Alternative dispute resolution offers the opportunity to develop a continuum of alternative dispute resolution options. Mediation, and facilitating difficult conversations are ways that enable better understanding of our diversities and how better we can build inclusion within universities spaces and communities.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shared with you, the reader, some of my deep experiences and reflections on doing social justice work in my university and within the university system in South Africa. This work has implications for higher education leaders and managers and for student affairs researchers and practitioners. It raises worthwhile questions and learnings. In deepening our transformative work, I would recommend we consider the following:

1. ***How are we creating spaces within the work we do to reflect on ourselves and what we bring to processes and practices of creating inclusive cultures?*** Debriefing sessions and thinking environment opportunities may be important spaces we can create as part of our work as we reflect on improving what we bring to support, care and improve in the healing work we do. For example, what we bring to our work in the classroom is different to what we bring to our diversity work in the residences, as the latter are shared living spaces in which tensions reside and may fester. Humiliating and dehumanising initiation traditions, racist and gender-based violent practices manifest differently in these different spaces. This requires us to deepen what we bring to these different spaces. The work is challenging. The care of the carers and supporters of change are equally important. As we do this healing work, we have to recognise the healing that takes place within ourselves.
2. ***What opportunities are we creating to think through the work we are bringing to others?*** How might we extend our transformative work so that it is far more comprehensive and reflective of different dimensions of transformation such as

diversity work, development work and creative disruptive and contested work to create that ‘sweet spot’ Luescher et al. (2023) point us to? To get close to the integrated nature of the systemic, our work needs to be far more rooted in assisting people to reflect on what they bring of their selves into the space and what the space needs to be for inclusive systemic development to be stimulated in iterative and dynamic ways. A key question to explore is: *What are the implications of our shared values and ethics for the kinds of shared practices, policies, and systems we need to co-create restorative dignity and develop inclusive cultures?*

3. ***In which ways are we strengthening leadership and management self-reflexivity through tracking, learning, and sharing change at points of engagement that allow for the distributed nature of leadership and management development within all spaces and levels throughout the university?*** Student affairs spaces especially engage directly with students’ university experiences, what students will become and change into as they leave the university and contribute to the restorative dignity, inclusive culture building and humanisation development within society more broadly.
4. ***Which vehicles can we establish within our universities to enable and support our work?*** In addition to existing initiatives of anti-discrimination awareness work and interventions, coaching, mentoring and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, such as mediation, are some expansive ways to consider as ways to enable and support deep and comprehensive transformative work. These are vehicles that transport us into considering how the self and systems can enable changes in personal and professional reflexivity, while simultaneously delving into the social construction of *new humanising systems that enable the development of inclusivity and restorative dignity.*

Student Affairs practitioners have a powerful role to play given the direct and expansive engagements that takes place within this portfolio in teaching and learning, research and innovation, accommodation, food security and mental health spaces. Student affairs has broad reach which can lead the embeddedness of change work throughout the university life experience and beyond our students and future leaders and managers.

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Ethics statement

This reflective piece is informed by the author’s experience and is an ethnographic study that draws on sources that are in the public domain. No information has been included which is of a confidential nature. The views expressed in this article are the views of the author.

Potential conflict of interest

As this is reflective work, a potential area of conflict is between being an active participant, leader and initiator of ideas for practices, testing and research. Of importance is that the Transformation Office at Wits is now thought of as an Office of Praxis. Colleagues we engage with are aware of why we have chosen to work in a way that allows us to Do Transformation for Transformation. Put differently, to do transformation and reflect on our practice to share our understanding and learnings with other social justice practitioners, advocates and theorists. Given the sensitive nature of the issues dealt with in this office, no confidential information is drawn on as part of retaining a distinction related to the integrity of the office.

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