Harnessing Students' Capital to Teach and Learn: Responsive Pedagogies to Implement Change in a Higher Education Lecture-room

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Abstract
This article considers the unanticipated findings gleaned from the base-line information collected prior to a two–year participatory action research (PAR) study and explains how the study was shaped to respond to the findings. The study, shaped by critical pedagogy and aimed at change agency, was conducted over six PAR cycles in an English Education lecture-room at a School of Education. At the end of each cycle, data was collected and analysed qualitatively. The findings revealed that a nurturing lecture-room environment, which responds to students' cultural capital, encourages active engagement. Secondly, despite an apparent lack of a reading culture, the students could recognise the importance of reading for academic empowerment. Finally, using literacies with which the students were comfortable and competent enabled effective teaching and learning. The article therefore argues that it is imperative that lecturers take cognisance of who their students are and the capital that they bring with them.

Keywords: Capital, Literary texts, Critical pedagogy, Participatory action research, Active engagement, Reading, Literacies

Introduction
This article considers the unanticipated findings gleaned from the base-line information collected prior to a two–year participatory action research (PAR) study and explains how the study was shaped to respond to the findings. The

study, conducted in English Education lecture-rooms in a School of Education, emanated from the student teachers' apprehensions surrounding the poor state of education in South Africa and the fear that they would have to fit into an apparently dysfunctional system. Different to but complementing their apprehensions, was my concern that in English Education lectures, while content and pedagogy were covered, the student teachers were not taught how to make a difference to learners' lives through literature or otherwise. Thus, the power of literature to both empower and transform was often ignored.

I designed an outline of a study and presented it to third-year student teachers and they were asked to consider whether they wanted to be part of the study. The research question guiding the study was: How can student teachers of literature become agents of change? All participating student teachers were assured that participation was voluntary, guaranteed total anonymity and confidentiality, and granted the option to leave the study at any time with no consequences to themselves.

The baseline information, gathered to determine the starting point for a PAR study, provided unanticipated evidence of the cultural capital with which the student teachers arrived. In this paper, I only consider these findings by discussing how the study was shaped to engage with the capital present in the lecture-room. Ultimately, I argue that it is imperative that lecturers take cognisance of who their students are and what they bring with them.

In the article, I consider the theoretical framework, literature review, and methodology used in the study. I then highlight the findings from the baseline information and discuss how we responded to it.

The Theoretical Framework

Critical pedagogy, which served as the theoretical framework that underpinned the study, is founded on the possibility of transformation, and has a critical nature and liberating function. It proposes that education should be located within its socio-historical and political setting, and should assert its commitment to transformation towards justice, equality, democracy and freedom (Giroux 1983; Biesta & Tedder 2007; Giroux 2009).

The study was especially shaped by hooks' (1994) notion of engaged pedagogy which contends that teaching and learning are most effective when

they are responsive to and respectful of the needs of a specific group of students and when teaching and learning conditions are non-threatening and non-discriminatory. A progressive, holistic education, hooks argues, necessitates the lecturer contributing to the intellectual, social and emotional development of the students, while locating the lectures within their realities and histories, and taking cognisance of their cultural capital.

In his theory of cultural capital, Bourdieu (1986) conceptualises capital as being the cultural background, resources, knowledges, assets, dispositions, and skills that are passed down from one generation to the next. Society usually values the cultural capital of dominant groups and sees as less worthy the cultural capital of marginalised groups (Yosso 2005; Rios-Aguilar *et al.* 2011). McLaren (2009) expands the conceptualisation of capital by considering ways of talking, socialising, moving, and acting, modes of style, forms of knowledge, language practices and values.

Educational institutions like universities, McLaren notes, value and reward those students who display the dominant cultural capital of the institutions and their lecturers, and devalue the capital of those in subordinate positions. Many researchers have considered whose knowledges count and whose are discarded (Ladson-Billings 2000; Bernal 2002). Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) point out that knowledges of the upper and middle classes count, and to get those knowledges, you are either born with it or learn it at school, and in this way, society reproduces itself. Lecturers at universities thus impart to students forms of cultural knowledge considered valuable by the dominant society.

Students entering South African universities often emerge from dysfunctional school environments which they use as their points of reference (Bloch 2009). In schools, students are socialised into accepting certain behaviours, and often work out what the 'correct' answers are supposed to be. When these students move to universities, they struggle to ascertain what it is that different lecturers want (Anstey & Bull 2006). Anstey and Bull indicate that students can be disadvantaged by the social interactions in a lecture-room because of the acculturing function and pedagogies used in their former schools.

In lecture-rooms, teaching and learning relationships are often infused with power (hooks 1994). Students see lecturers as representatives of power (Koro-Ljungberg 2007), and the hierarchical structure ensures that lecturers' social values are reinforced by their dominant discourse (McKenna

2004). Heap (1999) and Baker (1999) point out that lecture-room discourse as an acculturing factor transmits knowledge and communicates how the university operates. If students come from social and cultural groups that have not experienced this dominant discourse, then they do not know the rules of engagement, cannot participate in the lecture setting, and lack confidence in engaging in the teaching and learning process (Anstey & Bull 2006).

However, Yosso (2005) urges lecturers to consider the cultural capital that students bring with them, as they could potentially be rich resources to the teaching and learning environment. In the study under discussion, all the student teachers and I had to consider how to use the cultural capital present in the lecture-room to help the student teachers achieve empowerment and transformation and become agents of change. Many studies were drawn on to help inform the study under discussion.

The Literature Review

The study was informed by studies that shared similar aims. Bartolome (1994: 173) found that the teacher should look for a 'humanising pedagogy that respects and uses the reality, history and perspectives of students as an integral part of educational practice'. Bartolome (2009) warns that implementing teaching strategies without understanding who the students are and what they bring with them will not necessarily achieve successful student learning. Various researchers (Edelsky, Altwerger & Flores 1991; Perez & Torres-Guzman 1992; Bartolome 2009) have successfully used a humanising pedagogy where students' languages and life experiences are incorporated into lectures while the lecturer provides academic content knowledge and skills. In the South African context, it becomes imperative for lecturers to identify students' realities, histories and perspectives, nullified by apartheid South Africa and rendered invisible, and utilise them in their teaching practices. The post-apartheid lecturer therefore has the opportunity to tap into students' rich resources and build on them.

To achieve a 'humanising pedagogy', Ladson-Billings (1995) recommends culturally-relevant teaching that is committed to collective, communal empowerment. Culturally-relevant teaching, which this study used as a basis for engagement, is based on, among other ideas, the principle that students are excited and engaged when their knowledges are acknowledged

and built on (Ladson-Billings 2009). In Ladson-Billings' study (1995), teachers used students' cultures as building blocks for learning and teaching and students developed a critical consciousness where they could confront the *status quo* of the existing social order by critiquing social structures, practices and norms that produce, reproduce and maintain the social order.

Villegas (1991) speaks similarly of a culturally-responsive pedagogy where lecturers use strategies that acknowledge and develop culturally different ways of behaving, learning and using language in the lecture-room. Lipman (2009) takes this idea further when she identifies a culturally-relevant, responsive, emancipatory pedagogy that has a liberatory aim. This pedagogy understands that education is political and that teaching cannot be 'colourblind' (Lipman 2009: 364). Instead, lecturers need to connect with and draw on the discourses, cultures and socio-political realities of their students to promote academic competence and socio-political awareness. In this way, lecturers will take the first step to enabling students to develop into citizens informed by a concern for justice, happiness and equality as espoused by Giroux (2009).

The Methodology

The study was framed by a critical paradigm that used critique as a method of investigation to develop a discourse of social transformation and emancipation, as proposed by McLaren (1991). According to Freire (1998), when using a critical paradigm, education is seen to have transformative possibilities that could provide opportunities for progress, an idea that propelled this study in its aim to enable student teachers to become agents of change in their classrooms. While the student teachers critiqued teaching practices and philosophies, they aimed for transformation and thus emancipation from previously held ideas of what a teacher of literature should be.

This study was implemented over six PAR cycles. PAR, a form of participatory, democratic action research, involves a spiral of cycles of research, experiential learning and action (Boog 2003), aims to be responsive to the emerging needs of a situation, and the results of the research should lead to improved actions in a specific situation (Boog 2003). While Hall (1981) suggests that the issue being studied should originate from the group, in this study, while the student teachers were not responsible for suggesting

the idea for the research, they embraced the aims of the study and recognised that it could help shape their future careers, professional identities and professionalism in their workplaces. They also recognised that the concepts of change and transformation were marginalised in their teacher education programme.

Prior to a PAR study, baseline information is collected from participants to determine how to proceed. It enables the researcher to understand how participants perceive and experience concepts and events and thus determines what the first set of interventions needs to be. Interventions refer to a set of planned actions designed to increase the effectiveness of a situation, and deliberately disrupt current practices (Cummings & Worley 2005).

In this study, each cycle comprised an intervention designed collaboratively by the student teachers and me to attempt to answer the research question, and within each cycle, the intervention was implemented, observed, reflected on and theorised before further action. Interventions used the literary text as a springboard to focus on literary theories, social justice issues under scrutiny, innovative pedagogical tools, and unpacking the concept 'agent of change'.

After each cycle, different research methods were used to collect data on the effectiveness of the interventions in facilitating the student teachers becoming agents of change. Some data was collected from all the student teachers (observations; student evaluations; drawings; questionnaires) and some data was collected from different groups of randomly selected student teachers (interviews; focus-groups). The data collected served to inform the student teachers of what the intervention should be.

Since the study worked with student teachers' descriptions and understandings of change, we chose a qualitative approach that focussed on in-depth accounts and interpretations. In this study, PAR and a qualitative approach reinforced each other, as student teachers and the researcher were open to allowing the findings to determine the study's progress, adapted the study as the situation changed, and thus had to work closely together implementing the interventions and analysing the outcomes.

All data was analysed by me and by a group of student teachers (different groups for different data collection methods) by reading and segmenting data into meaningful analytic units that were coded. The codes used were both a priori (a set of codes developed before the data is examined)

and inductive (the other codes developed by the analysers as the data is examined). For example, the research question initially determined a priori codes, but as further data became available, other factors presented themselves (such as the characteristics of the emerging professional identity of student teachers), requiring further sets of codes to be developed.

Analysis was an ongoing, iterative process of collecting and analysing data (Johnson & Christensen 2007) and all analyses were verified with persons involved in the research process. While PAR does not aim to be objective and impartial, it does aim to be authentic, credible, and rigorous. Dick (1999) comments that PAR, by its nature, gives added rigour to an enquiry as the use of cycles and the action-positioned nature of the research ensures that data collection and interpretation coincide, and subsequent cycles are informed by the interpretations from previous cycles.

The subjectivity of the researcher and participants and the relationships that emanate from the various processes make PAR different from traditional objective research. The student teachers and I worked together as research partners and responsibility for the process was shared. However, throughout the study, we reflected upon the process as ethical issues emerged, and we planned and implemented new cycles of research as carefully as possible.

As the primary facilitator of the study and the student teachers' lecturer and assessor, I understood my power within the research process. I aimed to be socially responsive and reflexive at all stages of the research, and had to ensure a clear mediation of the research process and a seamless integration of the various roles played by me. Perhaps the most crucial aspect of the study involved the dialogical relationship between the student teachers and me, which included collaborative critical reflection and shared planning and facilitation.

Findings from the Baseline Information

Collection of baseline information took the form of anonymous questionnaires addressed to the student teachers, in which they were asked questions to ascertain their reading histories, encounters with literature, understandings of literacy and experiences of university, among others. The questionnaire also included open-ended questions, which allowed for the expansion of ideas.

The questionnaires, from sixty-six student teachers in their third-year of a four-year degree, revealed that 63% of the participating student teachers considered English as their home language with 37% speaking an African home language. The majority were in their early twenties with just over 10% being in their thirties. Just over half the group (52%) indicated that they were Indian; 36% were African; 8% were White; 3% were Coloured; 1% was classified Other (racial categories are still in place at universities, presumably to redress past inequities). All the student teachers had chosen to study English Education at university to teach English at primary or high schools. The initial questions in the questionnaire allowed me to place the findings in a social and historical context. For example, three student teachers attended private schools, six attended rural government schools, and the majority attended either middle-class suburban schools or working-class township schools run by the state.

The baseline information revealed, among other findings, four important aspects of relevance to this article:

- Most of the respondents indicated that they rarely spoke in lectures, even if asked to
- Many indicated that they enjoyed a participatory oral culture of storytelling, listening, speaking and memorisation
- The majority did not come from homes that had a reading culture (parents had not read to them as children and parents were not seen to read)
- Visual media (including electronic media and social media) shaped their daily lives

Responding to the Baseline Information: A Discussion of Findings

The first finding was that the student teachers did not speak in lectures even when asked to. Once the study began, I had to consider how to address the finding and to consider how to engage the student teachers in the lecture-room. Each lecture was placed within a flexible structure that allowed for adjustments. Generally, a lecture began with an open-ended question or problem. The ensuing discussion helped to disclose what the student teachers

were thinking and we then explored and built on the suggestions that emerged from the discussion. Issues that emerged from the texts were discussed as a class, and then the student teachers worked in pairs or as a group to answer, orally and then in writing, a challenging question or respond to a provocative statement, and answers were discussed with the class. Throughout the lecture, the student teachers were encouraged to confront views (mine or their peers') and as the cycles progressed, they did so more easily. Issues were open to deliberation, and they were urged to interject during the lecture to ask questions.

When they asked questions, I often restated or reworded the questions to enable second-language speakers of English to understand, and then answers were invited from the group. Throughout the lecture, I posed questions, initially convergent ones and then divergent ones. During certain times in the lecture, I tried to use interactive group-questioning to involve as many people as possible. Time was also allocated at the end of the lecture for their questions.

To ascertain if the strategies were making a difference, data was coll-ected from the student teachers. The findings from the student evaluations, created especially for the study, revealed that as the study progressed, the student teachers felt more comfortable speaking in the lecture-room.

At the end of cycle one, where the novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior* by Zakes Mda served as the catalyst for engaging with issues of empowerment and transformation, the responses to the statement, I felt comfortable to participate in class, revealed a large majority (83%) who indicated an 'unsure' response to the question. They were indicating that they were not sure about their comfort in participating in class. It is possible that the use of interactive, collaborative learning, which was a distinct contrast to the traditional lecture mode, made them unsure of their levels of comfort in embarking on a new way of knowing. However, the fact that no student teacher answered 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' seems to indicate a general feeling of ambivalence and since they had not rejected the idea of participation outright, there was hope that, with greater exposure to co-operative methods, they would feel more comfortable in subsequent cycles.

My observations of the lecture-room verified the student evaluations. While some student teachers actively participated in the discussions, not all engaged in the class discussions and in the feedback from the pair-work. Often, when they were asked to respond, they declined and I respected their

choice. I was aware of the need to build trust in small incremental steps.

During the reflections at the end of cycle one, I pointed out to the group that in lectures and tutorials, they sat, in most instances, in racial groups. A student teacher responded that she was 'comfortable with our friends'. In some tutorials, I asked the student teachers to work with people they had not worked with before and they appeared to work well. However, a student teacher revealed, 'I don't like working with some students. They act like we're not there'. The fact that a student teacher could articulate a feeling of being disrespected and ignored had to be discussed, but no-one in the class responded. Thus, many deep-seated concerns of the student teachers were not being articulated and, it was possible, that the disrespect and disregard experienced by some student teachers resulted in their not talking in class. While the student teachers did not react to the comment, it was just as revealing that they did not challenge it nor express surprise at hearing it. However, they did reveal that they mixed with people of their own races during breaks and when having lunch. A student teacher noted, 'It's a language thing. When we meet, we speak a language that we're comfortable with and can understand'. While the comfort of speaking a common language was understandable, the fact that the student teachers could not and did not articulate perceptions of racial tensions meant that such tensions needed to be actively challenged in the following cycles.

In cycle two, the student teachers worked with the film, *The Colour of Paradise*, directed by Majid Majidi, and the majority indicated, in student evaluations, a level of comfort with class participation with five student teachers still being uncertain. During the focus-group discussions, many of the student teachers indicated that they were comfortable talking in the English Education lecture-room with one student teacher saying, 'This is the only class I talk in. I would die if I had to say anything anywhere, you know, in other lecturer's lectures'. When asked why she believed this was so, she answered, 'You know how you say, "Try. Get it wrong". You get us to try and no one laughs if it's not right'. Another student teacher quipped, 'We wouldn't dare to laugh at others in your class'. A third student teacher pointed out, 'In other lectures, you just try to answer and sometimes, if it's wrong, people find it funny. They're stupid like that'. The comments indicated that if student teachers experience a sense of trust and respect in the lecture-room, they perceive it to be a safe place for them to share their views.

Similarly, the student evaluations at the end of cycle three indicated

that the majority of the student teachers felt very comfortable to participate in class. The play *Sophiatown* by The Junction Avenue Theatre Company was used as the literary catalyst in that cycle, in which the student teachers shared their memories (to understand the use of memories in the creation of the play). Despite many stories revealing personal histories, the student teachers felt safe enough to tell them with candour and honesty, and the others listened intently and responded empathetically. It was clear that the group was building a sense of community that supported each other. It was therefore a challenge to have a new student teacher enter the research process.

He had not been part of the introduction to the PAR study and no baseline information was collected from him. He did not participate in cycles one and two, was much older than most of the others, and did not engage in reflections from cycles one and two and the decisions that emerged from those reflections. He was informed about the study and he asked if he could join the study, albeit for one cycle. However, he made his hostility felt by shouting out answers, rudely challenging opinions, typing on his cellphone, and passing snide comments. The group, who had gelled over the past two cycles, appeared annoyed by his behaviour, seemed to feel intimidated to speak and at one lecture, a student teacher had to be stopped from threatening him. In many ways, I found him destructive and yet, he had to be seen as a challenge, typical of the many challenges that the student teachers would face in their own classrooms. The new student teacher agreed to being interviewed, and while all other interviews occurred at the end of the cycle, he was called in at the end of the first week of the three-week cycle.

After the questions from the interview schedule were complete, I said, 'Now tell me what is really going on.' He soon revealed his many frustrations (academic, financial and personal). He was assured that his views were valued, and he needed to be aware that he was being disrespectful to the others. This student teacher forced me to step back from the research and to consider whether it was important to stop his disrespectful behaviour in the lecture-room or work through his concerns first, a dilemma that was not truly resolved. However, he did alter his behaviour and refrained from creating an atmosphere that stopped others from talking.

By cycle four, where we engaged with the novel, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, the lecture-room observations emphasised the findings in the student evaluations where most of the student teachers were seen to engage in class discussions, and in group- and pair-work. The

reflections, too, on cycle four with the group revealed that they felt confident engaging in lecture-room activities, comfortable sharing ideas, and during the reflection, they appeared to demonstrate a protective stance towards each other. During the reflection, what was significant for both their personal development and the study was that the student teachers could suggest, without prompting, what they wanted to focus on in the next cycle to move towards becoming agents of change.

During cycle five, during which the student teachers explored the film *Much Ado about Nothing*, directed by Kenneth Branagh, the focus-group participants, who had just returned from Teaching Practice at schools, were asked if the study had any effect on them thus far. A student teacher revealed,

> The best part of the study is the freedom, the liberty to speak, and share your opinions. [During the Teacher Practice] I tried to get my learners to speak their minds. I encouraged them to try even if they got it wrong. That's what you say to us. It's what I'll remember.

The comments indicated the importance of democratic participation in the lecture-room and, by extension, to the school classroom. More importantly, she recognised the importance of enabling learners to have a voice in the classroom. The student teacher understood that the opportunity to share opinions enabled her to have a voice, and her view reflected those of the student evaluations where all the participating student teachers indicated that they felt comfortable speaking and participating in class.

In the final cycle, the student teachers worked with *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare. The student evaluations confirmed what previous cycles had indicated about the student teachers' comfort in participating in class, and the individual interviews held with six student teachers at the end of cycle six reinforced it. A student teacher observed that the use of 'questions, discussions and debates' was effective in 'making me see ... understand things that you sometimes just accept'. In their drawings and accompanying explanations, the student teachers recognised the need for 'student-centred', 'creative' and 'interactive' lectures. They appreciated the 'stimulating questions'; 'discussions'; 'debates to encourage higher order thinking'; and that 'views were respected'. It was clear that when the lecture-room environment is nurturing and supportive, agency and participation are allowed to thrive.

However, the student teachers did point out their views and capital were not always respected in other lecture-rooms. A student teacher related her experiences of speaking in lecture-rooms by saying, 'When lecturers ask you something in a lecture and some of them will put on this stupid accent, trying to imitate a Black accent. I want to ask, you think you're funny? And then people laugh. I don't get the joke. I just see it as racist and stupid'. The comments provided insights into how certain lecture-room contexts belittled people. It was clear that the student teacher had not articulated her thoughts with the lecturer, thus reflecting an understanding about how relationships are controlled by power and advantage.

The second finding, from the baseline information, that the student teachers enjoyed a participatory oral culture, appeared to contradict the first and yet, was understandable. They enjoyed a participatory oral culture, not the culture of an alien lecture-room. The student teachers indicated respect for participatory ways of acting and reacting, empathy for others, verbal memory skills, sound features and expertise in being able to tell a good story (often by a grandmother or great-grandmother). In a lecture-room dealing with literary and other texts, or any other lecture-room, the emphasis is on the print word (whether read or written), and therefore appears to be at odds with an oral culture. And yet, the student teachers in this study were studying to become teachers of English and would teach the language to school learners. It was thus imperative that they used the language to speak, listen, write and read.

To exploit the student teachers' backgrounds of a rich oral tradition and enjoyment of a participatory environment, the student teachers and I decided to use class discussions, group- and pair-work, debates, problem-solving activities, and music. When studying *Sophiatown*, the music from South Africa in the 1950s was played and students were able to recognise songs and sing along to them. We also used role-plays, scenarios and other drama strategies, where empathy for characters and situations played an important part. While at the initial lecture of cycle three the student teachers demonstrated great resistance to the methodology, subsequent lectures proved completely different. Each of the concerns they raised - 'Will we need to act?'; 'I'm not coming to the front'; 'I'm very self-conscious' - was addressed. They were assured that there was no performance involved and sharing was optional; no one was to come to the front of the class as all strategies were designed to take place at desks; and the strategies were ways

to bring texts alive in their own classrooms. Most importantly, they were assured of confidentiality and respect.

Using role-plays, the student teachers stepped into other persons' shoes, and, working in pairs or groups, grappled with a tension in the form of a question or problem. They then responded in character and used the information from various sources to create scenarios. The sharing sessions allowed the group to see how nuances in each group's performance led to different interpretations. As the lecturer, I used a teacher-in-role strategy (where I stepped into the role of a character in the text and questioned or challenged their responses) to increase their knowledge and comprehension of the texts and for them to identify and empathise with characters and incidents in the texts.

We also used storytelling when I asked the student teachers about their memories of loss, during the teaching of *Sophiatown*. Initially, they were highly reticent to share stories but once I shared a story (about my grandmother's forced removal from her home) with them, they felt more comfortable sharing their stories of removal, loss and oppression, and how they (or their parents) remembered, spoke about or acted in the past. Telling their stories helped to affirm their own histories and voices, and to engage with and interrogate their own experiences. It was also an attempt to understand their situations both intellectually and emotionally.

The interviews conducted after studying *Sophiatown* revealed that, in the main, the interviewees enjoyed the use of role-plays and teacher-in-role. This finding reinforced those of the student evaluations where all the student teachers strongly agreed that they 'enjoyed the lectures' and that the teaching strategies used helped them to understand the play. Nine of the ten interviewees indicated that they would use the strategies in their own classrooms and indicated a preference for the use of teacher-in-role. Teacher-in-role required greater input from the teacher than from the learners and could indicate a need for control on the part of the student teachers or could reflect their uncertainty of who their learners would be and, thus, uncertainty about how learners would react to such strategies. The student evaluations, too, reflected that all the student teachers knew how to implement the teaching strategies in their classrooms.

In the reflections conducted after cycle three, the student teachers noted that, through the use of participatory co-operative learning strategies, they had built relationships, had to learn to respect each other's views,

enjoyed working in groups, and perceived a sense of trust in the lecture-room. What I realised, however, was that despite enjoying a participatory oral culture, it was still imperative to explicitly assure the student teachers of confidentiality, trust and respect to ensure comfortable participation in lectures.

The third finding that the majority of participating student teachers lacked a reading culture was significant. The English Education modules, which they had chosen, required extensive reading of varied texts and they would one day teach texts to learners at school. The findings by Evans *et al.* (2010), gleaned from studies in twenty-seven countries including South Africa, indicate that reading books and academic progress are clearly linked. As the researcher and lecturer, I had to consider how to counter the student teachers' lack of reading models or reading materials in their lives.

During the first cycle, when I asked the student teachers to read aloud extracts from a literary text, there was great reluctance to do so and they appeared to be afraid of making mistakes. I then read the extracts aloud and they listened. As the cycles progressed, I asked them to read and they acquiesced, and by the third cycle, they volunteered to read aloud. Some of them also volunteered to present dramatised readings from *Sophiatown* and later from *The Tempest*. They also grew increasingly comfortable reading out their answers to questions. Reading aloud from texts or from their own answers was the first step to enabling comfort with and confidence in reading.

The student teachers and I realised that we needed to foreground reading to enable access to higher education in general and to English Education, with its emphasis on varied texts, in particular. I gave them academic articles to read and critique. When working with an article, which the student teachers were to have read before the lecture, questions were asked and issues from the article were alluded to from time to time so that they realised that it was worth their while doing the reading without my being overly prescriptive. At various times, language issues were pointed out incidentally with particular emphasis on the role of language as it constructed realities and social categories, and highlighted or suppressed agency, among many other functions.

During the various cycles, besides their prescribed texts, they also read newspaper articles, interviews with authors and filmmakers, critiques of novels and films, and poetry and novels of people cited in the texts they were

studying. In cycle four, the student teachers, recognising their lack of a strong reading culture, asked if they could independently source articles written on their texts, a suggestion that was wholly that of the student teachers.

However, the lecture-room observations noted that five student teachers did not access any articles, four copied other student teachers' articles (they cited time constraints as their excuse), and three stated that they found the articles difficult to read. However, the majority successfully accessed, read and engaged with the articles both in and out of the lecture-room. When I asked them to access an online print-interview with an author, twelve student teachers did not and thus could not fully engage in discussions about the interview. I began to question the decision taken by the group and wondered whether I ought to have supplied material to them. However, I knew that they needed to empower themselves, should they wish to succeed. Overall, the majority were able to engage with the reading strategies in the lecture-room, on condition that they came prepared to do so. In the reflections, the student teachers re-asserted the need to become independent and empowered to rely on themselves.

The final interviews revealed that, in the main, the student teachers recognised the usefulness of reading aloud to enable understanding, and indicated that they would do so in their future classrooms. They also recognised the importance of providing a good reading model in their own classrooms. According to their drawings and explanations (where they were asked to represent an ideal teacher of English), they indicated that a teacher of English 'loved reading'; was 'able to make learners enthusiastic about reading'; 'engaged with learners if they had problems with reading'; 'surrounded learners with books'; and 'loved inspiring generations to pick up books'. Thus, the student teachers recognised the importance of a reading culture.

The final finding, of relevance to this article, indicated the student teachers' reliance on visual media, which played a significant role in their lives. They indicated that they read and wrote text-messages, emails and social messages (most indicated that Facebook was their social media of choice), and that they accessed information and messages on their cellphones, not via a computer. In addition, they were comfortable taking photographs or videos with their cellphones. As the researcher, I had to consider how to achieve the aims of the study while being responsive to who the student teachers were and what they brought to the lecture-room.

We decided to use aural and visual media such as music, digital video disks (DVDs), pictures, and film clips in the lectures. I also asked them to keep their cellphones on and access information from the internet (about the texts, authors and/or pedagogical strategies) when needed. In addition, all student-notes or messages were sent electronically to them, thus working with a medium with which they were comfortable.

Before cycle three, I made a DVD using still pictures and music of the 1950s to understand the era and events depicted in *Sophiatown* and the interviews revealed that the student teachers believed that the DVD enabled understanding. I also showed them how to make a DVD using still pictures and music. They were introduced to simple computer software, available on most computers, to make their DVDs. They could thus make their own resources and play it off a laptop or a DVD machine and television when in their own classrooms. In cycle four, I played a DVD, using moving images and music of Kerala, which forms the setting of the novel, *The God of Small Things*. As in cycle three, the student teachers were shown how to make their own DVDs using moving images and music. The change from cycle three to four was vast with most of the student teachers, having experimented with the computer software, being very familiar with the technology and who then taught me and their peers many important techniques, including animation. They had assumed agency and, in many respects, served as experts who could share their knowledge.

After cycle four, the student teachers went on Teaching Practice in schools. On returning, a student teacher explained that he made a one-minute DVD of the poem he taught. He noted,

> I read the poem out, used simple images from the Net and added music. The learners were like ... wow. They wanted to know how I did it and I showed them some techniques. My mentor asked me to teach her, but she couldn't get it. I don't think she wanted to.

While the comments seemed to indicate that the mentor-teacher did not want to learn and change her practices, it is important that the learners and the student teacher recognised the effectiveness of using visual media as a teaching and learning tool.

Despite their comfort with visual media, the student teachers noted that they were not comfortable with studying or teaching a film. Prior to

studying the film, *The Colour of Paradise* in cycle two, a questionnaire, given to the student teachers to ascertain their film histories, revealed that while they enjoyed watching films, a majority (79%) were not taught how to analyse a film in school.

Despite indicating a reliance on their cellphones, when asked if there was anything they did not like when watching films, the most repeated answer was people talking on their cellphones during a film. When the film *The Colour of Paradise* was screened, they all agreed to turn off their cellphones.

By the end of cycle two, the group still appeared unsure of how to read a film. The focus-group helped to understand the finding. A student teacher noted, 'I know this film and can read and analyse it. What happens with another film? Can I do it? Can I apply the rules?' Her lack of confidence in applying her knowledge to other contexts and films was evident. She also believed there were certain 'rules' that needed to be applied. In retrospect, perhaps more needed to be done by me to scaffold their understanding of films.

When the film, *Much Ado about Nothing* was taught in cycle four, I assumed that because film study was undertaken in cycle two, the student teachers would remember everything done then. I failed to revise work done previously and they therefore still found film analysis difficult. In the reflections, the student teachers were asked how the film could be more successfully taught, and they noted that they needed constant reminders of definitions of terms and concepts. I recognised that I had not adequately engaged with their understandings and had wrongly assumed that their comfort with visual media equated to being visually literate. This recognition proved to be an important learning lesson during our reflections.

Conclusion

Reflections on this study emphasised to me the importance of acknowledging and responding to student teachers' capital and ways of being as starting points into my lectures. I understood that a nurturing environment may enable empowerment and transformation while, at the same time, challenging ideas and beliefs. The study demonstrated that the teaching and learning experience has to affirm and build on the various contexts that shape student teachers' lives.

By using active engagement, dialogue and learning through inclu-

sion, the study enabled the student teachers to ask questions and challenge assumptions. Thus, the student teachers were provided with opportunities to develop agency, voice and democratic participation while they constructed meaning together. They also recognised the value of regular critical reflection, which enabled them to acknowledge and understand the contradictions and confusions in their own lives, and had to learn that they needed to make choices about how to act.

Students also recognised the importance of grappling with and practicing a reading culture in order to succeed in higher education. They understood their agency in their success or failure and most of them made the important decision to assume agency for their success. In addition, visual media, they realised, could play more than a social role and could serve as an asset in the classroom.

By the end of the study, all role-players in the study (the student teachers and the researcher) understood that transformation and empowerment are possible if the environment is conducive to maximising teaching and learning and if a responsive pedagogy that acknowledges and respects student teachers' capital and ways of being is foregrounded. Thus, the study developed an awareness in the student teachers that they could take into their classrooms. Whether they choose to do so, is not known.

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