Artist or

Imposter!

Breaking barriers and 'dancing' the data

Dianna Moodley
with
Clare Craighead

Artist
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Peer-review declaration

The publisher (AOSIS) endorses the South African 'National Scholarly Book Publishers Forum Best Practice for Peer-Review of Scholarly Books'. The book proposal form was evaluated by our Social Sciences, Humanities, Education and Business Management editorial board. The manuscript underwent an iThenticate similarity evaluation to compare the level of originality with other published works and confirmed originality and appropriate acknowledgements to other published works. The manuscript was subjected to rigorous two-step single-blind peer review assessment before publication by two technical expert reviewers in the field, who did not include the authors and were independent of the authors, with the identities of the reviewers not revealed to the authors. The reviewers were independent of the publisher and authors. The publisher shared feedback on the similarity report and the reviewers' inputs with the manuscript's authors to improve the manuscript. Where the reviewers recommended revisions and improvements, the authors responded adequately to such recommendations. The reviewers commented positively on the scholarly merits of the manuscript and recommended that the book be published.

Research justification

This work attempts to trigger a conscience-inducing disequilibrium in teaching and learning practices within South African higher education. It advocates for a critical, humanising and compassionate pedagogy, with the goal of sensitising mentally fatigued and brain-fogged academics – who are casualties of the pandemic themselves – to the daunting domestic realities faced by students during this time. Arts-based methodologies offer humanising potential, empowering our research participants to become co-researchers with the capacity to produce and create knowledge in a context where they are often silenced. We discuss art forms with humanising impulses as pedagogical interventions, offering fertile pathways towards embodied and more empowering learning. This work would make profound theoretical and epistemological contributions to newfound understandings of social constructivism in education, provoking a gut-wrenching response from educators. In doing so, it transforms pedagogy into crisis-driven activism. It will not only invite open engagement with non-traditional methodologies but also better inform higher education educational practices in supporting student well-being and academic success.

This book challenges obstinate guardianship around 'unadulterated' scientific or scholarly research and discipline 'integrity' – gatekeeping. This is an audacious crossover. We traverse methodological confines, defying and transcending the borders of 'dictated' and learned boundaries. We expose the overworked assumptions and academic rigidity entrenched in research that views groups of participants as mere guinea pigs. Our research participants are individuals with senses and emotions, which has poignantly motivated the compilation of this book. It is imperative that our deeper research findings lead to real change in people's lives; it would not suffice to be captured in words.

Our aim is to invoke discourse on paradigms in the humanities, especially highlighting the potential of freedom in paradigmatic conceptualisations. We bring to the forefront stereotypical negativity around preconceived notions of what construes epistemological paradigms and its effect on research communities. It is precisely these biased philosophies that lead to futile contentions around methodology, thereby stunting intellectual freedom. An overemphasis on epistemology can hinder research advancement and its progress – there are other more important components of research to be considered in order to think transformatively. Beyond words, embodied practice provides avenues for understanding and navigating students' experiences.

The methodology employed in this work is autoethnographic, utilising reflective–reflexive arts-based approaches.

This study is based on a previous published work by the author, which serves as its basis: Moodley, D 2022, 'Post COVID-19: The new (ab)normal in South African higher education – Challenges with emergency remote learning', *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 112–125. https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v4i1.1008.

The preceding study upon which this book is based did not incorporate arts-based methods. This subsequent scholarly book aims to present the data from the arts-based study in a more dynamic and evocative manner. Thus, the entire work is original and has been developed to contribute new knowledge to the field.

I hereby declare that no part of this work is plagiarised.

I hereby declare that this book is written by scholars for scholars, specifically focusing on research related to student well-being, higher education transformation, and the methodological development and foundation of autoethnographic and reflective–reflexive arts-based methodologies.

Dianna Moodley, Faculty of Arts and Design, Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa.

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Contents

Abbreviations and acronyms and figures appearing in the text and notes

List of abbreviations and acronyms

ABR	arts-based research
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
DUT	Durban University of Technology
ERL	emergency remote learning
ERT	emergency remote teaching
HE	higher education
HEI	higher education institution
HEIs	higher education institutions
HERS-SA	Higher Education Resource Services – South Africa
NPHE	National Plan for Higher Education
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NRF	National Research Foundation
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
RADLA	Research and Doctoral Leadership Academy
SADC	Southern African Development Community
STEM	science, technology, engineering and mathematics

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Biographical notes

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Dianna Moodley is the research coordinator in the Faculty of Arts and Design at Durban University of Technology, South Africa. She holds a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Human Sciences – Sociolinguistics, obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal after completing her postgraduate studies with distinction in the United States of America (USA). She is the recipient of the Vice-Chancellor's Award for creative work involving divergent thinking, innovation and entrepreneurship from the Durban University of Technology (2023). She was honoured with the Outstanding Women Leaders in South African Higher Education award from the Higher Education Resource Services – South Africa (HERS-SA). She received the international prestigious award for best presentation in Barcelona, Spain (2022). Her research interest lies in sociolinguistics, with vast experience in quantitative and qualitative methodologies. She focuses on how language can contribute to enabling social relationships and how, as a vital part of human communication, language has the power to build societies and strengthen associations. She has more than 10 years of experience in strategic academic leadership and development, and she has expertise in quality processes and systems in the higher education environment. She has a strong research portfolio spanning journal article publications, journal reviews, membership on an international editorial board and participation in local and international conferences. She is also an experienced research fund proprietor, including several National Research Foundation (NRF) grants.

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Clare Craighead is a lecturer in the Department of Drama and Production Studies at Durban University of Technology, South Africa. She holds a Master's (MA) degree in Drama and Performance Studies, focusing her

research on site-specific dance theatre and embodied spaces in the work of South African choreographer and scholar Jay Pather. Currently, she is pursuing her PhD, which explores nomadic theory, posthuman subjectivities and performative embodiments in the work of various performance art practitioners from the Global South. She has over two decades of experience teaching in South African higher education. In addition to her academic role, she serves as the company manager of the Durban-based Flatfoot Dance Company and also freelances in backstage and production roles when time permits. She is an integral member of the organising team for the JOMBA! Contemporary Dance Experience and currently serves as the facilitator for JOMBA! Khuluma, its long-standing dance writing residency.

Encapsulating quotes

‘The powerfully vivid narrative emanating from the voices of the students was being concealed, disguised, or at best, distorted within text – lying lifeless, impersonal and latent. I had to transgress my habit of thinking in pursuit of unorthodox methodologies to tell MY truth.’

Dianna Moodley

‘Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower and to humanise. Stories can break the dignity of people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.’

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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Foreword

Dr Wilhelm van Rensburg
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Dianna Moodley and Clare Craighead are a formidable research team, often written about, reported on and acknowledged as some of the foremost agents in the field of discourse. By transcending their customary methodology of data analysis and reporting, they abandon a theory of objectivity that promises impartiality in favour of different standpoints shaped by power relations. From this perspective, the vexing experiences of university students become comprehensible using their alternative methodologies, amplifying their lived realities. They turn these alternative methodologies topsy-turvy to intersect with different forms of discrimination prevalent in colonial logic, revealing the authentic crises experienced by already marginalised students, exacerbated by the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. For them, as arts-based methodologies are still embodied by colonial conformities that silence participants, they use them in a 'messy' disruptive way to make students' subjective experiences and their own stories visible, rendering their participants as resistant actors, not passive victims. In doing this, they create an acute awareness of the need to accept 'other' agencies and validate 'other' knowledge. In its subversive dimension, their breaking of traditional boundaries becomes a practice through which restructuring of the power of knowledge-making is worked out and emancipatory discourses are encouraged. The correlation between artistic method, visuality and knowledge empowers their participants to not only demand but also initiate and enact a revision and re-articulation of dominant systems of knowledge. Creative and participatory studies – as are key elements in this work – imply the validation of research participants' non-hegemonic knowledge, to develop situated and embodied learning epistemologies. This knowledge does not emerge from a distance or a single gaze of the research findings but takes place as a reflective–reflexive, transformative process between the author, the co-author and the participants, of grasping and understanding.

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The book opens with a thought-provoking quote, which effectively sets the stage for the entire discussion on the role of alternative methodologies in understanding the learning challenges faced by students within a unique colonial legacy context, making an urgent and timely post-pandemic call for the practice of an emancipatory pedagogy in South African higher education. The monograph thus functions as a subjective documentation of the author's voice 'in front of' and 'behind' the camera, using a dialogical, intersectional approach to assume an ambivalent position that oscillates between Dianna Moodley's participants', her co-author's and her own idiosyncratic perspectives. The inclusion of visceral graphics adds depth to the discussion, not only emphasising the often-invisible circumstances of students but also connecting the reader with a agonising visual reference, rendering their narratives as lasting impressions, central to the discussion throughout.

Moodley ventures into unorthodox transdisciplinary visual methodologies, and arts-based approaches that would trigger a guilt-provoking upset in teaching and learning practices, towards a critical humanising, compassionate pedagogy. She attempts to sensitise drained and disoriented academics to the daunting domestic realities of students during the pandemic. The photo-essay offered humanising potential to empower her research participants as co-researchers with the capacity to be knowledge producers and creators in a context where they are often silenced. She also used performance studies with humanising impulses as a pedagogical intervention, offering fertile links towards embodied and more empowering learning.

Craighead augments Moodley's phenomenal research enterprise with intermittent theoretical insights, constantly explaining and interpreting the significance of the research. She stresses the notion of an embodiment of knowledge in performative pedagogies equating verbal and textual knowledge generation and, in the concluding chapters, reflects on the value of critical pedagogy. She outlines the numerous alternative and groundbreaking methodologies employed in the research and provides rich data description on which Moodley bases her remarkable analysis and interpretation.

Preface

Unlike scores of seasoned artists and scholars who have masterfully employed arts-based research (ABR) methodologies, I (Dianna) am neither an art-based researcher nor trained, skilled or educated in the craftsmanship of the arts. With a background in pedagogy and sociolinguistics, and as a stranger to the arts discipline, I am specifically interested in using ABR methodologies as a strategy to effect positive change in society. The inventiveness of this work lies in its identification of the unconventional conceptualisation of the research product evolving before insight and appreciation of the research process, thereby confronting inflexible gatekeeping around what constitutes justifiable scholarly research and academic disciplines.

This is a reflective–reflexive project, in reverse. We are taking the risk as an endeavour to provide an ethical representation of students' learning challenges, by using the potential of the arts to contribute something meaningful to our understanding, and from our respective vantage points, of students' contemporary realities. Arts-based researchers are driving change, using visual expressions to address urgent issues such as inequality, gender-based violence and human rights. Through this work, Clare and I attempt to inspire empathy, challenge injustice and bring communities together. We acknowledge the difficulty of this effort. Crossing boundaries and being heard can be tough.

I attempt to translate interviews with students into unusual methodologies to amplify their experiences during the pandemic. Hence, this research, which may contain 'cracks' when compared to traditional research, is used to carry significant meaning in visualisations of students' experiences, merged with my own experiences and Clare's interpretations, to engender evocative empathy and argument towards societal upliftment. True – I approached the interviews with preconceived responses, but what I left with were graphic accounts of students' heart-wrenching experiences that not only moved me deeply but also left me restless and somewhat irritated. I often replay these images in my mind, which haunt me like a film in my head, questioning my role as a researcher. Engaging in this project, I now know that beyond just words, somehow, the voices of our students from this era will be reachable and echoed long after they have gone, affecting the fabric of that society at that present time.

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As co-authors, Clare and I share a mutual association, not only as researchers and educators but also as trusted workmates and critical friends in the higher education (HE) environment. This collaborative composition emanates from a casual discussion between Clare and me, revolving around a prevalent social disconnection amid the hard lockdown during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. I inadvertently discussed my most recent research findings on this 'social disconnect' – the disengagement between lecturers and students, as found in my journal article 'Post COVID-19: The new (ab)normal in South African higher education – Challenges with emergency remote learning' published in the *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies* (Moodley 2022b). The article offers a global context of the COVID-19 impact on HE around the world. While technologically advanced countries with progressive HE systems generally received adequate support in transitioning to emergency remote learning (ERL), in lesser developed regions, the pandemic worsened an already dire situation in higher education institutions (HEIs), where most had inadequate learning resources and deficient technical and administrative support (Moodley 2022b). This book draws from the author's previously published research as it basis. However, here, the initial data is dynamically transformed into arts-based methods, contributing to new knowledge in ABR.

It may be argued that:

> The worst affected by the pandemic were students from lower income backgrounds in Africa and Asia, where students from poor backgrounds solely relied on government for educational support. [*Upon more closely interrogating the COVID-19 effects on the state of HE locally, the aforementioned article presents the results of a study*] conducted at one of SA's leading universities of technology [*amidst the peak of the pandemic and during the untimely introduction of*] ERL in 2021. [*The investigation*] sought to [*explore whether*] the University [*Durban University of Technology*] pedagogically adapted and adjusted to the realities of ERL. The [*focus was on students' perspectives, guided by*] how the shift to ERL affected student–lecturer interaction in the classroom. [*This article reveals sense-based, highly subjective data drawn from a qualitative study.*] (Moodley 2022b)

This article elucidated the existing condition of the South African HE system. It depicts how the COVID-19 pandemic forced South African HE into making a sudden shift of instructional delivery to an alternative delivery approach because of the devastating circumstances, exacerbating the country's already seriously broken educational system – a system fractured, now grappling. The article reveals how ERL emerged as a new type of remote learning where universities displayed a pressing need to ensure that curricula were rigorously executed rather than meaningfully engaging and connecting with students to ensure optimal learning (Moodley 2022b).

It was this conversation between Clare and I that germinated my 'crossing over'. Our exchange moved to the power of art to bring people together. It then dawned upon me that my latest research findings needed more than ever to somehow be 'seen' by critical HE stakeholders to drive action. Instinctively, I resorted to breathe life into my research findings.

This book provides an account of that 'crossing-over' experience, where Clare and I collaborate retrospectively and reciprocally from our mainstream disciplines (one a sociolinguist–researcher–educator, the other an educator–practitioner–researcher), co-inquiring on how the unconventional, idiosyncratic methodologies used in this work came into existence. A disclaimer pertinent at this juncture is that the products emanating from these methodologies are not autotelic – they were not created to stand alone in their purpose; rather, they serve to unravel the process embodied in their creation. I reflexively expound on my unintentional organic assimilation into alien methodologies. Clare reflectively intercedes and elucidates a post-mortem on my process of using avant garde methodologies and rationalises their use. Sections in slanted text (italics) represent the interpretive or reflexive commentary of Clare, as part of an ongoing scholarly dialogue with Moodley's research observations. Together, we expose overworked assumptions and academic rigidity entrenched in research that considers groups of participants as merely research subjects to generate data. We sought to:

> Avoid a hierarchical imperialist tyranny in our discursive practices and inject horizontality in our thinking where we consider [*research participants*] that have been hitherto confined to the margins [...]. (Govinden, in Pillay, Pithouse-Morgan & Naicker 2017, p. 57)

In our research engagements, Clare and I have always affirmed participants as individuals who possess senses and emotions – and this has so poignantly motivated our compilation of this book. This monograph is a depiction of how text mutated into an animate catalyst that would provoke a poignant response from educators. In so doing, it torments pedagogy into crisis-driven activism:

> 'A work of art does not answer questions; it provokes them, and its essential meaning is in the tension between the contradictory answers.' (Leonard Bernstein, *The New York Times*, 24 October 1965)
>
> 'Artists are here to disturb the peace.' (James Baldwin, UC Berkeley speech, 1963)

Resonating with Bernstein's and Baldwin's stance, the purpose of this work is to vex and push readers towards liberating and generative perspectives. We trust it will not only invite open, deep engagement on or with non-traditional methodologies but also better inform educational practices in HE of students' academic success. Moreover, it could potentially have

'important ethical ramifications, arguably, for what constitutes history and culture, self and selfhood' (Govinden, in Pillay et al. 2017, p. 45).

Our aim is to inspire and empower emerging researchers with (re)-new(ed) knowledge about transcending conventional research methodologies in their creative advocacy work. In so doing, we challenge often inflexible research methodologies employed traditionally in the humanities. Arts-based research can be a double-edged sword – offering visibility while being subjected to 'scientific' censorship. We promote ABR methodologies by navigating the challenges, and sharing experiences, ideas and strategies to sustain them. We advocate for stimulating impact-driven research, evoking transformative action resulting from correlational humanism emanating from research. We attempt to drive change, using ABR to address urgent issues in HE and trust that this project inspires empathy, challenges injustice and brings communities together.

The opening chapter offers the rationale for engaging in self-study upfront. It was essential that we delve into an understanding of the very phenomenon this book explores. Self-study was an attempt to find a way around the issue of how we used technology, creativity, pedagogy and philosophy to frame our message. We applied self-study as a critical lens through which to dissect my personal experience of engaging with my research participants, on the journey that led me to engage in ABR and then together at our professional practice. This provided us with an avenue to directly address the social–ethical–political contexts and issues prevalent during one of the most unprecedented times in our history, and in so doing, we wanted to contribute together, at least in a small way, towards fostering a socially just education for all.

Chapter 2 unfolds the challenges we encountered through the process of engaging in reflective–reflexive self-enquiry (in reverse) as a methodology to recapture how I had come to create such works emanating from tension from my latest research. We discuss the complexities of the process of looking inwards and backwards simultaneously. This chapter explores the tensions of conventional research where subjects, situated as 'datasets', are dehumanised as their stories and experiences are disembodied. In moving towards performance and its potential to more fully humanise the research, the body is centred – and not just that of the researcher, but of their collaborators who create, perform and enact the 'data'. It was not enough to know of the experience; what was important was to make meaning of the experience. This chapter explains how we pondered, introspected and carefully thought about ideas, experiences and actions, while we embarked on a new learning experience.

Research and processes of knowledge production have for ages been based on racialised and imperialistic frameworks, marginalising

Africanised theoretical orientations and methods, and even matters of disclosure and publication. This subject has attracted increasing critical attention and scholarly debates within social research. Chapter 3 outlines a delicate balancing act in walking the tightrope around gatekeepers of knowledge and their influence on social research in diverse ways. Although they occupy obstructionist and facilitative roles, this chapter describes how the research was instinctively negotiated and navigated around to make personal disclosures, leading to a deeper understanding of the research and the researched, drawing attention to the dilemma of conforming to norms or defying them in order to expose truer depictions of student learning experiences when engaged in remote online learning, amid other struggles in their everyday lives.

Chapter 4 details the unconventional methodologies applied in processing the research results. We switch from traditional, written research approaches to those frequently employed in arts-based fields, which are also primarily interactive and collaborative in character. This chapter presents three main ABR methodologies that have served as the study foundation and make the case for their ability to provide more inclusive, diversified and humanising pedagogical influences in South African HE. Clare and I examine the ability of photo-essay to overcome traditional language hurdles that remain in South Africa after apartheid. Additionally, we present performance studies and the benefits of contemporary dance theatre, emphasising how these approaches can go beyond traditional pedagogical techniques and promote greater complexity and plurality in research participation while also embodying the research data. Here, we argue for more inclusive ways to knowledge co-production and their transformational potential within South African HE, challenging the hierarchical power dynamics inherent in conventional (written) methods.

Chapter 5 explains the crossing-over into unchartered methodologies to reveal my narrative – an authentic reflection of the perceptions of students towards ERL. The interpretative approach, best suited for a study of this nature, was applied. This meant employing a qualitative paradigm to extract value-laden data, providing preponderant, context-bound themes and further interrogating for analysis of emerging patterns.

Chapter 6 presents explicit findings from each of the methodologies applied. *While no single, universal language exists, ABR enables communication beyond words. By utilising multisensory and interdisciplinary modes, ABR cultivates accessible means of communication that reflect shared human experiences and their impacts on us as sociolinguist–researcher–educators and educator–practitioner–researchers. It also acknowledges the students whose stories we are holding through this research and our artist–collaborators who embody the data.* The first

approach is a multisensory, interdisciplinary *aide-mémoire* of the exasperating COVID-19 impact on students' learning. Here, we delve into the discovery of a visual language, using arts-based tools in the delivery of a photo-essay. *Next, we explore digital and interdisciplinary practices in the development of a short collaborative dance film, highlighting the psycho-social impacts of COVID-19 on students and their experiences of remote online learning – embodying the research and dancing the data in a narrative dance work. This piece emerges from a close collaboration between Dianna and Sibahle (the performer), with Dianna actively shaping the aesthetics, visual composition and conceptual framing and Sibahle moulding the movement language and its flow. The final piece, another dance film, extends the research further, marking a shift from an intimate collaborative process to a professional collaboration with Durban-based choreographer Musa Hlatshwayo who interprets and translates (with his team) the data into movement and imagery while maintaining the aesthetic continuity of the previous works. Dianna's role here shifts from hands-on involvement to a more consultative position – her research data provide the foundation for professional collaboration. Here, embodied knowledge production is framed – rooted in Dianna's aesthetic influence, but with renewed creative agency. The work emerges as a cry of hopelessness representing the internal struggles many students deal with as a result of the newly adopted methods of teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.* It highlights the emotional and psychological traumas our students are subjected to when forced to adapt (or fail) to ways of teaching and learning. *Across all three iterations, Dianna's aesthetic sensibilities provide foundational continuity, even as each work explores different methods of reproducing and representing the worded datasets from Dianna's previous research. This progression also layers Dianna's research, returning a variety of artistic artefacts, in the forms of photographs and dance films, as well as storyboards and graphic sketches that mark the many ways through which ABR can layer data analysis and even form new expressions of existing ideas.*

Chapter 7 explicates the blunt realities of students' experiences in dominant themes that emerged from the new ABR data. It reflects on *de facto* evidence from the findings, responding to the question of whether the teaching and learning process responded appropriately to the previously unheard-of, unstable environment in which students found themselves – plunged into ERL during the COVID-19 pandemic. The evidence here highlights the acute effect of the ABR data on our teaching and learning practice and our research. *It also exposes gaps, challenges and potentials towards (necessary) adaptations in pedagogical approaches that are more humanising, empathetic and situated. The emotional and cognitive tolls of ERL and often disembodied technologically mediated*

learning and teaching compel us to critically and crucially re-evaluate traditional teaching methodologies towards more flexible, creative and responsive student-centred strategies that account for both the psychological and practical barriers to learning experienced in our particular contexts.

Chapter 8 (based on Moodley's 2022b article) reiterates a fitting solution to the dilemma, followed by an invitation to HE to purposefully engage in action. It discusses a key approach that can restore social justice to a post-conflict HE such as that of South Africa, drawing a contrast between education that liberates and education that upholds oppressive situations, perpetuating a disengaging and non-participatory education that is dehumanising. This chapter talks about pedagogy as a transformational tool that offers not only us as educator–researchers but also students the ability to think critically and act as change agents even outside the classroom. *It moves beyond passive consumption of knowledge, offering instead a process of inquiry that is active, embodied and situated in lived experiences of the learners themselves. Embodied learning offers space where dominant narratives can be challenged, and agency can be enacted through reimagined possibilities – making visible often invisible emotional and psychosocial dimensions of education, extending education beyond just intellectualising towards lived, felt and potentially transformative expression or experience. Arts-based research, and in particular in this study, offers itself as more than a research method – it is also an act of resistance, activism and justice-seeking that lends itself to the evolving decolonisation of South African HE and its institutions.*

Chapter 9 extends the need for action towards a consistent national problem and appeals to South African HE to mobilise towards solutions by addressing the core problem. This chapter calls for a crisis-driven innovation in education, whereby lateral adjustments are implemented, ultimately leading to the development of society through truly effective *(and affective)* education. It also offers insight into the kind of solutions needed for high-quality HE in South Africa, emulating foreign solutions for pedagogical challenges students face under similar conditions.

Chapter 10 offers the findings of our reflective lessons as co-authors of this entire process of reflective–reflexive self-study. In this chapter, we present our unencumbered educational experience through our partnership and how it yielded dynamic transforming potential. Here, we discuss our paradigmatic freedom, our personal discoveries of inner and outer selves and our professional growth – our relationship now intricately and inextricably webbed for life.

The book concludes with recommendations for furthering research projects that employ other ABR methodologies. It discusses the open-

endedness of research, *emphasising the importance of revisiting existing data – reviewing it organically and allowing (re)new(ed) meanings and perspectives to emerge in response to shifting contexts. Research is never static; it is alive and a living process that is continually shaped (and re-shaped) by the sociopolitical, cultural and temporal landscapes in which it is situated. Revisiting (old) data anew offers critical and crucial opportunities to discover insights that may have been previously overlooked and underexplored – moreover, applying alternative methodologies also potentially warrants new findings, strengthening the capacities of the existing research and its potential reach. As contexts evolve, whether through changing educational policies and praxis, historical and emerging sociopolitical movements or technological advancements (and uneven access to these), the same data can yield fresh understandings, reframed through lenses in the present. This iterative approach not only deepens our engagements with past findings but also ensures that research remains relevant, responsive and attuned to the needs of the communities it is supposed to serve – often, research is cited and used to justify how 'things are done' – all too often, the research is not brought into contexts of the present. Arts-based research enables this while enlivening, and in our context here embodying, its potential. Such acts of re-engagement as documented in this monograph enable an analysis that acknowledges research as an evolving conversation rather than a fixed conclusion.*

Chapter 1

Why self-study?

I spent some time pondering why and how I stumbled upon such distinctive explorations that converge between epistemology, pedagogy, creativity and technology to solve a problem. Nothing was predetermined in creating these works. True, I had incorporated multiple forms of text, including academic writing, sound, images and multimedia, while applying existing knowledge and theory. However, in practice, it became clear I inadvertently evaded rigid forms of knowledge and framing and had ventured into something strange.

This work began as an attempt to navigate around how I, as an emerging artist (or not), can feel confident in my newfound research pursuits. However, because the research became so personal and deeply profound, there were often instances of writer's block, where I found myself stalling in a state of chaotic perplexity, the pressure and expectation of where to go next lurking. This is when Clare and I came together for the first time, in spite of our diverse ways of knowing, to address the crucial issues head-on, along with the challenges that emerged from the study. More importantly, I needed a critical friend to help me understand why and how I had stumbled upon arts-based methodologies to interpret my findings.

Our union in creating this new work was a new, unpolished experience, where the resultant:

> This voice[,] is not a fully blended voice nor is it made-up of our two voices alongside one another [...] we write them alone as our own futures and then talk about what we have written and we write together either face to face or over the [*virtual platform*] with a shared text in front of us. In some ways writing

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> collaboratively has liberated us from some of the stress and anxiety that we feel when we are writing solo. (Tidwell, Heston & Fitzgerald 2009, p. 9)

Clare was a friend positioned to 'pose questions and offer advice […] work together to contribute and ponder multiple perspectives and insights' (Pithouse-Morgan, Chisanga, Meyiwa & Timm 2018, p. 106) and so began the journey between two novice self-study researchers. Together, we sought to investigate transdisciplinary bodies of knowledge while generating our own story – self-study provided us with this platform.

Our engagement evolved into a space co-created by both of us, relinquishing any semblance of control of where it would take us. This was an intersubjective connection that presented an opportunity to hold ourselves to account for reporting as responsible advocates for the voices of our students, for:

> Herein arguably resides and unfolds the agentic space emerging from a critical reflection […] that makes one rethink one's relationship to the trauma of a history […] as it engenders a radical understanding of meaning making in a human and embodied way. (Govinden, in Pillay et al. 2017, p. 57)

We wanted to present the work in such a way that people from all corners of the world, transcending social, political and cultural barriers, can understand why what happens in HE in South Africa has a huge impact on all of our lives, in ways that we may never know. We did not want to reduce the impression of the narrative, as much has been said regarding it already. It was also important for inclusivity to be mirrored in our story in a provocative way and for everyone to have a stake in the conversations emanating from it. This process reinforced our ethical responsibility as researchers to avoid speaking for our students. Instead, we aimed to acknowledge their experiences, which enables and promotes a more humane pedagogical praxis. It required a willingness to be unsettled and to sit with discomfort and an acknowledgement that true learning – the kind that matters – is about transformation, both the students' and ours.

What was more important was to turn this space into a 'space for the collective representation of people's histories and stories' (Govinden, in Pillay et al. 2017). This was not unlike a labyrinth that deserved to be put together and interlocked creatively to make sense of the subject matter, which was a true story. Similar to Pithouse-Morgan, Naicker, Chikoko, Pillay, Morojele & Hlao (2014b), we wanted to present a 'mental kaleidoscope of sights, sounds and silences in the data' (p. 156). In this space, it offered freedom – a 'certain fluidity of thinking' (Govinden, in Pillay et al. 2017, p. 58) – to express ourselves without judgement, as we faced a critical choice to find a way of writing our own learning, a way to present a clear, incisive and truthful research experience, while contributing meaningfully to knowledge production and its praxis:

> The idea then was to no longer wait for talking about what to do next, but to get together when there was a need to make sense of what was going on and what ought to happen next right then and there. (Roth & Tobin 2004, p. 7)

Faced with tough questions regarding which route to take, we discovered an alternative technique to intellectualise and represent our data.

Eisner (1997) discusses the possible advantages and disadvantages of alternative data representation techniques. He expounds on how scholars are increasingly employing novel representational forms to communicate knowledge to 'readers'. This he attributes to 'discontent with traditional conceptions of knowledge' (1997, p. 4), which emerging scholars find too restrictive, precisely the sentiments Clare and I share. As a result, Eisner states, scholars in education, in particular, are becoming more and more intrigued by the connection between representational form and comprehending form. He calls this 'transforming the contents of our consciousness into a public form that others can understand' (1997, p. 4). These explorations are attested to a growing understanding of the nature of knowledge and the connection between one's knowledge and representations of it. Nonetheless, Eisner also cautions, although these novel modes of representation possess potential benefits, they are not without restrictions. They are, however, exciting – for us, this work was the most exhilarating by far.

Eisner (1997) purports innovative approaches to the representation of alternative forms of data. He investigates the question of whether research belongs to science alone and clarifies that qualitative research gradually became more than a type of social science applied to education. In addition, Eisner discusses what constitutes legitimate or authoritative forms of inquiry in education and what should count as research. Ultimately, he touches on who possesses the power to publish, making a case for the freedom of using alternative forms of data representation. This freedom of experimentation was what excited Clare and me. For Eisner (1997), it:

> Presents an image [...] that acknowledges the variety of ways through which our experience is coded. It is about the ways in which the transformation of experience from the personal to the public can occur. It is about what we can learn from each of these transformations. It is about the trade-offs that are inevitable in the selection of any option. It is about exploring the edges and re-examining the meaning of research. (p. 7)

Eisner submits that the purpose of alternative methodologies is to illuminate and not obscure, to evoke empathy for the very human beings and experiences we want people to know. It provides a sense of particularity – that which is devoid in abstractions, it evokes and generates insight into its complex issues, opens up colourful discourse regarding these issues and empowers researchers to explore their own aptitudes. These types of methodologies were particularly intriguing to us, as it aligned so accurately to our purpose of engaging in such an experience.

This extends, arguably, more meaningful links to research that evokes what Ronald Pelias (2004, p. 1) engages as 'a methodology of the heart' in his book titled A methodology of the heart: Evoking academic & daily life*. Pelias (2004, p. 1) articulates the appeal 'of this way of working [that emerges from] a feeling of lack' – this resembles Dianna's initial engagements in this study – and her searching beyond words, towards other creative modes of exploration and articulation. As Pelias (2004, p. 1) offers:*

> *I know there is more than making a case, more than establishing criteria and authority, more than what is typically offered up. That more has to do with the heart, the body, the spirit [...] As I go about my business of just living and of doing my job in the academy, I never want to hurt or be hurt, but too often I've watched claims of truth try to triumph over compassion, try to crush alternative possibilities, and try to silence minority voices.*

The sentiments in the quotation above echo my own as a lecturer in the performing arts in the HE sector in South Africa and, I think, too, are evident in this monograph and its search towards research and pedagogical praxis that enable humane and humanising encounters through the research project itself and its potential outwards and onwards impacts. In the context of ERL and its impacts on students – which prompted this study initially – being the dominant mode of teaching and learning delivery for the greater part of two years across South African HEIs (between 2020 and 2022), these ideas are deeply resonant.

Under COVID-19, we were thrust into online, virtual spaces – starkly contrasted with the physical and embodied nature of live performance studies. The digital divide and our insufficient infrastructure exacerbated already fraught tensions within South African HE, making it difficult to meaningfully deliver decolonised and quality education (pertinent to our South African context, and the pre-COVID-19, #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student protests). In this context, the inadequacies of conventional pedagogical approaches became frustratingly clear, highlighting the need for pedagogies and methodologies that prioritise human connection rather than the mere absence of 'connectivity' that we arguably (and undeniably) experienced in the online teaching and learning environment. In this light, integrating creative practices into research and pedagogy both enhances academic inquiry, while also offering ways into addressing the psycho-social and cultural realities of our students – as we hope this study will show, while simultaneously also providing further pathways for additional creative research practice and praxis as well as acknowledging the humanising potentials of ABR. Human beings transcend treatment as datasets in these methods – arts-based practices become re-valued and we are able to share space as co-producers of knowledge with our students and each other (and the various artist–collaborators who have contributed to this particular study).

Similar to Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2018), who provide a compelling exploration of collaborative leadership within the context of South African educational research, Clare and I sought to co-learn, co-author and co-contribute to our unique local challenges in HE, and self-study proved to be most conducive. According to Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2018):

> In South African public higher education, the miseducative legacies of the past weigh heavily [… *and*] as leaders of a multicultural community of university educators [*we*] seek to contribute towards repairing the damages of a divided and discriminatory past by means of self-study research. Through a collaborative arts-informed analysis process, we have heard multiple perspectives from community participants and expressed our own learning in dialogue with theirs. This has enabled us to recognise shared qualities of caring, listening, and creativity as vital to a socially just reimagining of higher education communities. (p. 102)

The authors investigate the dynamics of co-learning among leaders from diverse cultural backgrounds, aiming to address the complexities and opportunities inherent in challenging educational environments. Further to this, and similar to our research, they situate their work within the post-apartheid South African context, where legacies of racial segregation and inequality continue to influence educational institutions.

Employing a qualitative methodology, Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2018) draw on narratives and reflections from their own experiences as leaders in the South African educational research community. Their use of an autoethnographic approach allows for profound personal engagement with their subject matter, 'the auto of co/autoethnography refers to the self, and most particularly to the self as agent' (Tidwell et al. 2009, p. 4). Each author provides rich, contextual insights into the processes and outcomes of co-learning. They advocate for narrative inquiry, putting forth its aptness for exploring complex, interpersonal dynamics, while capturing the nuanced, evolving nature of collaborative leadership.

Still in the South African HE context, academics Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2021) describe their experiences using creative literary collaborative autoethnography, what they refer to as co-autoethnography. Pithouse-Morgan et al. use this methodology to (re)humanise learning and teaching, empower themselves as academics and enhance their professional practice. This inquiry among themselves and others offers them a window to examine linkages between human experiences and societal concerns. These authors report using personal narratives, poetry and expressions in dialogic ways to 'create connected ways of being and becoming academics […] in HE, the collaborative creative practice of an ethic of relationality and dialogue can make a (re)humanising difference' (2021, p. 31). Pithouse-Morgan (2021) recounts how she met her own 'Child self in stories of other childhoods', in her attempt to understand more concerning the broader sociocultural subject of childhood parental loss:

> I recognised my child self in their evocative descriptions of tangled feelings of bewilderment, anxiety, alienation, and loneliness. In asking my students questions such as, 'Can you tell us more about this, from the inside?' I realised I held within me a fusion of feelings akin to theirs. It was disorientating and compelling. (p. 35)

This was critical autoethnography – a creative medium in which Clare and I, as academics and researchers, could self-reflect, employing our personal identities as instruments to examine, in a very complex and contingent way, the connections between our individual autobiographies, lived experiences, and broader social and cultural issues (Chang 2013; Ellis & Adams 2014; Grant, Short & Turner 2021). Autoethnography deepened and extended our understandings of lived educational experiences, and as Tidwell et al. (2009) convey:

> The very process of undertaking autoethnographic research has helped us develop a collaborative method that allows us to weave our narratives together in a way that opens new opportunities for understanding our practice. (p. 7)

Webster-Wright (2009) would refer to this as 'authentic professional learning [...] a spirit of critical inquiry where professionals can gain insight into their own learning and the assumptions they hold about their practice' (p. 702).

Breckenridge and Clark's (2017) article presents an additional dimension to autoethnography – a compelling and innovative co-autoethnographic theoretical framework and practical approach to qualitative research within the field of nursing. They introduce and elaborate on what they term the 'duoethnographic' method, specifically utilising a Japanese tanka poetic form to interrogate, express and offer insights into delicate and often difficult-to-articulate experiences within the nursing profession. The duoethnographic method, as described by Breckenridge and Clark, is a collaborative form of autoethnography where two researchers engage in a dialogic process to explore and reflect on their experiences. The authors use poetry to highlight the power of abstract, evocative language to capture the emotional deepness and complexity of research participants' experiences. For the authors, 'whereas autoethnography involves better knowing oneself, duoethnography is about knowing oneself in relation to another' (2017, p. 452).

Breckenridge and Clark (2017) argue that this approach is aptly suited to explore sensitive topics while allowing the researchers themselves to resonate with the personal subject matter engagement. Duoethnographic dialogue encapsulated the authors' reflections and reactions to their research participants' experiences. In a sense, Clare and I recognised this dialogic format served to illustrate the richness of insights that emerged from the study, but more than that, it allowed for:

> Juxtaposing voices from different backgrounds [*for*] the potential for learning about individual professions, establishing interdisciplinary collaboration, and challenging typical ways of knowing and doing within different professional cultures. (Breckenridge & Clark 2017, p. 452)

As Tidwell et al. (2009) would put it:

> Co/autoethnography insists on pulling the interpretive aspect to the surface [...] forces us to look at our lives through a cultural lens [... *it*] provides a means of making sense of this complexity from the inside, for ourselves. (p. 6)

The very same dialogic and polyvocal principles conveyed by Pithouse-Morgan, Coia, Taylor & Samaras (2016) are embedded in duoethnography, with its emphasis on learning in the context of others and its application to university education. Duoethnography stood out for its ability to convey nuanced emotions and insights that might easily be overlooked or inadequately expressed through the use of more conventional qualitative methods. We could use it as a tool and a means to communicate, while bridging the personal and professional realms of our respective experiences. This method can adapt to the research purposes and proved valuable to us in exploring new methodological avenues.

While Breckenridge and Clark (2017) address the potential challenges and limitations of using this collaborative, interpretive methodology, as it can lead to varying degrees of subjectivity requiring a high level of trust, they argue that the benefits, such as the ability to explore deeper emotional truths and foster a more profound understanding of sensitive issues, far outweigh the potential drawbacks. For Clare and me, the novelty of this duoethnographic approach that we organically adopted, and upon reflection have recognised, together with its ability to underscore the importance of creativity and emotional depth in capturing the complexities of human experience, resonated with us. 'Duoethnography is not a self-indulgent spiralling into the inner self, but a transformative process' (2017, p. 458). We were intrigued by 'duoethnography's postmodern conceptualisation of identity as a co-created hybrid' (2017, p. 459) and how this innovative qualitative method allows for the intersection of art and research through creative practice.

Roth and Tobin (2004) further augment the idea of duoethnography as proposed by Breckenridge and Clark (2017). Roth and Tobin offer a detailed account of yet another innovative qualitative research methodology used in case studies of their work in science education – 'co-generative dialoguing and metaloguing'. They intricately dialogue about their dialogic process, exploring another layer of the reflexive process as a means to validate the depth and rigour of qualitative inquiry, likewise promoted by Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2018).

Inasmuch as Roth and Tobin also situate their methodology within the broader context of educational research, particularly in science education, the applicability of this approach extends to various fields of social research, particularly in their applicability to challenges in teaching and learning. This approach enlightened Clare and me. Very much as with the 'double reflexivity' experience Clare and I had, Roth and Tobin (2004):

> [*Began*] by reconstructing [*their*] mutual thinking and use the two dialogue forms, then, as an instantiation of metaloguing, reflect on what [*they*] have learned at the first level, and finally, at a third level, make another reflexive turn to look at the conversation that [*they*] had. (p. 1)

This methodology aligned with what we wanted to achieve in employing the theoretical foundation of social constructivism, where knowledge is constructed by social interactions. Our research was a collaborative engagement, not only between ourselves as researchers but positing the understandings and insights of the research participants (the students) as co-constructors of new knowledge. *To this, we also added another layer of knowledge co-creation – with the artists with whom Dianna worked – particularly in the two dance films produced as part of this process*. We sought to recognise and appreciate the preconceived power dynamics in the research process. This co-generative metaloguing methodology offered a way of breaking down traditional hierarchies between researchers and participants. For Roth and Tobin (2004):

> The use of theory to make sense of co-generative dialogues enabled us to iteratively consider an expanded array of potential outcomes and to explore It offered us a platform to recognise the value of how multiple, inclusive perspectives can come together in a dynamic way to make new meaning. (pp. 3–4)

Roth and Tobin (2004) argue that co-generative dialoguing fosters precisely this more egalitarian research relationship that we wanted to achieve. Their research:

> Became a place for collective decisions to emerge within a context in which respectful interactions could occur, with the understanding that no voice would be privileged, and it was safe to make critical statements about others as long as the interactions were respectful and free of malicious intent; the goal being to improve the quality of science education. (p. 4)

Roth and Tobin (2004) further assert that this approach is not only participatory but also critically aware of the sociopolitical contexts in which it operates. In this way, Clare and I reflected on our own assumptions, uncovering underlying issues and suppositions, and exploring different methodological choices, while acutely aware of the power relations interplay within the research process. It is through this recursive exploration that we acquired a deeper comprehension of the dialogic process and its outcomes.

Roth and Tobin (2004) further expose the challenges associated with this methodology, such as the need for researchers to be open to vulnerability and the complexities of managing power dynamics within dialogues. However, they put forth that the advantages of using this methodology outweigh the risks in defying traditional paradigms and marginalisation of research participants' voices. They promote this type of research, especially in troubled educational contexts. For them, it became: 'A means for all stakeholders in a situation to deal with contradiction and conflict and to design changes themselves rather than waiting for policies and recommendations from researchers' (2004, p. 5).

This urgency to agency turned out to be pivotal to us. However, because we were immersed in unknown territory, Clare and I were fascinated by its unpredictability. We were curious to establish where it would go and what it would lead to. Weber (2014) explores the unexpected outcomes that arts-based self-study research can lead to, similar to any other type of inquiry. She calls this the 'ripple effect' and advocates for its use, as it goes beyond the initial design parameters, even though we start with a reasonably clear purpose. Further to this Weber adds, the data we create through arts-based methodologies may address additional topics even more essential than those we meant to explore initially. The most potent outcome of an arts-based self-study is the enhancement of our work, which may transpire in a different domain. This knock-on impact that only becomes apparent after our investigation is finished and may go unnoticed as our focus shifts.

Clare and I wanted to additionally disrupt and move readers to new understandings while generating even more unknowns we could pursue. Weber (2014) highlights how arts-based self-study achieves this goal:

> Images can simultaneously present multiple viewpoints and generate multiple interpretations and can draw attention to the importance of the everyday by making it strange or casting it in a new light. Images can be used as elegant and economical representations of theoretical positions by retaining more of the complexity of the whole within less space than words would necessitate. Moreover, images can combine cultural and transcultural elements; they can evoke, but also sometimes transcend the specific context in which they are created, and they can use specific instances to comment on, or illustrate wider generalities. (p. 29)

While there are many applications for ABR methods, Weber (2014) contends that they are most beneficial in the context of self-study in education. Weber (2014) highlights the key features that make ABR particularly well-suited for self-study inquiry:

- Arts-based approaches, by their very nature, foster reflexivity
- Artistic forms of representation can help capture the ineffable
- Through visual detail and context, arts-based approaches show why and how the study of the one can resonate with the lives of many

- Arts-based approaches involve embodiment and provoke embodied responses
- Arts-based self-studies often constitute a call to action, whether deliberate or incidental, to others who are not the central participants. (pp. 31–32)

What Clare and I were engaged in was practice-based self-study and our quest was to present it as trustworthy. *Dianna's frustrations at the limitations of conventional research methods initially led her to create visual and embodied responses to her research findings – and then inviting me in as a critical friend has enabled us layers of reflection.*

Initially, our focus was on the ethics of 'speaking for' students – questioning how we, as educators, could responsibly present their experiences without imposing our narratives. Over time, this inquiry deepened, shifting from an external focus on student narratives to an internal process of self-examination. We began to reflect on how these stories moved us, how they unsettled and challenged our assumptions, and ultimately too how they prompted us to reimagine our roles in HE, myself as educator–practitioner–researcher and Dianna as sociolinguist–researcher–educator. Through this process, I reaffirmed my long-held belief in the power of embodied pedagogies and their student-centred responsiveness as Dianna found articulations towards research as collaborative and knowledge as co-constructed. In this we both acknowledge that our reflections here do not merely inform the research as it is presented; but they also reaffirm and reshape our teaching and research praxis, respectively.

Our purpose was to present findings that would enable researchers to draw meaningfully out of our personal experiences and to generate discourse around them. Tidwell et al. (2009) state: 'This trustworthiness can best be achieved by making the data visible and by clearly presenting and illustrating [*the methods used to derive findings and interpretations*]' (Tidwell, Heston & Fitzgerald 2010, p. xiii)]. This was a powerful way to tell our story within a story in an ethically rigorous way. Tidwell et al. (2009) defend this methodology:

> Stories are interpretations, but they also need continued interpreting. In co/autoethnography, our stories become texts of experiences that are interpreted [...] the experience may be past but the meaning or interpretation of the experience is from the present and this is what is significant. (pp. 7–8)

Practice-based self-study research encompasses a range of methodologies that we explored, including action research, narrative inquiry, autoethnography and critical reflection. These approaches have been widely used by scholars, characterised by their focus on the lived experiences of educators and their engagement in reflective practice within

their own contexts. Action research enables educators to systematically investigate and reflect on their teaching practices, often leading to the development of innovative teaching strategies and pedagogical insights. Hine and Lavery (2014), for instance, use a qualitative paradigm to systematically and cyclically explore the experiences of postgraduate teacher–researchers who employed action research in the schools within which they taught. Firstly, they outline the conceptualisation of action research in the context of educational research. They underscore the benefits as well as the challenges of action research for teachers. They then discuss the design of the case study methodology used to examine the experiences of these teacher–researchers. The research uses interpretivism and employs a 'symbolic interactionist' approach to examine case studies, drawing data from interviews.

Hine and Lavery's (2014) findings are categorised into three themes: the value of action research methodology, its impact on the target population and the challenges inherent in employing action research. All the participants highlighted that 'action research provided them with a valuable research methodology to examine what they considered to be a critical issue' within their educational environments and 'enabled them to engage fellow colleagues in the problem-solving process and to empower these colleagues in taking collective ownership of the particular issue' (2014, p. 170). Furthermore, the teacher–researchers reported that the research process positively impacted their school culture and policy, contributing to positive change. Although the participants experienced challenges, they appreciated the personal and professional challenges. Similarly, Clare and I underwent the very notions of enlightenment, even through challenges of understanding precisely what was unfolding.

Since we were focused on impacting HE practices, Clare and I found Nguyen's (2017) depiction of action research relevant, particularly as a valuable tool for pedagogical professional development in HE. He focuses on the significant impact action research has on students' learning, drawing data around problems and resolutions from student feedback and teachers' self-reflective journal entries. Nguyen shares his personal trajectory of pedagogical professional development, stating he 'did not even know what [*he had*] done to improve the teaching practice' but had used a 'spiral process' to produce 'creative ideas from experiences' to improve his students' learning challenges and enhance the effectiveness of his teaching practice (2017, p. 1). Nguyen (2017) concludes this research enabled him to realise that:

> [*Great*] teaching is a combination of an art, a learning process [...] an attitude, an experience, belongings of an emancipating guider, belongings of an explorer, a puppet, and all of an actor/actress [...]. (p. 10)

In addition, he suggests it is necessary for teachers to transform to affect students' lives, and action research positively makes this possible. Similar to Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2018), as Clare and I became more conscious of the students' lived experiences in isolation, we became more aware of our learning of ourselves and each other.

The emancipatory aspect central to the understanding Cain and Harris (2013) reached regarding action research caught our attention. The authors embed their research within a culture of performance management for teachers subject to continuous policy pressure to change their teaching practices to measurable outcomes. Cain and Harris report that this culture of performance management is so demanding that it distorts teachers' identity of themselves, their beliefs, their ideals and their commitment to the profession. The authors thus engage in collaborative research, providing teachers an opportunity to step back and reflect on their practice. In so doing, Cain and Harris (2013) use action research as participatory and democratic, enabling and improving practitioners' ability to make critically sound evaluations in their practice. Although teachers were challenged by the research process, they emerged realising that change in their practice is not impossible – it is productive. Similarly, Morales et al. (2016) employ a descriptive approach in applying action research to effect reflective practice on the part of teachers in promoting better classroom practice in pedagogy, assessment and parental involvement. They conducted surveys and interviews among teachers, indicating that action research led to positive actions in developing student learning and promoting lifelong learning. Morales et al. (2016) call this 'theory–practice-influenced teaching'.

We wanted to tell the story our way, so we turned to narrative inquiry as a form of self-study. Mudaly, Mthiyane & Sibanda (2021) describe how, as mid-to-late-career academics teaching science and mathematics, they too experienced mounting 'professional anxiety' from institutional demands to decolonise the South African curriculum. They resort to narrative inquiry 'to become more thoughtful, retrospective, and introspective of [*their*] practice' (2021, p. 150), reporting on reflections of their past and present identities and employing their active agency to construct and exchange stories. Likewise, Tidwell et al. (2009) assert that '[*c*]o-autoethnography involves writing about oneself, exploring the past in an effort to understand the present and prepare for the future' (p. 7). For Clare and me, our self-study research provided profound insight into the complexities of teaching and learning within a challenging and diverse educational context, with the added pressures that ERL and COVID-19 and the uncertainties that these presented.

In a similar vein, Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2014b) venture into 'Entering an ambiguous space: Evoking polyvocality in educational research through

collective poetic inquiry'. In exploring the concept of pedagogic settings, very similar to the research pursuit Clare and I were engaged in, Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2014b) use a collection of vignettes, which:

> Portrayed how this student's daily life on campus was constrained by his anxiety about xenophobic harassment and violence. Hence, we argued that the pedagogic setting for his learning was educationally unsound, even when effective teaching and learning activities might be occurring in designated spaces. To conclude, we deliberated on possibilities for cultivating pedagogic settings that are favourable and safe for all those who learn and teach within them. (p. 152)

(Pithouse-Morgan et al. 2014b) explore the execution of collective poetic inquiry as a dialogic methodological innovation, explaining their literary academic writing as:

> [*A*]s a process of reflecting upon [*their*] experience and on the experience of others in an attempt to make useful suggestions for change and growth as part of a conversation in progress. (p. 150)

By adopting collective poetic inquiry, Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2014b) aim to evoke what they term 'polyvocality' – multiple voices and perspectives, seeking to 'address a perceived absence of the voices of those most directly affected by the research: learners or students' (p. 150). In this way, they enrich the research process and its outcomes. This approach aligned perfectly with our broader aim to use qualitative research to capture the deep human experience and understanding of the issue at hand. Here too, authors embark on a journey that underscores the complexity and ambiguity inherent in educational research. They use poetic inquiry as a means to evoke emotional and cognitive responses, often inaccessible through conventional research methodologies. Poetry offers them a unique lens, through which these complexities and ambiguities can be explored and expressed.

Central to Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2014b) is the concept of collectiveness in their collaborative approach, where they engage in the creation and sharing of poems among a group of researchers. For the authors, this process is both iterative and dialogic, allowing each participant to contribute their own voice, while also responding to the voices of others. The resulting data are not merely artistic expressions but become analytical tools that help uncover deeper layers of meaning and insight of all roleplayers in the research experience. While the authors engaged with each other's poems, they reflected on their respective experiences and interpretations while considering the perspectives of their colleagues.

As much as this dialogic process highlights the potential of collective poetic inquiry to emanate in a richer, nuanced understanding of the research topic and even though these types of methodologies 'heighten creativity

and reflexivity' (Pithouse-Morgan et al. 2014b, p. 152), the authors address the shortcomings of this methodology with a head-on approach. They too acknowledge the element of discomfort emerging from engaging in artistic inquiry, as this type of methodology lays bare the vulnerability and openness of researchers. Attention is, furthermore, drawn to concerns such as 'whose voices are indeed present, how diverse voices are re-presented, and which voices dominate in participatory research analysis and research texts' (2014b, p. 151). In addition, they add that the subjective nature of this type of methodology makes it difficult to ensure rigour and reliability in the research process.

Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2014b), nevertheless, support the benefits outweighing the challenges, highlighting the potency of polyvocality arousing the emotional and experiential dimensions of educational research. In this way, a compelling case is made for the inclusion of arts-based methods in educational research. Researchers are also encouraged to build upon and adapt such collective, pluralistic methodologies in a responsible and ethical manner, developing 'critical and reflective self-awareness', as opposed to simplifying or reducing complex issues by taking the conventional route. Similar to Clare and me, the authors do not lay any claim to be experts in the artistic or literary methodology they use. Rather, they merely use polyvocality as demonstrations of 'knowing in the making' of the work, inviting readers to be part of the continuous participatory inquiry.

Autoethnography also encourages educators to critically examine their own experiences and identities, shedding light on issues of power, privilege and social justice within the educational landscape (Pillay 2019). In this regard, Pillay (2019) uses ABR to examine how:

> Visual and literary art forms open up imaginative spaces for self-reflexivity and complex ways of thinking and being. Art-making can serve as imaginative entry points to awaken creative, materially situated, and practical modes for researching supervision pedagogy in higher education. Visual modes like drawing, painting, sculpture, and collage can employ the powers of creativity to know the self in surprising ways. (p. 99).

Pillay speaks of using autoethnography as a space for 'unknowing' oneself, with the potential towards developing different understandings of pedagogy in South African HEIs. The process of using this type of methodology, as Pillay states, is not comfortable, for it pushes pedagogy into strange meanings, repositioning oneself within convoluted shifts in thinking. You get to know yourself differently in this process. Pillay urges the use of this methodology to '[*r*]esist fixed, disembodied ways of enacting supervision practices to graduate students viewed as product-oriented outputs' (2019, p. 102). Pillay (2019) concludes that art-making and autoethnography:

> Provided [*her*] tangible, creative ways to search and research the subjective self and, from this material and practice-based understanding, supervision pedagogy looked different: mutually respected, caring, lively, and of brilliant colour. The visual imagery and [*her*] possible interpretations materialised a rich assemblage of ideas that offer fertile ground for thoughtful experiments and to generate new ways of conceptualising what it means to fascinate explicitly research learning in [...] supervision. (p. 102)

Little did we know these were the ideal circumstances that would lead to self-discovery. Self-study in research refers to a specific research method or approach, where an individual researcher or a group of researchers study themselves or their own experiences, behaviours, beliefs or practices, as conveyed by Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2014a). I too needed to be schooled into who I am, or at least, into this component of my 'not-fully-embraced' holistic being. For this, I needed a conceptual compass in Clare so I could leverage my newfound knowledge into further, meaningful explorations leading to newer knowledge. Together, we began on a journey of discovering ourselves. *For me, this self-discovery has been a push-pull. I have never considered myself an academic – my work in dance and with dance has made me sceptical of what is and is not included in academe [...] but I've never been able to say no to an opportunity to highlight the value of dance beyond the dance itself.*

Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2016), who are teacher educators from two different countries, collectively explored and thereby reached a deeper understanding of what they refer to as 'methodical inventiveness' in their self-study research. They describe how they experienced an artful, dialogic process, which they named 'virtual polyvocal research jamming', finding 'imaginative ways to express and make sense of insights [...] deepen[*ing*] and extend[*ing*] shared reflection, analysis, and communication in educational inquiry' (2016, p. 443). For these authors, researchers who study self-study believe that while changing one's own understanding starts with oneself, interacting with others is necessary to expand and enhance one's own viewpoints. Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2016) assert that cooperation of some kind is necessary for all self-study research, with collective self-study emphasising the collaborative aspect of the study. Self-study research challenges academics personally, calling for both vulnerability and self-confidence as it triggers a heightened awareness of 'the messiness, uncertainties, complexities and elisions of professional practice' (Pithouse-Morgan 2016, p. 444).

The authors caution that while it is fraught with risks, self-study presents opportunities by integrating real-world engagement with theory and practice. It further enables self-study researchers in education to identify how their research affects students, teachers, curriculum and policymaking, as well as raising questions regarding the purpose of self-study. Pithouse-

Morgan et al. (2016) explain that this research approach is becoming more and more popular among academics, in response to various contexts, and continues to be 'critically reconceptualised, reconfigured, and reinvigorated' (p. 444). They submit that there is not only one suggested self-study research technique – there are appropriate methods to support the support inquiry and methodological inventiveness and hence, they entail creative engagement to support unconventional, artistic and transdisciplinary methods in generative ways of knowing, which have broader implications for social change. Thus, Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2016) found themselves 'jamming into the unpredictable [...] inviting the uncertain, listening to each other's individual experiences, and then taking cues from each other' (p. 444).

A review of the aforementioned literature reveals that practice-based self-study research in South Africa is not without difficulties, despite its potential benefits. South African HE functions within a complicated sociopolitical environment, ravaged by disparities, resource limitations and historical apartheid legacies. Yet, despite these challenges, Clare and I engaged in self-study research, as it offered us an opportunity to engage in reflective inquiry within our own professional contexts. This became even more prominent as a valuable approach for Clare and me to understand our respective roles as practitioners in HE. For us, it held particular significance, precisely because of our fragile educational landscape post-COVID-19, historical legacies of apartheid and ongoing efforts to promote educational equity and social justice.

Together, we began to explore the methodologies, our contributions and the challenges we experienced during our engagement around this work, acknowledging its potential to inform our educational practice, foster our professional development and have an impact on our contributions towards educational transformation. Self-study was the perfect framework to write of our interaction with troubled and vulnerable students while hoping to prompt a positive impact on teaching and learning in HE in such a way as to value our students 'behind screens' as human beings with feelings, emotions, lives and livelihoods. In retrospect, one thought frequently remained on my mind, but was constantly ignored, while I worked on these strange explorations – 'meta-awareness'. 'Self-study', as seen in the literature, is a complex concept that addresses meta-awareness. Self-study has to be experienced before it is even appreciated and understood, for, as the Sufi philosophy proclaims, 'He who tastes, knows', so began my journey of experiencing a world beyond words.

In collaborating with Clare, this work became about researching our creative selves. It turned out to be imperative that our deeper findings affect change in people's lives rather than being confined to words. *This is where I came into the process [...] as a dance scholar and practitioner,*

Dianna approached me with her ideas about challenging the research conventions that dominate her field. Being sceptical myself, of words and their limitations, knowing the power of embodiment as an educator, scholar and practitioner, I accepted the invitation and hence the probing that followed.

Clare: When we were first thrown into ERL, I remember feeling completely unprepared – not just in terms of technology, but emotionally and pedagogically too. How do you teach something so deeply embodied, like live performance and performing arts through a screen? And, what about data and networks? Colleagues were speaking about 'film' and 'TV' [...] but we are a LIVE performance programme, this is what the students have signed up for, and what Department of Higher Education and Training has approved and what the institution has charged them for [...]

Dianna: Yes, that disconnect emerged strongly from my research findings. It was so difficult to understand why lecturers were not reaching out to students more intimately even though they were now engaging remotely. This tension of a crumbling structure and infrastructure [...] surely lecturers felt this tension too.

Clare: The classroom has, for me anyway, always been a space of shared energy, dialogue and responsiveness – and quite suddenly, we were reduced to flat screens and muted microphones, and not really knowing if anything was actually landing [...]

Dianna: And yet, we had no choice but to adapt [...] and fast. But adapt to what? A crisis is not a stable thing – it is constantly shifting – daily [...] hourly [...] It was not just about adjusting a syllabus [...]

Clare: We were navigating entirely new pedagogical landscapes [...] without maps!! I kept thinking about accessibility – indeed I was receiving desperate WhatsApp messages from students who were confused and afraid, and needing greater structural support and infrastructural equality [...] while also navigating the fear of COVID-19, and the grief that came with it, the loss [...] trauma [...] isolation. It seemed as though we were simply expected to just get content across [...] there seemed to be very little understanding of the human impact of this shift (institutionally, I mean) [...] we had to report on data and statistics [...] there was very little room to engage the human-level trauma [...] on both sides of the teaching and learning spectrum [...]

Dianna: Exactly! That is where I started questioning the role of care in teaching [...] what does it mean to be an educator in crisis? It was impossible to separate the academic from the personal [...]

Clare: [...] to hold space for students' struggles while also navigating our own [...] I started to re-evaluate everything I thought I knew about

teaching [...] I had also, without any preparation time, to step into the role of HoD for our programme when our HoD became very ill with COVID [...] The working hours just seemed endless [...] I was trying to also ensure that no student (or member of staff) was 'left behind' [...] I was not entirely successful [...] the weight of responsibility was very heavy [...] we all felt this in our own ways [...] I think [...]

Dianna: It is interesting – ERL has forced us to strip teaching down to its core [...] What is essential? What is learning when everything around it is unstable?

Clare: I had to let go of my own assumptions of what engagement (should) look like [...] A student who kept their camera off and did not use their mic was not necessarily disengaged; they were surviving [...] a late submission was not carelessness – it was a reflection of a reality beyond their control [...] Teaching became less about delivering content and more about meeting students where they were (as far as possible) [...] some dropped off the map for weeks on end (no signal, no data [...] no contact) [...] I was worried what our classrooms might look like after COVID [...] would there be missing faces – how many students (and colleagues) might we 'lose' to this virus [...] what does education look like in this scenario [...] how do you keep focus? Do marks mean anything? Should they? What is our institution doing beyond sending us to endless online meetings and training (somehow, classes were thought to be shorter when delivered online) [...] WhatsApp is gruellingly slow with a class of 50-odd students [...] The tools didn't match the reality [...]

Dianna: The Institution sent us to endless meetings and training, trying to 'equip' us – but for what? For efficiency?

Clare: And, beyond the logistics, there is something about the loss of embodiment [...] I say this as a person who comes from a dance background, and physical theatre engagement [...] Teaching performance, dance, acting [...] it is not just about intellectual understanding – it is felt [...] lived [...] it is in the breath, the movement AND the spatial relationships [...] with other performing bodies [...] it should be safe and there should be space to play [...] often students did not have capacity for this [...] not having home spaces that they could freely move in, having to dance outside, in full view of other community members, some of whom would make casual commentary or laugh [...] I did sometimes feel like I was not supporting the students in their learning [...] but we were also told that we had to deliver to the institutional descriptors (module descriptors) [...] with very little change allowed [...] how do you 'translate' embodiment [...] I became quite pre-occupied with this question [...]

Dianna: This is, I think, where the arts – where practice-based, embodied methodologies have something valuable to offer.

Clare: Yes, I have always engaged in embodied practice as a teacher […] and as I have grown into teaching, beyond just the dance and physical disciplines, I try to bring it into all of my classes or across the discipline […] the think–feel connection and how that enables meaningful learning and also communal and collective learning […]

Dianna: Absolutely – I am just coming to this way of knowing now […] but it feels so necessary to activate research sitting on shelves. I really want to shout out the findings in more vivid ways.

Clare: Yes […] it is, this ERL online environment has really thrown me for a loop, but I keep coming back to how embodied learning enables dialogue in the classroom, deeply felt learning and our capacities to really see and witness each other […] it resists institutional pressures to flatten experiences into neat categories – it encourages messy creativity – and for me this is the richness that learning can be – and I have experienced it first hand both when I was a student myself and now that I am a lecturer […] I keep coming back to it […] and I cannot wait to return to in-person engagement again I miss the dialogue, interactivity, responsiveness and the difficulties too […] we exist differently in our bodies […] And some bodies are more 'acceptable' than others […] I love to challenge these ideas in my classroom, to break them down and to encourage the students who I teach to embrace their 'Ngi-la' [I'm here] […] all are welcome […] all have capacity […] all contribute and in this we – and I include myself in this 'we' – all learn and teach together.

Dianna: You articulate it better than I can, but this way of exploring knowledge – through embodiment – seems to turn traditional ways of research and knowing upside down […] I'm incited by this, as I am feeling quite frustrated with traditional methods […] they seem too clinical and also don't really capture the emotion of our and our student's experiences at this strange time […] For me, this presents a new way of thinking, of researching and presenting data […]

Clare: For me – and my peers in dance – this is how we work – it is refreshing though that someone from another field can see the value, often times, we are not taken too seriously because we are told that our ways of generating research lack scientific rigour […] that they are too personal and therefore somehow less than […] I'm often frustrated by this academic hierarchy […] where all 'we' (in the arts) are good for is 'entertainment' […] I look now at this so-called new-normal, and consider how many people are turning to 'just entertainment' to help them feel a little less scared, alone and traumatised as we are isolated and without freedom of movement, receiving reports on the daily about how many people are newly infected and/or have died since the start of the pandemic […] our value is so undermined […] I challenge anyone to consider a world without arts […] no

music, theatre, television or film; no galleries – a world where there is function and no form [...] I do not want to live in that world!

Dianna: [...] as a newbie to these ways of thinking, I am stirred up by the potentials – particularly in relation to my latest research that documents student experiences of COVID-19 and ERL. I have been frustrated at the limitations of words, and am inspired by arts-based methods – the visual and embodied in particular – to be able to bring the research to life so that it is felt. When I read these accounts, I am moved, but I am frustrated that the words on the page cannot capture the tensions and the heightened emotion and the very real experiences of our students [...] so in deciding to revisit the data in these creative ways, I am discovering the value of these methods, and their impacts [...]

Through such exchanges, Clare and I felt the 'flourishing togetherness', so fittingly put forth by Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2018, p. 118), as we shared experiences while supporting each other. Pithouse-Morgan et al. illustrate this mutual growth and support among leaders in education. They expound on how co-learning facilitates the development of shared understandings and collective agency, enabling leaders to navigate and transcend cultural differences (2018, p. 119). The authors depict the collaborative process as challenging but highlight the enriching aspect where each participant in the research process was required to be willing to engage with diverse perspectives, while simultaneously embracing uncertainty and ambiguity.

Our self-study involved ethical considerations, particularly regarding our potential biases, while ensuring the confidentiality and privacy of the research participants. We conducted this self-study with rigour and transparency, exposing our vulnerabilities. This meant we had to render ourselves visible and vulnerable, while at the same time deriving valuable insights into the lived experiences of our participants and practices of educators and practitioners, leading to any meaningful contribution to pedagogy and our potential improvements in professional practice.

No doubt, the journey continuously shifted our perspectives, as together, we experienced moments of learning. Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2018) draw attention to the elements of mutual trust, respect and open communication that contributed to our successful co-learning. According to the Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2018), reflexivity fosters a culture of continuous learning and adaptation, and they emphasise it could empower and enable ongoing commitment to personal and collective growth. Clare and I had 'drunk the cool aid' and internalised a yearning for this ongoing development within our safe space. We would dialogue, experiment, bare our vulnerabilities and learn from our mistakes long after the immediate experience.

In fact, Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2018) advocate for implementing this model as a programme of co-learning across educational institutions, making a case for prioritising the cultivation of co-learning communities of practice, where diverse voices are given esteem and collaborative problem-solving is enhanced. This approach, they argue, can lead to more inclusive and effective educational practices, ultimately contributing to the broader goal of social transformation in South Africa. For Clare and me, self-study offered a dynamic framework for fostering inclusivity. By introducing reflexivity into our research, we moved from data presentation and interpretation, to theory, similar to Roth and Tobin (2004):

> We really blurred the boundaries that some people experience between doing research and analysing data and writing the research studies. Doing (writing) a metalogue is part of the data analyses, it is another pass over the data but now concerning our own learning in the process of doing the study. However, we often engage in this only after having produced some text intended for publication. So, in a sense we begin working with the data again not only to write the research but also to engage in further learning. (p. 8)

So, we ask ourselves, similar to Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2014b, pp. 167–168), why our experience of being, knowing and unknowing within this self-study would matter to others. We hope, as HE in South Africa continues to grapple with challenges related to its complex legacy landscape, and being critically socially responsible researchers, our insights from this study will be particularly significant in offering a positive and transformative outlook of how we can flourish together in our diverse thinking.

Chapter 2

A double self-reflexivity

It was not the mere knowledge of the work that was important – I wanted to make sense of my newfound experience. In the context of self-awareness, being reflective refers to the ability to contemplate, introspect or think deeply about one's thoughts, experiences or actions (Van Laren, Pithouse-Morgan, Muthukrishna, Naicker, Singh, Chisanga & Meyiwa 2014). Academic definitions of reflection commenced with Dewey (1933) with reference to the process of analysing and reviewing past experiences. As stated by Boud, Cressey and Docherty (2006), Fenwick (2009), Kolb (2015) and Mezirow (1994), reflection is essential to adult learning theory and practice. However, as noted by Jordi (2011) and extensively discussed by Roessger (2014), there are significant differences in the terminology used to define reflection and the process of meaning-making or sense-making. These definitions are explored by scholars like Brookfield (2017), Fook and Gardner (2007) and Moon (2007). 'A form of mental processing – like a form of thinking – that we may use to fulfil a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome' is how Moon (2007, p. 82) succinctly describes reflection. Clare and I used reflection to process the meaning of our experiences, previously held beliefs and worldviews (Rouleau 2010).

For this to occur, I had to re-visit, re-experience and reconnect, staying close to the intricacies of the process. This required resorting to a conscious and deliberate reversal, re-examination, analysing and evaluating my thoughts, feelings, motivations and behaviours, which led me to new interpretations and insights of my past experience. Kolb (2015) and

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Schön (2017) contend that reflection is essential for efficient learning. It is necessary for deep learning, innovative issue solving and problem-solving in a complex, constantly changing environment.

While reflection was happening in my head – not observable – Clare was my critical friend, whose perspective was deeply embedded in mutual respect and functioned as a powerful trigger to prompt reflection on the process. Within the context of a tremulous shift to accommodate the present realities of a situation that took the world by storm (COVID-19), I engaged in this journey with the assistance of my critical friend, to qualify my constant errant thoughts towards coherence and meaning-making. This was a frighteningly new experience, which I felt uncertain about, but through the support of my critical friend, I gradually settled into the joy of the experience. With Clare, I was not afraid of failure. Similar to Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2018, p. 112), we discovered 'the power of bringing creativity and the visual into research'.

The process involved deeper and deeper reflective engagement, even confronting the discomfort while sitting within the discomfort. I constantly invited Clare's critique of my thought process to identify the font and source of such thinking that had become an indelible component of my persona, both professionally and personally. Such intersectionality forced me to reframe and refine the coherence of my personal existence and role in this HE landscape.

Clare asked awkward questions, facilitating the process, while creating a conducive environment to monitor my disruptive thoughts. She was catalytic in respectfully posing unpopular thoughts that led to further interrogation This was merely a learning-by-doing experience, and together, Clare and I engaged in sense-making and sense-giving, sharing and comparing interpretations. Although our paradigmatic orientations were different, with respect to our discipline expertise, we co-emerged and co-aligned our thinking within a mutually respectful ethos. We quickly realised this collaborative interaction between us was yielding natural learning, because of our common interests and invested focus. We became aware of our own, as well as the other's thoughts and actions in the moment, reflecting on them afterwards to gain insights and embrace the potential adjustments.

This was an individual exercise, but what I needed was a dialogic stimulus to see and question my assumptions (Brookfield 2017; Freire 2012). The term 'reflexive' implies a feedback loop between self-observation and self-awareness (Alejandro 2021). While Clare and I pondered and deliberated on the process, we went back into the act of self-reference. Involving ourselves in a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, similar to action research, data analysis, theme identification and drawing conclusions informed our professional growth. It empowered

us in shaping our professional development and contributing to our respective research fields.

It is worth noting that while 'reflective' relates to conscious thought and self-examination, 'reflexive' has broader applications across different disciplines. In social sciences, reflexivity refers to the idea that individuals' thoughts, actions and behaviours can be influenced by their knowledge, assumptions and beliefs (Pithouse-Morgan et al. 2014b). In their more recent study, Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2018) refer to these mutual principles as 'reflexive ubuntu'. According to the Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2018):

> Reflexive ubuntu unifies the following: (a) research reflexivity, which mainly constitutes paying critical attention to how researchers' positioning, understandings, and values affect research; (b) [*s*]outhern African ubuntu philosophy, which is underpinned by the principle of locating oneself in the experiences of others as an ethics of care; and (c) what we term 'co-flexivity', which we have described as 'being reflexive together through thinking deeply about and questioning our professional practice and selves in dialogue with significant others'. (p. 107)

This suggests people are not passive observers but active participants who shape and are shaped by the social contexts they inhabit. These ideas are also central to theories of embodiment that so closely align with dance and other creative disciplines that acknowledge the body (Firth, Miller & Loprinzi 2019; Griffith 2021). Our bodies are the vehicles that allow us active participation, but, following Foucault (1977), our bodies are also policed in terms of which bodies are allowed or enabled to be active in various contexts. Reflexivity acknowledges an intimate engagement with the subjective nature of knowledge and the interplay between the observer and the observed (Pithouse-Morgan et al. 2014b).

For Clare and me, the process of reflexive self-reflection and self-analysis has led to a more nuanced understanding of ourselves as co-authors–researchers–educators, our thoughts, our emotions, our behaviours, our experiences and our biases. This is further expounded upon in the final chapter of this work. Moreover, the experience led to personal growth, enhanced emotional intelligence and higher-level decision making. It involved examining personal and mutual beliefs, values, biases and assumptions, as well as considering how they shape the self and the other's perceptions and actions.

The process of reflexive self-study typically involves keeping a reflective journal of events as they occur, engaging in introspection and analysing one's experiences and reactions (Pithouse-Morgan et al. 2014a). Of course, a plethora of transdisciplinary self-study research exists, conducted by university educators, professional artists and designers, and others with a vested interest in the arts, design and digital technologies. These include works involving drawing (Van Laren et al. 2014), poetry and video footage

of poetic performances (Chisanga, Rawlinson, Madi & Sotshangane 2014; Pithouse-Morgan 2021), play scripts and dramaturgical analysis (Meskin, Van der Walt, Scott, De Beer & Pithouse-Morgan 2017) and vignettes (Hiralaal, Matebane & Pithouse-Morgan 2018). No doubt, these works contributed rich insights into reflexive study. However, the difference in our study is that it was a reflexive self-study in reverse. It involved backtracking in an attempt to understand the process and perceive it from creative and critical perspectives. I had to frame and reframe my thinking around these perspectives, understand them and then respond to them accordingly, while Clare prompted deeper interrogation.

Clare urged an explanation of the origins of my presumptions, beliefs and frames of reference – Freire (2012) would refer to Clare as the catalyst for 'conscientisation' – to enable me to an awareness of socially constructed factors influencing my thoughts and behaviours. Through our engagement, she was unintentionally and indirectly supporting a critical reflection on my own decision making, problem solving and contribution towards social change, while I reciprocated a similar effect on her. While I began to perceive understanding through Clare's cognitive lens, she was appreciating discernment through my cognitive insights. It was an insightful exercise to then reframe to consider solutions. What could we do about this challenge? How could we make this better for ourselves and our students in HE? How could we motivate stakeholders to take cognisance of the problems, but more specifically, potential solutions? We stepped back and addressed these questions.

Differently focused questions have the ability to change the entire perspective of a conversation. A different framework affords building on other perspectives. It enabled us to see possibilities over obstacles and to make improvements by reframing past experiences. Through constant feedback during dialogue, we gained diverse perspectives and challenged conventions and assumptions. This increased our self-awareness, personal growth and the development of critical thinking skills, reaffirming the potential of arts-based and embodied performative engagements in humanising research – providing alternatives to tired conventional models that often de-humanise research based in and on human beings and sociocultural phenomena.

The collaborative nature of the engagement (both in the writing of this text and in the making of the performative responses to the data sets initially collected through Dianna's research) reflects the potential of critical thinking as a tool for shared reflection that challenges traditional hierarchies in research practices. This is underpinned by a feminist ethics of reciprocity – really speaking to the question of 'who benefits from the research?' and linked to 'what constitutes ethical research practice?'

These are important questions in a context such as South Africa, with its histories and legacies of exploitation that still persist today and are ever-evident in institutionalised racism, sexism and the exclusions that many students experience in South Africa's HEIs (Swartz, Mahali, Moletsane, Arogundade, Khalema, Cooper & Groenewald 2018). Moreover, precisely because performance is both embodied and collaborative, it offers the potential to undermine and irritate traditional hierarchies related to knowledge production that prioritise 'mind over matter' in the Eurocentric tradition, following Descartes's now well-established 'I think, therefore I am' – a Eurocentric ideal that has and continues to be criticised for its privileging of rationality and intellectualism rooted in Western epistemologies while marginalising and devaluing other ways of knowing, particularly those rooted in embodied experiences and non-Western knowledge systems and epistemologies.

In this engagement, bodies are central to the interrogation and co-construction of knowledge – it is this plurality of embodiments that enables greater depth and breadth within the research – as this offers capacities and potentials for plural perspectives. In a way, a move towards knowledge production as a co-creation enables broader capacities towards necessary decolonisation of and in research praxis. More than this, it challenges traditional notions of the researcher as the 'expert', usurping ideas that knowledge is singularly produced and that words hold more weight than actions. Our bodies are, in this context, sites for knowledge production, collaboration and critique. TOGETHER, it is this context that provided us the space where we could recognise and challenge biases and limiting beliefs within existing HE structures, enabling more informed and conscious decision-making regarding a dire HE system, now faced with intensifying injury.

Chapter 3

Back to context: A system fractured, now grappling

'The South African higher education (HE) system remains severely fractured, still struggling from the effects of [*colonialism and*] apartheid' (Moodley 2022b). Research by scholars such as Tjønneland (2017) reveals that the country's university students fail to complete their studies in the required time, because of [*numerous*] factors impeding their progress, resulting from impoverished educational backgrounds (Moodley 2022b). Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2018) bring to the forefront that:

> More than two decades later, higher education in South Africa continues to be constrained by impediments that can be traced back to apartheid strategies and systems. These include poor undergraduate success and 'throughputs' (particularly among students from underserved and disadvantaged communities); slow, if any, alteration of outdated curricula; higher education staff lacking in requisite graduate qualifications; an aging professoriate; and too few new and young researchers [...] Moreover, the higher education landscape is still shadowed by persistent social divisions and distress rooted in lived experiences of unfairness, oppression, and alienation linked to, among other factors, race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, ability/disability, and nationality. (p. 104)

Boughey and McKenna (2021) describe South African HE as still recovering from 'huge hangovers of their colonial and apartheid pasts'. They continue, referring to HEIs as becoming 'massified' to accommodate students from previously disadvantaged schooling backgrounds (Boughey & McKenna 2021, p. 5). Their reference to 'massified' implies 'the masses' that were deprived, given the selective, preferential, racially privileged and elitist

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mode in which education previously operated. Therefore, it was a question of justice for all towards affirmative action once South Africa became a democracy. This also resonated with The Freedom Charter's principle that '[*t*]he doors of learning should be open to all'. Yet, scholars such as Tjønneland (2017), a senior researcher at the University of Bergen, Norway, reveal that South African university students continue to face critical learning challenges because of a multiplicity of factors.

The impacts of the dual legacies of colonialism and apartheid have resulted in local drives to transform universities through practices of decolonisation and call for pedagogical reform. In the collectively authored 'Studying while black: Race, education and emancipation in South African universities' (Swartz et al. 2018), the authors offer a groundbreaking study that explores how the dual legacies of colonialism and apartheid continue to mediate student experiences (and success) at local universities. In it, they identify systemic and endemic issues within HE in South Africa. From racism on campus and the complexities of gender dynamics to important considerations around language and power, the authors illuminate contemporary student experiences in HE as part of a historical prerogative that never intended for university access to be democratised – it was only designed for an elite few – and this design was never re-figured when, post-1994, HE access was opened to historical minorities.

Contemporary tensions have emerged – most profoundly in 2015 and 2016, when countrywide calls for free, decolonised and quality education nearly brought public tertiary education to a halt, with the #RhodesMustFall and its parallel #FeesMustFall movements erupting. Significantly, these student-led protests indicate the first time in post-apartheid South Africa that all the country's major HEIs were simultaneously involved in what became a nationwide call for reform, centred on principles of decolonisation. The need to decolonise our public university spaces aligns with the need to acknowledge both structural and historical acts of violence that are the foundations of contemporary HE in South Africa. These forms of violence are rooted in the curriculum and the values assigned to certain knowledge, which is often predominantly Eurocentric. This perspective is ultimately exclusionary and does not adequately represent the majority of the university community, nor does it reflect the realities of a post-colonial and post-apartheid context. A more pluralistic model is needed – one that acknowledges post-colonial calls to engage through a politics of location (Spivak, in Harasym 1990).

What #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall revealed, among many issues, is that racism, gender discrimination, sexism and financial access/exclusion are core issues that impact students' abilities to thrive and succeed within

South African HE. Additionally, issues of language 'as a tool of discrimination' (Swartz et al. 2018) have been highlighted and problematised. The issue of language is pertinent here, in the context of this study and its attempts to explore alternative ways of articulation. This is a necessary aspect of decolonial and decolonising education. Following Ngũgĩ" (1981 in Mbembe 2021, p. 57), who advocates for putting 'African languages at the center of its teaching and learning project', the centrality of language in constructions of knowledge production in tertiary education requires much attention in decolonising HE. In a country with 11 official languages, where English and Afrikaans remain 'privileged' in HE, this becomes an important element for consideration as Swartz et al. (2018) acknowledge:

> *Language is never neutral and can be an academic obstacle, heighten racial tension, affect feelings of belonging and become the cause of shame and marginalisation in higher education institutions. (p. 62)*

This bears reference here, as in some ways, our study seeks to destabilise language through its explorations of and with embodiment and the centring of performative responses towards our questions that emerged in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and its uneven impacts on student experiences. In articulating this, we by no means insinuate embodied communication is neutral; rather, it transcends formal written and spoken language, in that it opens up capacities for reading beyond formal language.

It must be acknowledged here that the same pressure points revealed through the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student protests related to race or racism, gender discrimination or sexism, financial access or exclusion and language access or power remain key issues prohibiting student success, per the findings of our study here. These are now, ever evident, through formations and understandings of what has been identified as the 'digital divide' (Penley & Ross 1991), following the onset (or perhaps onslaught?) of the COVID-19 pandemic and the under-engaged move towards entirely online teaching environments.

The COVID-19 pandemic catapulted South African HE into an abrupt pivot to ERL, exacerbating an already fractured education system. Makombe (2021) argues that the COVID-19 pandemic caused havoc to HE, particularly in South Africa. Compounding existing circumstances, ERL further hamstrung students, resulting in nothing short of a learning paralysis (Moodley 2022b). Emergency remote learning became the new form of distance learning, without face-to-face contact between facilitators and learners and without the physical exchange of learning materials. We experienced and observed how some HEIs were expected to innovate on administering assessments and examinations timeously in order to fulfil obligations for the academic calendar. In particular, there was a gaping urgency regarding curriculum stringency. An intimate observation

suggested a tendency towards a productivity model, which prioritised throughput rates over the recognition of being cognisant of the peculiarity of this pandemic. Clearly, some HEIs were ill-prepared to manage the enormity of the situation, with limited technological resources to support virtual learning. Noticeably, the focus was on the assessment 'of' learning rather than the assessment 'for' learning. My constant attention was focused on whether pedagogy was adapting responsively to the current COVID-19 circumstances, particularly within an environment of pre-existing deficit in resources. The prevailing inequalities within HEIs became more pronounced, as the commitment towards an 'enabled' teaching and learning was expected to be maintained.

Embodied disciplines, including the live performing arts, were disproportionately impacted and affected. The prioritisation of more 'serious' science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)-based subjects 'integral' both within basic and higher education structures has sidelined arts- and humanities-based disciplines, most notably in terms of funding models that increasingly divert funding towards STEM subjects. Importantly, we do not mean here to place STEM subjects in a binary to arts- and humanities-based subjects, both are equally important and intersect in vital and creative ways, towards equality in recognising the value of both, as opposed to the pervasive either-or recognition.

It is undeniable that we are experiencing what has been coined 'the digital turn' (Carpo 2017); however, this should not be prioritised at the expense of careful engagement around its politics (evident, for instance, in the digital divide [Penley & Ross 1991]). Into this, funding models dictate, producing an academic value chain (where arts- and humanities-based subjects are progressively more marginalised). Increasing references to 'jobs of the future' being only associated with STEM-based subjects, under the guise of the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution', often ignore the politics of the digital divide (Penley & Ross 1991) that inevitably reconstitute and exacerbate existing issues of access. In the context of South African HE, and generally speaking, recent statistics provided by South Africa's then Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Blade Nzimande, indicate that 70% of university students are funded through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). What this indicates is that the majority of students currently enrolled at South African universities cannot afford independent access. It bears noting here too that NSFAS grants funding in cases where the 'combined gross household income [does] not exceed R350,000 per annum' (Nzimande 2024). What this translates to is that the majority of students currently in South Africa's HE system come from homes and backgrounds where digital technologies (central to rhetoric around the local, and global, importance of STEM-based subjects and the fourth industrial revolution) are not accessible. More so, the

seemingly simple pivot to online teaching in 2020, as a result of international and national 'lockdown' protocols instituted in the wake of COVID-19, requires some reflection and critical engagement.

In 2020, instructions issued to simply 'move online' have had numerous impacts on/within South African HE systems. Some are linked to already existing disparities, while others are more specifically connected to the pandemic panic that saw most of the global population forced into 'remote' and socially distanced living (both not neutral concepts). At the outset of this shift, I remember thinking: What does it mean to teach or deliver embodied and community centred dance practice and praxis online?. Now, I do not mean to undermine the need to 'save lives and livelihoods', as we were often reminded in presidential speeches live-streamed across the various stages of our lockdowns in South Africa; however, I do want to provoke some relatedly critical engagement.

As a person who was, at the time of the initial lockdown, a cultural worker and part of the very large and informal gig-economy that sustains most of South Africa's performing arts outputs, the abrupt lockdown resulted in the sudden loss of work and income and this continued for almost three years – negatively affecting, in particular, the live and embodied performing arts. I will put this into a parallel context, on the one hand, in the realms of sport, a similarly live and embodied set of forms – greater financial support and leeway were provided to enable matches to be played and the capacity to earn a living for sportspeople. On the other hand, theatres were shut down indefinitely and many have since closed their doors, unable to sustain themselves without the capacity to produce and perform live shows. I highlight this not as a way towards negative comparison, but rather to draw links to how 'the performing arts' are valued socially (and by extension academically), as this has a bearing on the expectations to seemingly 'simply move online' (Van Graan 2020).

With this, I return to my initial question, 'What does it mean to teach or deliver embodied and community centred dance practice and praxis on line?' – I cannot say I am able to answer this question affirmatively – and the reasons for this relate to the various questions that branch off and the actual experience of attempting to teach online, in a context of severe limitations (my own included) and with very little support or engagement as to what this has meant in terms of embodied live performance (being delivered through a screen, with spotty Wi-Fi and insufficient data to enable appropriate learning that is discipline sensitive). I consider here too, the need to align with calls for 'quality' education – such 'quality' was severely undermined in this context (for the better part of a three-year cycle – the average minimum time for a diploma or a Bachelor's degree). While being a trend prior to COVID-19, I consider the move to Moodle and being asked

why so few resources were posted to the platform for practical modules based on embodied learning.

At a national level, the then Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology, Blade Nzimande, maintained that 'no student be left behind' (Kgari-Masondo & Mkhabela 2020); however, the statement could not materialise for previously black HEIs. Despite this national utterance, the inequities became more prominent where disadvantaged students were, indeed, left behind. While universities fervently attempted to provide appropriate infrastructure (often falling short), pedagogy should have been adapting responsively and responsibly in enabling adaptive graduates within this unpredictable, volatile learning environment. For this to happen, all pertinent stakeholders needed to engage, not only those within the HE ecosystem but also those on a national level. What became blatant though was the State's own lack of preparedness for a pandemic, resulting in the educators and students becoming the sacrificial lambs in this entire context.

On the global front, the pandemic wreaked havoc. It undoubtedly brought about unprecedented challenges to education systems worldwide, but its impact varied between developed and developing countries. While both faced disruptions, the nature and severity of these interruptions differed significantly, because of uniquely contextualised infrastructure, resources and socioeconomic factors. Moreover, while the pandemic highlighted systemic issues in education systems, both in developed and developing countries, it exposed underlying vulnerabilities, including underinvestment in education, inadequate infrastructure and disparities in access.

In a comprehensive survey of literature (Moodley 2022b), the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic were revealed in different regions around the world. Higher education institutions, particularly in developed contexts worldwide, adjusted remarkably by finding new approaches to adjust to the unannounced move to ERL. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020) reports that the transition to remote learning was calmer where education systems are generally well-established and equipped with advanced technology, compared to their counterparts in developing countries. Universities quickly shifted to already established online platforms, leveraging digital tools and resources to ensure a steady and stable education. Although slight disparities in access to technology and Internet connectivity exacerbated learning in developed countries, the crisis served to merely accentuate the value of inclusivity in education, where the student's holistic well-being takes precedence. Policymakers were quick to recognise the need to address issues of inequity and, in excess, move educators to action to ensure all students have equal opportunities to succeed (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2020).

The literature revealed two pertinent challenges that faced university leadership: the need to provide students with technical support and the training of academics to teach online. The shift to online learning underscored the importance of teacher training in technology integration. While some educators were adept at leveraging digital tools to deliver engaging lessons, others struggled to adapt, leading to inconsistencies in the quality of instruction. Professional development initiatives became crucial in helping teachers develop the necessary skills to effectively facilitate online learning environments. No doubt, in South Africa, and many institutions worldwide, quick plans were implemented to equip academics with online teaching and learning tools (Govender & Rajcoomar 2021; Hedding et al. 2020; Khoza 2020; Makombe 2021; Mpungose 2023). In this volatile climate, effective communication was viewed as essential for optimising learning.

While communication became a critical currency to optimise engagement (South African universities, too, made enormous strides in providing students with both electronic devices and data), the reality, however, from my observation was an ineffective engagement because of other challenges that existed beyond devices, data and online training. It may also have been appropriate for university leadership to consider beyond the devices and 'training' – the actual learning and teaching needs for embodied disciplines. There was the expectation to consider how to provide infrastructure that might safely enable embodied learning beyond the devices and data.

Most profoundly, COVID-19 raised to the fore the inequities prevalent in our local context. The situation called for seismic shifts to accommodate the current reality. Studies throughout sub-Saharan Africa, for example, reveal that HE was bent on bridging the digital divide by providing updated learning resources (Aborode, Anifowoshe, Ifeoluwapo, Iretiayo & Oluwafemi 2020; Odera et al. 2020). The fact is, nevertheless, many of our students live in areas where network access is poor – therefore, regardless of devices and data provisions, access was not always possible. This demonstrated myopic engagement to the detriment of the teaching and learning endeavour. Moreover, other intersecting social and cultural realities were ignored; for instance, many of our women students were also expected to perform house chores and childcare responsibilities as they were confined to their homes, with little regard or appreciation that they were learning online. Many of our students reported their family elders did not accept this new modality of learning, as they observed they would be on their 'devices' for 8 hours a day learning. What then of childcare responsibilities and care of the elderly who had contracted COVID-19 and became gravely ill? Here too, the footprints of patriarchy become more prominent in stereotypical gender roles.

The literature revealed that technologically advanced countries handled the transition to ERL with much ease. In a massive study conducted by Aristovnik, Keržič, Ravšelj, Tomaževič & Umek across 63 countries in 2020, both students and lecturers were largely satisfied with the institutional support they received, particularly the technical support from universities. However, Aristovnik et al. (2020, p. 19) note that even in the most advanced countries, 'students do not have equal opportunities to study online efficiently because of different living conditions, domestic duties, and other factors'. Similarly, progressive countries such as the Netherlands and Italy also experienced challenges (Agasisti & Soncin 2021; De Boer 2021).

Conversely, developing countries faced more acute challenges in transitioning to remote learning, because of limited infrastructure and resources. Many schools lacked basic amenities such as electricity, computers and Internet connectivity, making it nearly impossible to implement online education initiatives (World Bank 2020). The closure of schools disproportionately affected students from vulnerable communities, who rely on schools not only for education but also for access to meals, health care and social support (UNESCO 2020).

In response to these challenges, some developing countries explored alternative modes of education delivery, such as radio broadcasts, television programmes and take-home learning materials. While these initiatives helped mitigate the immediate impact of school closures, they were not without limitations (World Bank 2020). Radio and television broadcasts often lacked interactivity and personalised instruction, making it difficult to cater to diverse learning needs. Additionally, distributing physical learning materials posed logistical challenges, specifically in remote or conflict-affected regions (UNESCO 2020). Students from low-income families or rural areas often lacked the necessary devices or reliable Internet access, hindering their ability to fully participate in remote learning activities (OECD 2020). This digital divide widened the gap in educational attainment, with marginalised students bearing the brunt of the challenges (UNESCO 2020).

Perrotta (2021, p. 35) noted the worsening 'technological and digital gap', while Tripathi and Aziz (2021) highlighted a similar state of affairs in India. Mishra, Gupta and Shree (2020, p. 118) referred to India's challenges as both 'technical and ideological', alluding to the country's historical under-development exacerbating the situation, even resulting in students' 'dejection and despair' (Mishra et al. 2020, p. 113). In addition, Odera et al. (2020) revealed that postgraduate studies across Africa were totally interrupted by a lack of e-learning. The worst affected were students from lower socioeconomic contexts in Africa and Asia, where educational reliance is solely on the government. Aristovnik et al.'s global study (2020) pointed to their shoddy conditions such as underdeveloped computer

skills, high workloads and poor Internet connectivity, unsuitable home environments and insufficient data.

Students' mental and physical well-being were affected by the lockdown. In their 2020 study, Aristovnik et al. found students reported 'boredom, anxiety and frustration' (2020, p. 1). Social disconnection and fear of uncertainty may have contributed to the issue. *Additionally, the stress of needing to 'pass' is significant, especially considering the high university fees. It is important to note that student success rates may be linked to anxiety and frustration. Statistically, failure rates among South African HEIs are estimated at 55%, with black students disproportionately represented in this statistic (Swartz et al. 2018). Moving into ERL with all of its related challenges of access (to data, network connectivity, adequate digital devices and digital literacy) exacerbates this beyond the statistic to a very human frustration, and so, failing is not really an option for many.*

Aslan et al. (2020) attest to stress, anxiety and depression experienced among students. Chinese students similarly experienced 'low learning efficiency and inability to focus for a long time' (Yang & Huang 2021, p. 131). Students in Australia (Le 2020) and the USA (Aucejo et al. 2020) were equally affected. In Hong Kong, students reportedly 'felt under duress due to psychological issues caused by social isolation, insecurity, and anxiety' (Jung et al. 2021, p. 108). Students in India also experienced some degree of mental angst which affected their learning (Mishra et al. 2020). Social deprivation was prevalent among Chinese students (Yang & Huang 2021) and among students in Hong Kong (Jung et al. 2021). In the United Kingdom (UK), students were apprehensive about 'loss of education as an embodied and communal experience' (Eringfeld 2021, p. 146). In Australia, PhD students reported similar unease (Le 2020).

Noteworthy here too is that while students were struggling, lecturers may well have been too [...] lecturers were also experiencing the challenges of trying to adapt to the online environment. As articulated previously, embodied disciplines were quite possibly the most negatively affected – particularly those within the creative and performing arts – to try to provide 'quality education' (more or less possible given the disciplinary needs). This was also exacerbated, in my personal experience, in relation to the seemingly endless semester extensions that had an adverse impact on my own work cycles and workload. There were stretches of weeks, for instance, when my automated screen use report would reflect upwards of 15 hours per day (Monday to Sunday) spent in front of my computer screen (for context, I do not use my work computer for any personal engagement, that is, to watch or stream series or movies). This is by no means a purely individual experience, but what it does indicate in part is the potential for further research related to lecturer experiences as part of the shift to ERL. Our

institution, for instance, kept extending semester time, such that lecturers were constantly on the back foot – because communication around term times and more was not always forthcoming […] and while adaptability is important, what enables this is the capacity to plan carefully.

In the South African context, Mpungose (2023, p. 1) identified the articulation gap, what he refers to as the 'digital divide as the main hindrance to students' effective e-learning'. Digital competencies should have been afforded to students at the school level. However, this deficiency follows students into tertiary learning. This is a legacy problem between basic and higher education, one the then Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, in her annual report noted as a recurring challenge (Kgari-Masondo & Mkhabela 2020). This brought to the forefront the debate of previous white HEIs possessing privileged infrastructure, as compared to previously disadvantaged black HEIs, as well as the disparity of HEIs admitting students from different school quintiles. Khoza (2020) sheds light on the social impact on learning, where students evidently preferred a medium that would allow for at least some learning embedded within social interaction rather than engage in the learning management system. Perhaps WhatsApp presented low-fidelity (lo-fi) engagement, as it uses less data and also forces short-form engagements.

From the above literature, a paucity of studies explore the cognitive or intellectual effects of ERL on university students. Gonzalez et al. (2020) allude to Spanish students' higher performance levels with improved learning strategies. However, the study does not survey whether teaching methodology resulted in improved performance. Although Eringfeld (2021) recommends a blended approach to teaching and learning, he does not touch on whether this type of pedagogy can improve learning. Likewise, Govender and Rajcoomar (2021) merely recommend connectivist and multimodal models but fall short of how these can lead to more effective virtual engagement. While universities responded promptly to administrative and technical challenges, pedagogy needed to respond appropriately and with urgency, to academically enable students already riddled and battered by the legacy hurdles within South Africa's HE landscape.

Surveying the situation in HE both globally and nationally led to a study (Moodley 2022b) of the situational awareness rooted in reality within our own institution. What was revealed was beyond words could describe. The powerfully vivid narrative emanating from the voices of the students was being concealed, disguised or, at best, distorted within the text, lying lifeless, impersonal and latent. I had to transgress my habit of thinking in pursuit of unorthodox methodologies to tell MY 'truth'.

Chapter 4

No words to tell! – shifting the paradigm

> 'I had to submit an exam and there were like chickens that were crying in the background, the baby is crying, my mom is shouting in the background, there is just like a whole lot of distractions.' (Research participant)
>
> 'I think online terrifies people.' (Research participant)[1]

These utterances from university students aptly encapsulated the situation on the ground. Universities, keen on meeting curriculum targets, hurried to enable engagement with students, now in the confinement of their homes during what was called the 'hard lockdown'. This most unexpected disruption of human activities caused by COVID-19 posed a serious threat to health and well-being worldwide. In the first year alone, Europe recorded an estimated 600,000 deaths, while 315,000 deaths were reported in the USA. Despite the fact that infections in Africa were nowhere near as high as in the aforementioned continents, South Africa experienced a sharp increase in COVID-19 cases.

In light of this dire situation, considering the intricate and unpredictable nature of COVID-19, South Africa's president, Cyril Ramaphosa, implemented a Level 5 (complete or hard) lockdown across the country for a duration of 35 days, with the aim of curbing the country's increasing infection rates.

1. These verbatim quotations are cited from raw data retrieved in Moodley's most recent research post-COVID-19, which formed the basis of her 2022b article.

How to cite: Moodley, D with Craighead, C 2025, 'No words to tell! – shifting the paradigm', *Artist or Imposter! Breaking barriers and 'dancing' the data*, AVARSITY Books, Cape Town, pp. 39–46. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2025.BK524.04

This meant everyone was confined to their homes. The hard lockdown impacted all spheres of life. Operationally, the country came to a complete stop, resulting in massive job losses. All educational institutions were closed, and online teaching and learning was quickly implemented in the HE sector to allow students to easily navigate their academic programmes. However, this strategy was far from ideal for most South African students. For those residing on campus, it was detrimental to return home, which is usually to the most remote areas of the nation, with scant material resources and intermittent Internet access.

On-campus learning at least attempted to equalise access to resources for students from various disadvantaged backgrounds. Households served to accommodate entire families, with competition for shared spaces. Within this overcrowded environment, death, illness, violence against women and children, as well as substance abuse and the like were rife. This often resulted in feelings of anger, depression, anxiety and loneliness, in addition to hunger, impatience and more. Remote teaching and learning from home only served to further handicap students. For the majority of South African students, HE significantly enhances the socioeconomic circumstances of students and their families by increasing earning potential and improving job opportunities. Nonetheless, in view of the notable hereditary inequalities in both access to and completion of HE, leading to massive drop-out rates, students would naturally be concerned regarding their academic success, in spite of the now, even more disabling context.

It was here that my focus shifted on how local students were coping with ERL, particularly that the end was not in sight (Moodley 2022b). What interested me was students' experiences on how the shift to this mode of learning affected their learning. Were they embracing this approach, which abruptly transformed from the normal mode of face-to-face or hybrid teaching, now into digital education?

Participants in the study usually have access to all the tools within a specialised lab space, often working collaboratively, rather than in isolation. These workstations serve as hubs for engagement with peers and academics. Often, departments house equipment and tools specific to that department. In the Video Technology department alone, for example, students use professional video cameras, tripods, lights and microphones. At the video post-production facility, students access Apple Mac computers with Adobe Creative Cloud installed, with extra audio and video monitors. The audio recording booth hosts high-quality vocal microphones attached to audio mixers. For programmes in photography, students would be equipped with a professional photographic kit with sophisticated lenses and lights. Virtual reality headsets are connected to

high-end PC workstations. Students enrolled in Fashion, Fine Arts and Jewellery Design make use of 3D printing workstations, producing large-format colour printing on canvas as well as other substrates.

For students enrolled in arts and design disciplines, teaching and learning seeks to induce creative and innovative thinking. They are trained to unlock expressive, imaginative and artistic ideas, often working collaboratively to co-create and engage in immersive practice. Hence, the physical environment plays a significant role in fostering creativity and productivity. Moreover, to optimise such learning, students' mental conditions should be characterised by intense focus, heightened awareness, and a deep sense of enjoyment and fulfilment. In this state, students completely absorb themselves in the task at hand. A conducive environment, free from external disturbances, is required for this kind of deep engagement with the task, promoting creative exploration and innovation. A positive emotional state and a stress-free environment also enhance creativity and imagination. Learning becomes meaningful when such factors are at play. With students enclosed in often rowdy and disruptive home environments, the effectiveness of remote learning became questionable.

More than this, disciplines that rely on principles of embodied engagement (such as performance studies and dance) find precarious placements in an online environment (particularly one largely facilitated via WhatsApp – for reasons already indicated in this study). The impacts of this are various, particularly in relation to a programme that prides itself on 'practice' and the teaching and learning related to embodying various techniques – which would require more time than we were given, to reorganise, revise and reframe our curriculum delivery and greater access to the necessary digital components towards meaningful and effective teaching. MS Teams and WhatsApp are, to put it bluntly – more suited for less practice-based work (which only forms a fraction of our syllabus in the Drama department).

With this said, while there was some very innovative work that emerged from local artists in the online space – this was from artists who have already completed their formal basic training and have found collaborative communities with artists in other disciplines. Collaborative work such as Jigsaw, performed as part of the 2020 virtual National Arts Festival, saw performers James Cunningham and Iain 'EWOK' Robinson team up with filmmaker and editor Karen Logan, animators from Hello Pocket and director Sylvaine Strike. Jigsaw, described as a live digital performance, utilised the Zoom platform and took place across two continents with Cunningham in Dubai and Robinson in Durban. It was one of very few works to emerge that truly embraced the potential of a virtual theatre – and while this was no small feat, the work required access – access to computers,

stable Internet connectivity, sufficient data and network capabilities and specialised software that assisted with the livestream animations and editing (and of course the skills acquired over time, to support the creation and development of the work).

The findings emanating from the study (Moodley 2022b) were so poignant that text alone could not fully capture the gravity of the situation at hand. Highly subjective, sense-based data from my findings revealed the emotionally charged lived realities of students, exposing their alienation and decontextualisation from the learning process. They reported a lack of much-needed motivation from lecturers, deficiency of feedback and support, deprivation of social learning and insufficiency of experiential learning, as well as under-preparedness for assessment of learning. Furthermore, they emphasised how their mental and physical fatigue and their detrimental learning environments were disregarded in the learning process.

As I engaged more in-depth with the analytical process, I became acutely aware of my own practice in pedagogy and linguistics, and naturally influential in my interpretations, I became incrementally disconcerted and unsettled as I struggled to put the findings into words. From my habitual perspectives, my thinking leaned instinctively towards the humanities and social sciences as I began to process the information. However, words cannot always adequately capture experience, and as this research and my initial datasets were based on the experience, I felt somehow let down by words alone. Words can be limiting, and within my textual account I acknowledged an existing void, a surreal in-between space, an incomplete exposition.

Words could not justifiably capture the extensive thickness of their lived experience, and words would be devoid of the power to disrupt their intended audience the way it disturbed me. Staring at the textual rendition of my interpretations for long periods of time, I intermittently wondered whether I was encountering a psychological or emotional barrier to processing the results of the findings. I soon realised what was constraining me were the 'rules' of writing associated with meeting learned and practised institutional requirements. I was unconsciously trying to solve an inner dilemma via the subliminal medium of writing. I was hard-hit with a tough question that plagued my writing paralysis. What is the point here, when the result is incapable of triggering conscience-inducing responses. My gaze inadvertently turned to interrogation of my linear thinking, as it altered towards the matrix of logic that prevailed. It became necessary to transgress my traditional thinking and transcend my disciplinary barriers to venture into unorthodox methodologies.

My consciousness towards the gatekeepers of knowledge then came to the fore – those who act as defenders of scientific rigour and integrity and who impact the dissemination and approval of academic studies. They may come in the form of editorial boards, peer reviewers, funding organisations and institutional ethics committees. Their primary function is to judge quality and ensure research follows the rules of academic significance, ethical behaviour and methodological rigour (Resnik 2013; Savage & Vickers 2009). Gatekeepers have a profound influence on research communities. Their choices could affect academics' financial allocations, career development prospects and publication possibilities. Furthermore, they could prioritise certain disciplines and approaches (Larivière, Haustein & Mongeon 2015). I frame this as a radical inclusivity – particularly in the context of HE – one frequently reliant on hierarchical models for knowledge production and distribution. Perhaps such prejudices and conflicts of interest served as impediments to my thinking (Smith 2006). As I struggled to overcome an overwhelming feeling of being stuck in the writing process, a paradigmatic transition had begun, similar to Arundhati Roy (2003), in *War Talk*:

> [*My*] strategy should not only be to confront [...] to shame [...] to mock. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness – our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we're being brainwashed to believe. (p. 112)

My understanding of how paradigm shifts occur when thoughts transition from words to creative conceptualisations is drawn from various related theories. Kuhn (1962), in *The structure of scientific revolutions* precisely explores such shifts in frameworks when anomalies in the current paradigm mount up and lead to a crisis point. He points to the use of creative conceptualisations as a mechanism to deal with such dilemmas, although challenging existing norms. Paivio's (1971) *Dual coding theory* posits that when verbal and non-verbal channels are used for processing information (i.e. words and images), this enhances deeper symbolic and perceptual meanings using integrated conceptual frameworks. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) bring embodied experiences into the mix, where metaphorical structures are formulated from words to creative formats to render complex ideas more relatable. The generative cycle model (Finke, Ward & Smith 1992) of moving from words to creative conceptualisations resonated with my understanding of how I had come to realise novel insights and solutions. In closest alignment to my aim in producing these creative works, based on my own experience and values, the *transformative learning theory* (Mezirow 1994) points to critical reflections that led to transformative shifts in my conceptual frameworks and reconsideration of findings into new insights.

I felt compelled to seek a more humanising approach to ways of knowing and knowledge-making. This meant an audacious crossing-over –

a complete deconstruction of previous learning and reconstruction around the experience at hand. I had traversed methodological confinements, defied and transcended the borders of 'dictated' and learned boundaries and discovered ways of knowing perhaps less concerned with what I bring as a researcher, and more aligned with inclusivity and how research communities co-produce knowledge. The research involved not only my own experiences but was also significantly shaped by my interactions with students regarding their experiences of studying under COVID-19 conditions. This allowed me to de-centre myself and engage more collaboratively, as research of this nature demands. I felt compelled to seek methodologies that would appropriately amplify their voices rather than solely my own. Consequently, I began to explore the potential of visual and embodied arts-based forms and their approaches, in line with the compelling arguments made by Govinden (2017):

> [… *to expand*] and deepen our understanding of the vast potential in visual methodologies and visual literacies for our critical reflective practice as pedagogues. More crucially, because of and in spite of our history, this is another space where we interrogate our understandings of how to live in the world – not only of how we have value hidden and obscured histories, but of our connectedness with one another. (In Pillay et al. 2017, p. 46)

I had dared to venture into what were, for me, unconventional methodologies and had re-discovered a more accessible form of embodied communication, having the capacity to translate culturally, idiosyncratically and through non-verbal means embedded in an arts-based approach. This was a catalytic moment that resulted in a transdisciplinary shift in my thinking, 'an alignment of disciplines […] trans-sector problem solving leading to a high degree of joint attention […] and co-elaboration of knowledge' (Thomson-Klein 2018, p. 15).

My concern was whether analytic and conventional ways of thinking and knowledge production would be in vain as I faced several critical questions. What right did I have to interfere with creative craftsmanship? I felt like an imposter because I am not an artist. Despite this irrationality, I began to explore alternative conceptualisations to present my findings. This intellectual creativity was both exciting and liberating as I expanded my own possibilities.

Venturing into alternative methodologies, I was able to join a foreign community of knowledge makers, enabling a broader perspective than I alone would have been able to offer. Moreover, wider audiences may encounter the research (through its visual and performative components), thereby offering a greater level of access to the research, outside of conventional academic readers and researchers. Ultimately in breaking away from the conventional approaches of my own disciplinary field, I had

taken a necessary step towards greater creativity and innovation that such research fosters:

> 'Creativity is intelligence having fun.' (Albert Einstein)

What I had discovered was, beyond words, the embodied practice offers ways into, through and around potential understandings and ways of navigating experiences. A central element of dance practice, dance education and dance scholarship are the body and embodiments – though it has been my experience that this has been neglected within the academic landscape. The preference towards disembodied scholarship that prioritises 'mind over matter' has, and continues to, devalue embodiments and the body within academic contexts. When Dianna invited me on board, this was my starting point, to point to and impart the essence of embodied and collaborative learning central to most live performance pedagogies.

I wanted to tell MY truth MY way by revealing the unseen and unfelt aspects of just words. However, the process made me apprehensive. What stance would it take? From a realist perspective (Phillips & Burbules 2000), arts-based methodologies would reveal the truth. From an interpretivist perspective (Berger & Luckmann 1966), arts-based methodologies would yield richer interpretations and enable new meanings and narratives. From a participatory perspective (Aweh, Kemmis & Weeks 1998), marginalised voices could be empowered to be heard. All possibilities considered, I had taken a pragmatic stance (Cherryholmes 1992), merging multiple perspectives to present my findings in a new way, in support of participatory research, to reach audiences that may not ordinarily be accessed. *In this, ethical tensions emerge, while seeking to reveal something beyond words, the foundation of this work rested on student experiences documented in Dianna's previous research – these were not her experiences. Does she become then a conduit for voices that might otherwise go unheard? Or, was she, however unintentionally, speaking on behalf of others? How can you begin to tell your truth, when this is built on the lived realities of students who have entrusted you with their narratives? This ethical dilemma calls for careful self-reflexivity and accountability. Firstly, questions of positionality emerge – as researcher and educator, Dianna's role in framing and interpreting these experiences carries inherent power dynamics. Secondly, there is the risk of appropriation – even with the best intentions such work runs the risk of reinscribing the very hierarchies that participatory research seeks to dismantle through its use of a collective lens rather than a singular one. Ethically too, there is the issue of representation and consent – how do you ensure students' voices remain intentionally authentic, while you also make yourself vulnerable in the learning – and the revelations of your truth (which is not the students' truth). Consider here the question of what the*

research in its initial form did to you – and how you were moved to action through your frustrations.

I experienced a deepening commitment to think with a critical lens of intersecting realities, admittedly uncomfortable to come from a place of doing to undoing. *What does 'undoing' look like in practice? How does it manifest in the ways we teach, assess and engage with performance as research?* Was this the correct approach or paradigm to this research, perhaps not even attempting to 'approach'? *Or, is the very notion of 'correctness' a by-product of institutional structures that demand fixed and static methodologies?* This was a difficult dilemma to conquer, as self-doubt kicked in.

It was upon reflection that I realised I had unconsciously internalised the experience of my research participants first-hand as the 'included middle' (Nicolescu 2010; Riedy, Fam, Ross & Mitchell 2018). Similar to a protean, this embedded knowledge began to move into unknown territory. *But what does it mean to be 'included' in a pedagogical space where hierarchy still exists? Can we, as educators, ever truly dismantle power structures, or do we simply shift them? Perhaps here a shift towards collaborative authorship – with students playing an integral role is more apt? In this way, your engagement is not theirs but co-constituted through theirs.* My frame of reference began to expand and shift towards more vulnerable, transparent methodologies to reveal my subjective 'truth'.

I began to gain confidence as I challenged myself from sometimes not knowing, towards knowing, as I moved into a transformative space, better informed of its utility in the present day. *But how do we hold space for not-knowing in performance education? How do we legitimise uncertainty, improvisation and process as valid forms of knowledge in a system that still prioritises outcomes, assessment rubrics and quantifiable success?*

Was this the correct approach or paradigm to this research, perhaps not even attempting to 'approach'? *Or, is the refusal to 'approach' in conventional terms precisely what is needed to reimagine live performance pedagogy (and by extension to other human and social science pedagogies) in ways that honour its ephemeral, fluid and deeply human nature?*

Chapter 5

Traversing methodological confinements

I quickly realised that I was treading sacred ground. This was paradigm-crossing. I felt euphoric though – vivifying. I was on a road to discovery and I felt energised to expand the range of voices and ways of doing research. However, in so doing, I deliberated towards multiple ways of knowing, but not easily. There was a palpable conflict in trying to ward off any learned theory, belief system and external wisdom. The challenge here was that:

> [...] people perceive reality in different ways, and the resulting worldviews lead to different ways of learning and different ways of knowing. Within the many distinguishable knowledge communities on the globe, people interact according to their perceptions, interpretations and lessons learned and between themselves come to a certain consensus about what is valid or acceptable knowledge. (Haverkort & Reijntjes 2010, p. 12)

No doubt, I felt a sort of creative tension that took effort to channel into more profound understandings. It must have been my intimacy with the process that helped me unconsciously battle against static forms of theory and application. To resist predetermined stages of doing research and give vent to my subjective truth, it became necessary to self-create an enabling mind-space.

My focus often oscillated between methodological concerns and pedagogical (and sociological) issues. Unintentionally at first, and then more consciously as the process of reflection unfolded, I became more mindful of the lived experiences of others, rather than conforming to

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stereotypical legitimacy or validity of research. Ironically, I make academic references around the research process, but this essentially provided me an avenue to contribute towards a body of knowledge, through discourse and practices understood by those who specialise in their respective fields. This is precisely my aim in sharing my experiences – to enhance discourse on paradigms in the humanities and expose the transformative potential of freedom in paradigmatic conceptualisation. I want to emphasise the negative impacts of defending the epistemological sense of paradigm, leading to unnecessary 'paradigm wars' and a misplaced focus on methodology, 'to the detriment of intellectual innovation' (Grey 2010, p. 678). In Chapter 3, we talked at length about the overemphasis on epistemology by gatekeepers who safeguard such methodologies, reaffirming and sustaining them in the HE space. We underscore how these methodological hegemonies hinder research advancement. There are other more important components of research to be considered in order to think transformatively.

This is more easily said than done, considering how various elements within HEIs have been, and still are, largely structured to support conventional models. Curriculum design, for instance, often reflects established paradigms and methodologies, leaving limited room for alternative approaches. Many courses and programmes prioritise traditional research methods and this reinforces the status quo. This is linked to publication norms. Academic journals and publishing houses often have biases – be they implicit or explicit – towards certain, often conventional methodologies or paradigms. This can affect the amount of research challenging the status quo that is allocated space for publication. Expertise and training also play a significant role here. Most faculty members are trained within conventional systems and structures in HE, making it quite challenging to break these norms, especially because this is where their expertise lies.

Another layer here includes research funding and evaluation norms. Funding, research bodies and frameworks often favour projects with tried and tested paradigms and methodologies, thereby perpetuating cycles where unconventional approaches are marginalised by having less resources allocated to them. One need only refer to how long it has taken for HEIs to acknowledge 'creative outputs' as research bearing. In addition, although these now are recognised as research – they often undergo more rigorous review and are subject to greater barriers to being recognised as research than conventional research outputs. This entrenchment of conventional methodologies in HEIs is not just an abstract issue – it has tangible and deeply human consequences, particularly in how we approach teaching, learning and assessment. The rigidity of traditional academic structures often fails to account for the lived realities of students, particularly in times

of crisis. It was during the sudden shift to ERL in 2020 that I was confronted in a visceral way, with how these methodological and institutional frameworks could be limiting – not only in research but also in the act of teaching itself.

I recall, having just begun delivering online classes in early 2020, I was engaged in delivering a module on physical theatre online. Students had a small mark-bearing task to submit a video to a set of performative parameters. Upon receiving the videos, it was immediately clear the domestic situations that our students were in. Most in rural settings, often working 'outside' as there was simply no space 'inside' for free movement […] mostly in community spaces, with people in the background and foreground, and the sounds of life and living in community settings scoring the submissions […] What would cause disequilibrium in current teaching and learning practices – one that would beckon a humanistic, compassionate pedagogy – one that would provoke intellectual and emotive urgency?

Out of this, what has emerged for me in my own practice is a central theme of empathy, and it is this that has also informed the methodological impulses that follow in Chapter 6. In seeking to move towards a more compassionate pedagogy rooted in empathy, we may be able to adopt a more diverse approach to knowledge production that does not treat students (research participants) as 'data sets', but instead, as human beings with their own experiences and knowledges that may be included alongside more conventional approaches. Linking the emergent theme of empathy, what follows in Chapter 6 is a call for a more inclusive approach to knowledge production – and arguably a drive towards knowledge co-production.

This exploration opens avenues towards intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) and intersectional approaches that ultimately offer multifaceted dimensions to research based on human experience and linked capacities to widen the scope of what constitutes 'knowledge' and who is allowed to produce it. Intersectionality refers to intersecting and overlapping systems of oppression and privilege that human beings face – in intersectional theory, there is an emphasis on these systems not being understood in isolation but that they preferably be analysed together, to grasp the full complexities of human experiences and their inherent power dynamics (Crenshaw 1989). In the context of this research, intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) offers a guiding framework towards inclusivity and knowledge co-production with the students (research participants), as it provides ways to understand the inherent power dynamics, socially, as well as those that often sit at the centre of conventional research based on human subjects, while also challenging me to understand my own positionality in this dynamic as Dianna's 'critical friend'.

What intersectionality prompts here is a re-evaluation of conventional research methodologies and their paradigms, at the same time also encouraging researchers to move towards embracing multiple approaches, in service of moving towards more inclusive and democratic approaches to knowledge production within HE in South Africa. This includes incorporating diverse voices, perspectives, methodologies and research processes that may not always follow conventional research hierarchies. This aligns with feminist standpoint theory (Harding 2004), which draws historical influence from Marxist thought. Although a controversial framework largely because of its suggestion that knowledge is socially situated and shaped by power dynamics – we see this as one of its strengths. Particularly in the context of South African HEIs, reverberating with calls to decolonise our institutions, what better way to engage this imperative towards decolonisation than articulating, practicing and understanding knowledge and their productions as social, cultural and political?

Feminist standpoint theory is often used in relation to social justice projects and, therefore, has clear links to the intentions of this monograph and its seeking towards a more compassionate pedagogical framework for South African HEIs. One of the strengths of feminist standpoint theory is its claim of a non-neutral space – opting instead to engage marginalised groups as central to knowledge production (Harding 2004). Feminist standpoint theory places marginalised voices at the centre, and also in the context of this monograph, encourages marginalised methodological approaches that enable greater diversity in terms of research production and knowledge co-production, thus de-centring conventional hierarchies and gatekeeping practices that render some knowledge (and research) superior to others.

In alignment with feminist standpoint theory, we may pose our intentions here, such that we seek to work away from the perceived neutrality of knowledge production, as it is often used in HE; our standpoint here is that any research that relates to human experience (such as this) cannot be neutral by its very human nature. In asking 'How can differences in oppression become political and scientific resources?' (Harding 2004, p. 7), feminist standpoint theory also provides us with ways to think through our intentions here and the need to seek alternative ways of knowledge production that are more inclusive and, ultimately, also rely on compassion. This was a way in which I could influence a wider range of audience and potentially inspire a process of change into thinking through our intentions here and the need to seek alternative ways of more inclusive knowledge production that, eventually, also rely on compassion.

Similar to Alvesson and Sandberg (2014, pp. 967–969), I purport a 'box-breaking' and 'box-transcending' approach to this work. Our research is more novel, forward-looking, socially relevant and transformative. Our

intention is not to challenge the status quo, incite a methodological rebellion or diminish the value of respected existing schools of thought. Instead, we aim to gather alternative perspectives that contribute to progressive thinking. In fact, I built my new research upon those traditional paradigms used as a foundation to add new knowledge (Slife & Williams 1995):

> 'If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.' (Isaac Newton, 1675)

My intention is not to undermine the methodological dominance in the humanities or in the other art forms. I became interested in investigating the potential of ABR methodologies within the humanities, exploring the various qualitative research techniques and how they might advance my knowledge of modern research. To do this, I had to abandon my conventional practice and embrace the unpredictability, discomfort and disruption that comes with 'other' research slants.

In a sense, my box-breaking paradigm became my problem-solving tool. Although I felt inarticulate and inadequately intellectualised to design strategies and determine arts-based methods, tools and techniques, I avoided too much concern over it; otherwise, this would lead precisely to what Ciborra (1998) refers to as the 'crisis' in research. He warns against subscribing to a prescriptive method that leads one to miss out on discovering the close relationship with the object of study, the technology being used as a medium and the excitement of creativity.

Although Langer (1972) pointed out decades ago that art media compensates for the inadequacy of language to capture human experiences, only recently has there been a movement in adopting art-based devices as part of research design (Barone & Eisner 2011; McNiff 2011). I had now begun on a newfound trajectory, a diversion from my usual linear style of presenting my findings, of voicing my truth. My mission was to, somehow, contemplate and explore the most effective means to sensitise mentally fatigued, brain-fogged academics, casualties of the pandemic themselves, to the core concern – the daunting domestic realities of students – to amplify HE discourse around students' learning challenges with ERL.

Arts-based research methodologies, such as visual, performative or collaborative inquiry, have the ability to move and compel audiences to think and engage emotionally (Mitchell 2011). Moreover, these practices place the individual within, allowing for reflexivity, while leaving room for critical analysis, renewal of thought, reformed meaning and transformation (Wicks & Rippin 2010). Schein (2013) affirms how art challenges, upends and encourages the beholder into new perceptions, experiences and ideas. Research methodologies that are arts-based also

address the undercurrents of power in the relationship between the researcher and participants and are particularly helpful in rendering voice to the often sidelined and vulnerable roleplayers (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson 2012).

The true test would be whether this approach would yield more powerful knowledge than that which a skilled writer would obtain. This engagement of my intuition, imagination and creativity was incomparable to any form of textual reflection that would justifiably reflect the veracity of my findings; that would truly echo the gravity of students' lived realities.

A variety of ABR has been used across various disciplines such as poetry, textiles and photography (Armitage 2014; Ray & Smith 2012; Rippin 2013; Shortt 2015; Slutskaya, Simpson & Hughes 2012; Warren 2002). Drawing and knitting have also employed arts-based methodologies (Ahmas & Koivunen 2017; Stiles 2004, 2011, 2014; Vince 1995; Vince & Broussine 1996; Ward & Shortt 2012, 2018), while film, performance and dance studies have used these conduits too (Giersdorf & Wong 2019; Manning, Ross & Schneider 2020; Phelan 1993; Schechner 2020; Wood & Brown 2012). Each technique has started to emphasise the importance of examining fresh philosophical, emotional and practical stances. Undoubtedly, throughout the past 20 years, there has been a continuous increase in the number of research publications that have expanded the arts-based area in research and provided novel approaches to study design and methodology for emerging and existing researchers. However, these studies were intentional, not accidental, unlike my newfound experience. I, on the other hand, present my story from my lived experience and not from practice. *A valid starting point, which is prioritised in the live performing arts, is that experiential engagements are at the heart of our disciplines. In the live performing arts, these experiential engagements are ultimately embodied.*

As we continue on this path towards what for us are alternative, methodological explorations, I am reminded of the words of French artist Henri Matisse (Holtz 2024): 'Creativity takes courage'. This is indeed true – it takes courage to challenge the status quo, question established norms and forge alternative pathways in seeking much-needed transformation within South Africa's HEIs. It is essential to reconsider who is capable of producing knowledge and how this knowledge can be validated, especially in light of current hierarchies that do not represent the majority of the contemporary HEI community.

Chapter 6

Processing alternative methodologies

This chapter marks Dianna's departure from conventional word-based and written research methodologies towards more visual, embodied and participatory approaches – methods that align with arts-based disciplines and prioritise human experience and collaboration. These alternative methodologies challenge traditional hierarchies of knowledge production by prioritising co-creation, reflexivity and lived experience. In this chapter, we introduce the three primary methodological explorations that have anchored Dianna's research and argue for their potential in offering more diverse and inclusive (and arguably thus, humanising) pedagogical influences in South African HE. Here we explore Dianna's initial movement towards visuality in a co-constructed photo-essay with its capacity to transcend conventional language barriers that remain a reality in post-apartheid South Africa. The collaborative photo-essay, developed with a student–participant and co-collaborator, positions visuality as a means of meaning-making, destabilising traditional academic norms towards more inclusive and accessible outputs. Thereafter, we explore Dianna's shift to performance studies for its movement beyond static visuality. Dianna's use of contemporary dance theatre appears to be a natural progression, given her desire to transcend the limitations of word-bound research findings. Through these methodologies, we challenge hierarchical power dynamics inherent in conventional (written) research methods. By centring visual,

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embodied and performative ways of knowing (and representing research), we advocate for a more inclusive and transformative research practice within and in relation to South African HE. Our engagement here intentionally values diverse epistemologies while amplifying the marginalised voices of our students through prioritising relational and participatory engagements in knowledge co-production.

Before venturing further into the various techniques Dianna employed in her research, it is necessary to pause briefly and provide some insights into art-based research (Leavy 2015) and its potential value in contemporary research practices within the social and human sciences. I do this to provide some context for the methods and methodologies Dianna has employed in her study, which I discuss in this chapter. In the introduction to their book titled 'Art-based research in the context of a global pandemic', editors Usva Seregina and Astrid Van den Bossche (2023, p. 2) offer that art-based research 'foregrounds art practice as a way of engaging and exploring research topics via bodily doing and interaction among researchers, participants and the context'. In so doing, they argue it promotes knowledge creation that relies on interaction and also emotional investment within the research context. In this way, art-based research, across all its countless and varied forms, becomes 'especially useful for exploring contexts of crisis and trauma' (Seregina & Van den Bossche 2023, p. 2). Similar to Dianna, Seregina and Van den Bossche articulate their engagements in relation to the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, which spread globally from 2020 for the greater part of the next two and a half years and created conditions of both crisis and trauma. During COVID-19, what had been ordinary living, with its social, experiential and embodied dimensions all but vanished, as people were forced into lockdown and isolation – the so-called new normal found us gathering online using video conferencing software to bring us together, apart. It is worth noting here, as Seregina and Van den Bossche (2023) point out:

> *While the health, social and economic consequences of a pandemic are felt most urgently, outbreaks of infectious diseases have also historically influenced the arts, culture, and literature […] and the arts have thus played an important role in how these outbreaks were [and are] understood, remembered, and nested into the fabric of society. (p. 7)*

This recognition of the centrality of art, in all its myriad forms, as inherently social is significant and echoes the argument made by renowned South African scholar Betty Govinden in her 2020 article titled 'The arts in the time of pandemic'. In this piece, she highlights the various impacts of COVID-19 on the arts. Govinden (2020, p. 149) asks, '[w]hat is the role of the arts […] during this, or any, pandemic?'; a key question this monograph also engages. The perceived value of the arts is often reduced to entertainment, overshadowing their critical sociopolitical significance.

As Govinden (2020) points out, the arts should be recognised as an essential service, particularly in times of crisis. She links this to writer (activist) Arundathi Roy's (2020) 'The pandemic is a portal', which frames the pandemic as an opportunity for radical transformation – a perspective mirrored in this monograph is through Dianna's willingness to explore (and reflect upon her explorations of) artistic methodologies as a means of exploring and engaging her existing research data and her own frustrations at the limitations of words on a page. As Patrica Leavy (2017) offers:

> *Art, at its best, has the potential to be both immediate and lasting. It's immediate insofar as it can grab hold of our attention, provoke us, or help to transport us. Our response may be visceral, emotional, and psychological, before it is intellectual. Art also has the capacity to make long-lasting, deep impressions. Recent research in neuroscience [...] indicates that art may have unmatched potential to promote deep engagement, make lasting impressions, and therefore possess unlimited potential to educate [...] the arts are worthy unto themselves [...] they are also invaluable to research communities across the disciplines. (p. 3)*

With this sentiment, I will offer some more, relatedly, detailed engagement in this chapter around Dianna's research. Dianna's primary approaches here have included a collaborative photo-essay (which borrows some elements from photovoice [Wang & Burris 1997]) alongside venturing into performance studies through contemporary dance theatre – both these methods transcend the conventional written and spoken word with their ability to focus on visual, physical and visceral 'languages' and their capacities to convey complex narratives, emotions and experiences that words alone (written and spoken) may fail to express. More than this, these forms also operate to make research data accessible across different languages – which, in a context such as South Africa, with its 11 official languages (and a myriad other unofficial ones) is arguably a tool towards navigating much broader accessibility of the research (and its data).

Visual methodology: The aesthetic as inquiry

Dianna's research began with an exploration of visual methodology, and this signalled her movement away from traditional written research towards an approach that prioritises visuality and aesthetics as a means of inquiry. This shift signified a deliberate engagement with the visual (in the case of Dianna's research – photography) as a meaning-making tool. Using carefully selected aesthetic markers that would later inform her performance-bearing engagements and what emerged as a 'dancing of the data', Dianna began to explore what for her was unknown territory. Turning to photography and what would develop into a photo-essay eventually, Dianna began by mapping recurring themes and images from her original data set.

She collaboratively engaged with a student (model), in visualising the data, working through the text and generating stark black-and-white images to try and capture the many narratives of fear and desolation that had originally emerged. Visual images convey a meaning that offers views of the world, rendering the world in visual terms, but, as Gillian Rose (2001, p. 6) argues 'this rendering, even by photographs, is never innocent [...] images are never transparent windows on the world [they] interpret the world [displaying] it in very particular ways'.

Importantly, as Brisolara (2014, in Latz & Mulvihill 2017, p. 37) points out: 'While no methodology or method is atheoretical, no methodology or method is inherently feminist [...] photovoice included'. And, while Dianna's engagements here are not, strictly speaking, photovoice, I extend this articulation to include a photo-essay – and Dianna's one included in this manuscript. This is an important recognition, as it points to feminism beyond theoretical notions of equity and equality, and rather towards an embodiment of 'actions aligned with feminism when carrying out a photovoice [or photo-essay] project' (Latz & Mulvihill 2017, p. 37). It is this embodied and active participation that enables the research space to become more collaborative and offers the potential for research participants (as subjects) to become more active in the co-production of knowledge that emerges from the research process in this context. This structure challenges traditional modes of scholarship that situate the researcher as the singular objective knowledge producer while enabling greater diversity in research and knowledge co-production.

For Dianna, photography was an initial mode of inquiry – a means of capturing and curating moments that were visually resonant in ways that her text-based data sets alone could not articulate. These images, marked by intentional compositional choices, gesture towards a methodology that is both visual and embodied. While the photographic engagement in this phase of her research did not yet carry the full weight of performativity it did provide a base aesthetic and conceptual foundation that Dianna carried through into her later explorations with and through dance and choreography through the development of two dance films that sit at the heart of this study.

This methodological progression, from still image to moving body, from visual composition to choreographic structure, demonstrates an evolving engagement with the visual as a performative act. As a creative approach, this methodology broadens the scope of who may be considered knowledge producers and offers capacities in the context of this monograph, for more student-centric approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. Such student-centred approaches are more humanising, insofar as they acknowledge the value of each student's experience and

what they contribute through their active participation in the process(es) of knowledge production. In a context like South Africa, where students are often marginalised and excluded from decision-making processes, this approach encourages them to express their perspectives and experiences in a visually impactful manner. It also creates space for discussion and dialogue, fostering potential solutions to the issues raised by students through their visual explorations.

This also transcends the limitations of language: significantly plausible in a context such as ours, as I have stated previously, where there are 11 official languages, and in a university setting where English is the medium of instruction for a majority of students (and lecturers too), who do not speak or use English as their first language but rather a second, third or fourth language. By enabling other, more visual modes of communication that focus on embodied and experiential outputs, these methods generate the capacity to provide unique and valuable insights into the lived experiences of students and can be used to inform both pedagogical practice and related policies, in order to better support student success in HE.

The National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE), which outlines the government's strategic objectives and priorities for the HE sector in South Africa, may well be enhanced in this way. Insights drawn from student's lived and real-time HE experiences may be used to inform the implementation of strategies aimed at improving access, equity and quality in HE in South Africa. Likewise, our National Qualifications Framework (NQF) that sits as the foundational framework for the development of qualifications and learning pathways in South Africa may well benefit through drawing from student experiences captured through visual methodologies like photography and the photo-essay. Potentially, and very significantly, HE language policies could be revisited, refined or even reframed through insights from students that would likely support a move towards multilingualism within HE (including visual communication into its scope).

■ Performance studies

Dianna had also experimented with performance studies. Disciplines within performance studies, particularly those focused on live performance, continuously explore what it means, or might mean, to be present (Phelan 1993). Following Freire's (2012) humanising impulses through pedagogical intervention towards experiential learning, this presence in live performance offers fertile links towards embodied and arguably more empowering learning. Linked to this, hooks (1994) so eloquently offers:

> *We are all subjects in history. We must return ourselves to a state of embodiment in order to deconstruct the way power has traditionally been orchestrated in the classroom, denying subjectivity to some groups and according to it to others. By recognising subjectivity and recognising the limits of identity, we disrupt that objectification that is so necessary in a culture of domination. (p. 139)*

Drawing on Freire (2012) and linked to Keet, Zinn & Porteus (2009), African American feminist activist and scholar, bell hooks (1994, p. 15), in her Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*, posits what she refers to as an engaged pedagogy that is '[p]rogressive, holistic education [that emphasises] well-being'. hooks advocates for an active commitment to a process of active self-actualisation among teachers, in order to empower students. This sentiment is and has been at the core of my own approaches to teaching since I became a teaching assistant in 2002 and subsequently began lecturing in 2003.*

This practice, for hooks, of an engaged pedagogy, is the practice of freedom through vulnerability. There is no empowerment if we are unable to be vulnerable, and in a holistic model of teaching and learning, this vulnerability is reciprocal. She argues that teachers 'must practice being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body and spirit' (hooks 1994, p. 21). This presence, hooks evokes, is central to live performance pedagogies and praxis.

Much pedagogical scholarship also highlights, with urgency, the need to turn towards 'enfleshed' or 'embodied' pedagogies (Giroux 1997; hooks 1994; McLaren 1995). Importantly, however, meanings of 'embodiment' are not, nor should they be, static. While there is general agreement that in order to identify something as 'embodied', it relies on principles of presence, such that it occurs in real-time and space (Dourish 2001), this does not dictate the parameters of acceptable 'embodiments'.

Peggy Phelan in her seminal work, Unmarked: The politics of performance *(1993, p. 146), explains that '[p]erformance's only life is in the present', that is, while it may be recorded, documented or saved, in doing so, it 'becomes something other than performance' (1993). This too is true of pedagogical practices related to the transfer of performance knowledge through embodied techniques that require a holistic understanding of process-oriented learning that acknowledges and prioritises them. As Judith Hamera (2002, p. 130) offers: '[w]e often speak and write in performance studies about the possibilities for performance restoring the body as a site of knowledge'; at a pragmatic level, a turn towards embodied pedagogies arguably enables greater access to opportunities for meaningful people-centred learning and enables critical communication outside convention. I consider here Elyse Lamm Pineu (2002), who asserts:*

> *[T]he physical body is a site of cultural inscription [...] there is no unmediated or ahistorical body that can stand outside itself [...] and therefore outside its sociocultural situation. (pp. 43–44)*

Relatedly, Pineu (2002) offers a framing of 'the ideological body' – a body marked with, through or by race, class, gender and sexuality (among other social, cultural and political categorisations) that impact how our bodies can become sites of meaning-making that transcend the limitations of conventional language, while also embracing a politics of embodiment. This depiction enables meaningful representations within HE environments, which have historically denied access to diverse and differently marked bodies. As a lecturer in performance studies, I have been privileged to observe and practice, daily, the potentials of embodied learning and teaching in my classroom settings with the students I encounter; similar to Pineu (2002), I am made continually and consciously aware that:

> *An active body learns in ways that are eminently more personal, applicable, critical, and long-lasting than any other teaching method I have tried; bodied ways of knowing and learning which often defy conventional language. (p. 54)*

In this regard, Judith Hamera (2002, p. 130) offers: '[w]e often speak and write in performance studies about the possibilities for performance restoring the body as a site of knowledge'; at a pragmatic level, a turn towards embodied pedagogies arguably enables greater access to opportunities for meaningful learning that is people-centred and enables critical communication outside of convention. I consider here the assertions by Elyse Lamm Pineu (2002) that:

> *[T]he physical body is a site of cultural inscription [...] there is no unmediated or ahistorical body that can stand outside itself [...] and therefore outside its sociocultural situation. (pp. 43–44)*

In contemporary HE, there is often a bias towards intellectual engagements that prioritise critical thought over critical action, 'thereby precluding deeper engagement with topics under investigation' (Wagner & Shahjahan 2015, p. 244). These strategies disempower embodied ways of knowing, doing and being, and arguably buy into what Freire (2012) refers to as 'banking education' – a system whereby learners are treated as repositories of (existing, often too, alien) knowledge, rather than knowledge generators in an active community of knowledge-making and production.

What I mean is that we learn our disciplines in the performing arts through processes of embodiment. Our pedagogical engagements and artistic productions are also embodied and often tacit. For instance, I learn to dance not just by reading, watching and writing about it, but also by doing it – repeatedly. Without practice, I cannot really know the form with any level of complexity and three-dimensionality. There is a bodily intelligence, one that relies on physical action and participatory learning

methods (Boal 1974) that promote simultaneous individual and collective transformation through learning, as an exchange of knowledge, instead of a monolithic imparting of knowledge. As Johnny Saldaña (2011, p. 15) submits, theatre (and I add, by association, performance too) heightens 'the representation and presentation of social life' and so, it has capacities to capture and document 'the stark realities' (2011) of those involved in the performance-making process (regardless of the form or style of performance engaged).

Ours is thus an applied and experiential terrain. It is a think–feel engagement, where presence is an embodied consciousness. This consciousness involves acknowledging shared and individual embodiments and experiences, and that there is value in including everyone and everybody in our shared spaces of teaching and learning. I enter a community of learning and exchange with existing knowledge; discovering ways of being and knowing that may or may not align with my own. Before I intellectualise this, I feel it. Empathy emerges at the core of our embodied learning exchanges. This, more than anything, has promised to be transformative (which is what education seeks to do – is it not?). The possibilities are manifold, though often overlooked in disembodied pedagogies, where knowing is frequently treated as an out-of-body exercise, confined to the neck up, so to speak. This raises the question of how to conduct this type of teaching online, as we were compelled to do in the wake of COVID-19. We are separated by screens, servers, network connectivity, bandwidth, and the very real issue of the 'digital divide' (Penley & Ross 1991).

The importance of empathy towards one another, and also self-empathy (a process that enables empathy towards others), cannot be overstated. Empathy facilitates connection, understanding and belonging based on principles of mutual respect – and these can go a long way in diverse (and historically divided) learning spaces, such as we have inherited in our post-apartheid South Africa. My argument here is that empathy is a tool towards transformation. In South Africa, still scarred by historical fractures and their contemporary manifestations, empathy (real empathy, not sympathy) can foster greater inclusivity and more student-centred engagement. In a country such as South Africa, still grappling with systemic injustices and inequalities, nurturing empathy becomes not solely a pedagogical imperative, but a moral and ethical one too! Importantly, performance studies, and their capacity towards telling real people's stories through performance forms, have the potential to evoke empathy and open up conversation.

Teaching and working in live performance disciplines, life is always ephemeral – the moment of its existence is, simultaneously, the moment of its disappearance. It exists, experientially, in the present and has capacities

to represent the present, past and future. As such, there is often tension in a forward-moving world (and all the accompanying technological associations). To clarify, live performance as a process or product does not refute or deny technology, rather, its use of technology is interwoven with the embodied life. It is a symbiotic relationship that weaves technological potential and possibilities with the embodied life.

Following Grotowski (1975), the performer–spectator relationship is central here. It is this live, present, experiential exchange that renders our live disciplines distinct from those digital and recorded incarnations. Live performance opens up possibilities towards engaging people's lives and lived experiences in embodied and actively present ways because it requires the co-presence of the performer–spectator in order to be realised.

Remove the bodies, both audience and performers, and what you have is not just nothing, but it is not a live performance either. Perhaps my assertions here are in lieu of my long history and interaction with dance practice and dance studies and its reverence for the body [...] this living thing that is simultaneously subject and object in many live performance works [...] this living thing that straddles discourse, biology and identity... this living thing that we all inhabit [...] that houses our mind, which in academia is often prioritised [...] 'mind over matter' – so the saying goes [...] the body is matter [...] and to follow Butler (1993), it does indeed matter! Perhaps what is needed, is a broader engagement of the body as a site of or for difference and inclusion, in order to truly transform and humanise HE in South Africa. Our bodies are not neutral, but they are certainly not silent either, and as such, acknowledging this may be a step towards pedagogies that consider embodiments as fertile sites for knowledge production within the HE environment.

Living and working remotely has all but decimated the live performance and events industry, not only in South Africa but internationally too. Perhaps COVID-19 was a time to reflect on what to do with our inherited legacies of what constitutes live performance, where it can happen, who can make it and what it can be about. Quite possibly, part of the challenge too, is to reinstate the practices of performance as critical – a kind of embodied critique – something that transcends the capital imprisonment of entertainment. Upon reflection, how I understand and approach teaching and learning is similar to how I engage and approach live performance in practice. Both disciplines rely on communication, they depend on community and are engaged experientially. Ultimately, they are process-bearing. Both are powerfully transformative, and both too are elevated through embodiment.

It is this embodied and transformative latency I have found myself seeking in my online teaching and learning engagements, particularly under

conditions of emergency remote teaching (ERT) delivery. Digital illiteracies, both among students and staff, have undeniably made the transition a jagged one; these contexts cannot be dismissed. The capacity, for instance, to have a digital face-to-face as opposed to a WhatsApp chat, is vastly different and warrants differential results. In a context where data is expensive, bandwidth spotty and access to smart devices are not a given, I have found myself teaching to blank screens and muted microphones, or via text and voice notes on WhatsApp, with little response or interactivity. I crave the interactivity of life – I am grateful too that we have been able to return to this, albeit slowly. Perhaps too, it is worth noting video conferencing tools and social media applications were not designed to mediate teaching or learning in practice-led live performance disciplines, and while they were the tools we were forced to turn to under our recent pandemic state, it does not mean we cannot acknowledge their intended function and design and the inefficiencies in capacitating embodied engagement so central to performance studies.

Mexican–American performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña argues that, 'Traditionally, the human body, our body, not the stage, is our true site for creation and materia prima [...] our body remains the matrix of the piece' (2005, p. 23). This recognition is important in the context of this discourse and its focus on humanising pedagogy, especially considering the impact of COVID-19 on our teaching and learning strategies and delivery methods.

Contemporary dance theatre

Lastly, Dianna explored contemporary dance theatre, a genre of modern dance that prioritises embodiment and abstract storytelling through movement, while also incorporating other elements of theatre such as lighting, costume and set. Contemporary dance theatre is characterised by its fluid and improvisational style, infused with modern dance techniques. As Mark Fleishman (1997, p. 201) observes, improvisation is an essentially physical process 'in which gesture exists before and alongside words as an independent sign system'. Our observations of the world around us, when engaged in and through improvisation, warrant an understanding that we respond to these elements not only in or with the mind but in and through the body. It is a popular dance style in post-apartheid South Africa for its expressive nature that defies spoken language and prompts empathy, enabling inclusions and fusions with other local dance forms and styles – so also becomes a vehicle for engaging some contemporary living complexities. In the context of this study, this embodied form becomes a powerful tool for the exploration of the

research data and enables relatedly layered and open responses and readings. One of my methodologies, contemporary dance theatre, becomes a way of exploring complex themes while creating a visceral connection between the research data and its outputs.

Contemporary dance theatre, as a mode of embodied expression, enables creative expression and knowledge production and communication that centres the performer (it is their bodies that remain the primary sites through which meaning is made, shaped, formed and delivered). That said, the process of creating and generating performance is always collaborative, even in instances of solo performance. This collaborative nature of performance-making involves not only creators who use forms like contemporary dance theatre to shape meaning and tell stories but also audience members who complete the cycles of interpretation and meaning-making. Contemporary dance theatre is collaborative and participatory and, therefore, also has the potential to acknowledge hierarchies within knowledge production and move towards a more de-centred engagement of knowledge co-production that involves and actively includes students as research participants. Such strategies also provide powerful possibilities for creative interpretation, whereby abstract concepts are transformed into tangible and embodied movement sequences and choreographic motifs (as can be seen in the examples used in this particular study). This process of interpretation adds layers of meaning and depth to the research because audiences who engage in the research are also encouraged to bring their own perspectives to the fore. In this way, knowledge production and co-production become less linear and more networked, thereby dismantling conventional hierarchies in favour of more inclusive and diverse approaches and perspectives.

A further strength of such an approach to data analysis, through embodied performance forms such as contemporary dance theatre, is it allows for explorations of narrative structures and storytelling (as in the two examples provided in this monograph). By threading together various student responses in the original dataset, into a cohesive performance response, both researchers and audiences enter a meaning-making space open to interpretation, arguably its greatest strength towards its capabilities for a more humanising pedagogical approach and engagement.

Contemporary dance theatre as a sub-set of performance studies is a dynamic and ultimately very human (because it is embodied) methodological approach that unearths the dynamic abilities of the research narratives in this study. Through embodied expression, creative interpretation, narrative exploration and audience engagement such an approach offers a dynamic, embodied and three-dimensional approach that centres empathy and

embodiment, thereby offering alternative ways of being or knowing, and understanding. The strength of such an approach is its capacity towards enabling and empowering all participants within the research process (researchers, participants, as well as those who encounter the research as audience members).

Chapter 7

Students' voices: Graphic revelations

In this chapter, I provide e-links to videos of three pieces in the footnotes, directed and choreographed or co-choreographed by myself, to invite the reader into a first-hand experience of the findings – an attempt to deliberately draw the reader into an intimate encounter with students, and in a way, liberating each reader into personalised, subjective interpretations, thereby inducing peculiar discourses. I merely describe explicit revelations of these arts-based excerpts; Clare further elucidates her analyses, depicting the artist's perspective of the narrative using still picture excerpts from the videos. The subsequent chapter details the textual analysis of the findings and conclusions drawn thereof.

The first production titled 'Everybody's lessoning, nobody's listening![2] The new (ab)normal in post-pandemic South African higher education' is a multisensory, interdisciplinary aide-mémoire of the exasperating impact of COVID-19 on students' learning.

What led you to adopt the photo-essay in communicating your findings?

I discovered a visual language using an arts-based tool – the photo-essay – to effectively convey, 'a universal language we all speak, [...] photos

2. The video, available here [https://openscholar.dut.ac.za/handle/10321/6179] originally used song titled 'Anyone' by Demi Levato, reproduced by Ricky Braddy, licensed under SAMRO and used in the research phase. A substituted track 'Classical Piano' by Audio Library Beats (No Copyright Background Music) / 'Descent into Hell (Live)' is used here, due to licensing constraints.

How to cite: Moodley, D with Craighead, C 2025, 'Students' voices: Graphic revelations', *Artist or Imposter! Breaking barriers and 'dancing' the data*, AVARSITY Books, Cape Town, pp. 65–102. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2025.BK524.07

communicate so much, in an instant, without words […] We think in still images; our memory is formed by them […] a moving powerful display […] a strong image, lingering' (Simon 2019, p. 1). In addition, my use of the photo-essay conveyed the 'explanatory power of critical theory with creative, specific, aesthetically engaging and personal examples of the ideas at work – in cultural contexts, in practice, in people's lives' (Jones & Pruyn 2018, p. 4).

Dianna's use of photography as a story-telling technique is a testament to the power of visual methodologies. It is worth engaging here, if only briefly. Photography serves a dual function – both as a means of documenting the data and also, as a tool for visual analysis. This allows for experiential imaging of the initial, original research findings. As the saying goes, 'a picture is worth a thousand words' – a sentiment that highlights how visual representation offers layers of meaning that conventional word-based texts alone may not fully capture.

Given that you do not have formal photography training, how did you approach the creative and methodological processes of conceptualising and composing your images?

I merely directed the photography with subtle inner observations, intuition being my compass, to capture the terror and trauma of students pressured by a strange pedagogy while suffocating under vexing circumstances. I had, introspectively, responded to my gut (Brown 2019) in simulating modestly resourced, site-specific, visual pieces, which generated some editing and re-editing ideas, not pre-planned. The simulation served to offer a non-invasive glance into a typical homestead of a South African student, only this time, during the hard lockdown. The technicalities of the photoshoot unravelled organically within the process itself. Manipulation of lighting, camera-positioning, and model and prop re-posturing was deliberate in capturing the plight of the student. Colourless graphics depicted the bleak confinement, isolation and abandonment of losing a loved one to the devastating pandemic. A penetrating close-up of the student was intended to immediately engage and intrigue the beholder, while the carefully selected musical accompaniment and lyrics would purposefully evoke a powerfully haunting cry, long after the curtain closes (Daykin, De Viggiani, Monarty & Pilkington 2017).

Photographs can convey a range of emotions and multiple perspectives contingent on the frame of the image and who decides on what is included or excluded (Latz et al. 2016; Wang & Burris 1997). In this study, Dianna utilises the photo-essay format, working in collaboration with the model and photographer who agreed to participate in the project and worked closely with Dianna in setting up the shots to capture the expressed

experiences of the students who participated in the original study (their expressions included as captions here). Together both Dianna and the students bring new dimensions to the data, the curated photographic images paired with captions drawn from student responses encourage broader access and a more visceral representation of the socioeconomic realities of the majority of students who participated in the study (and who represent the broader student body at the university where we work.

Moreover, these representations are also open to interpretation by the viewer (Rania, Migliorini, Rebora & Cardinali 2015) and in this way, enable the written data a much wider readership. I note this here, particularly in a context where spoken communication is often negotiated through access to and proficiency in English (which as noted afore, is often not the 'mother tongue' of our student body). Representing the data in this way is not closed off to a readership who speak or read in a specific language, therefore, such techniques and strategies, in some ways, create the potential for more accessible ways of representing and presenting the data for this study.

This work makes a novel contribution to HE, engaging in an innovative methodological tool – the photo-essay. It also makes a profound theoretical and epistemological contribution to a newfound understanding of social constructivism, emphasising how individuals (in this case, all the research participants), through their interaction with others and their environment, actively construct knowledge and understanding (Saleem, Kausar & Deeba 2021). At its core, social constructivism posits that knowledge is not an objective reality waiting to be discovered; rather, it is a subjective interpretation of experiences shaped by one's cultural and social context. In this way, by internalising the experiences of the students, I reflected their experiences in new ways of knowing. Rather than viewing students as passive providers of knowledge, I actively immersed myself and collaborated in inquiry-based learning to foster an opportunity for students to construct their own understanding through dialogue and exploration, but more than that, to also construct knowledge collectively. This was a deep learning experience for all roleplayers within the research development – a powerful framework for internalising lived encounters.

This production contributed towards the audience nominating it as the best oral presentation award at the 33rd Barcelona International Conference on Education, Humanities, Social Sciences and Arts – Excellence in Research and Innovation in 2021. The title of the presentation, 'Academic terrorism: The new (ab)normal in post-COVID higher education in South Africa', was a graphic manifestation of students as agents of their own 'true' message – a message that would have been thwarted in text.

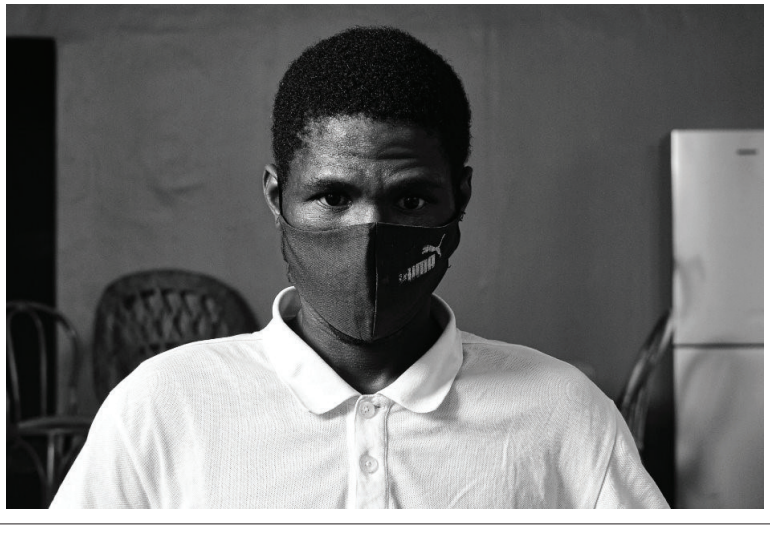
There was a tangible hush, an emotionally charged silence from the staggered conference audience, followed by a feverish utterance from one of the attendees:

> It reminds me of [*Sipho*], our student who committed suicide at the residence and his body left unnoticed for days [*hesitation*]. Sorry, Dr Moodley. I don't even want to talk about it (Conference delegate, 2021).

And then, a robust scholarly interchange ensued, transforming 'unscientific' knowledge into a tacit, conscience-disturbing catalyst.

The still pictures (refer to Figures 7.1 to 7.12), extracted from the video, are accompanied by direct utterances from students (Moodley 2022b) attempting to capture the nuances in words. The annotations on the first and last frames succinctly convey my overarching message in producing this video – to bring to attention that the plight of students within their respective circumstances is often ignored while teaching and learning proceeds anesthetised to the cry for help. In the closing annotation, there is an inherent appeal for supreme involvement from a non-human realm – a desolate call for altruistic intervention.

> I can't even connect to my colleagues because where they are staying, you need to go to a certain point for the network. (Moodley 2022b, p. 121)



Source: Moodley, DL 2022b, 'Post COVID-19: The new (ab)normal in South African higher education – Challenges with emergency remote learning', *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 120. https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v4i1.1008.

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FIGURE 7.1: Nobody is listening!

Source: Moodley, DL 2022b, 'Post COVID-19: The new (ab)normal in South African higher education – Challenges with emergency remote learning', *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 120. https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v4i1.1008.
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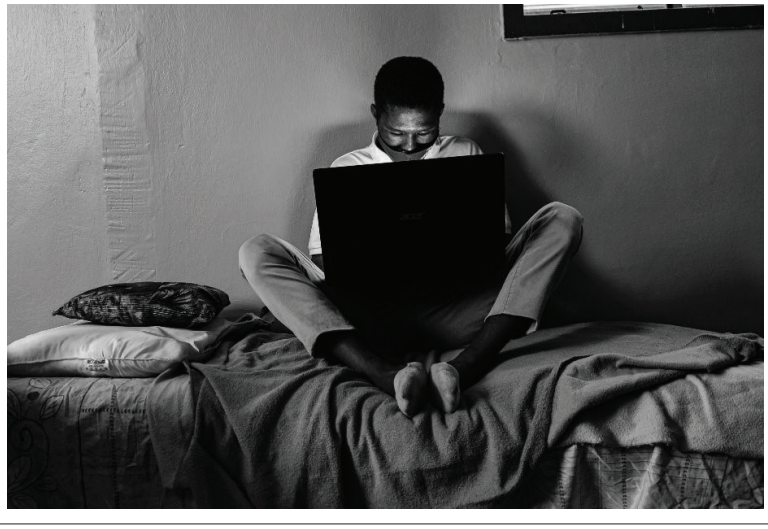
FIGURE 7.2: It gets a bit frightening when you are doing something alone.



Source: Moodley, DL 2022b, 'Post COVID-19: The new (ab)normal in South African higher education – Challenges with emergency remote learning', *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 121. https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v4i1.1008.
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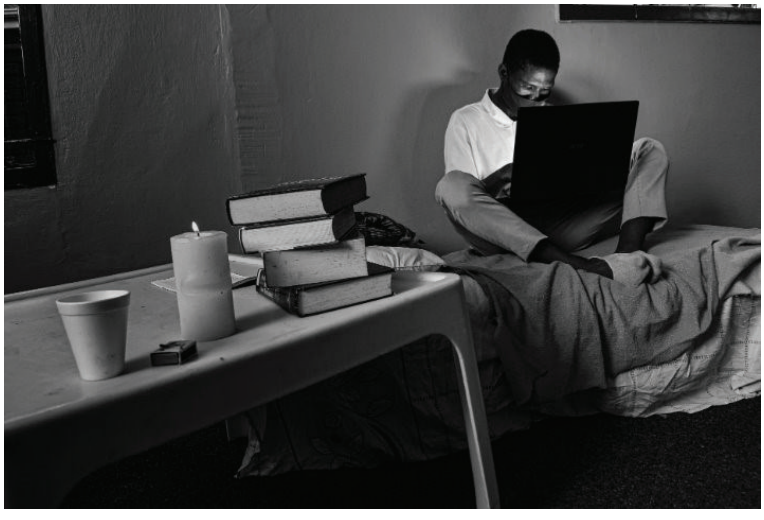
FIGURE 7.3: Students would literally cry [...] I cannot even study at home.

Source: Moodley, DL 2022b, 'Post COVID-19: The new (ab)normal in South African higher education – Challenges with emergency remote learning', *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 121. https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v4i1.1008.

FIGURE 7.4: It is a bit challenging [...] because you still have to do house chores right after you finish or start your class.

Source: Moodley, DL 2022b, 'Post COVID-19: The new (ab)normal in South African higher education – Challenges with emergency remote learning', *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 119. https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v4i1.1008.

Figure 7.5: It stresses me. I am already rattled up.



Source: Moodley, DL 2022b, 'Post COVID-19: The new (ab)normal in South African higher education – Challenges with emergency remote learning', *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 121. https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v4i1.1008.
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FIGURE 7.6: [...] it is non-stop working [...] I feel like we do not get much time to just breathe.

Source: Moodley, DL 2022b, 'Post COVID-19: The new (ab)normal in South African higher education – Challenges with emergency remote learning', *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 118, 119. https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v4i1.1008.
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FIGURE 7.7: Most of the time, I fall asleep [...] I do not enjoy learning. You are no longer motivated [...] you just fall off to sleep.

Source: Moodley, DL 2022b, 'Post COVID-19: The new (ab)normal in South African higher education – Challenges with emergency remote learning', *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 121. https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v4i1.1008.
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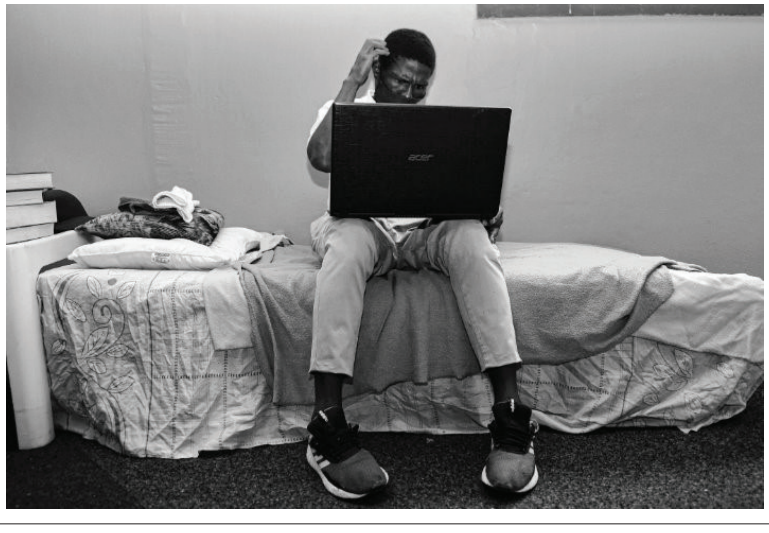
FIGURE 7.8: Imagine being a [...] student, having to work extra time, [we] were not allowed to be on campus on weekends and we were not allowed to be on campus after hours.



Source: Moodley, DL 2022b, 'Post COVID-19: The new (ab)normal in South African higher education – Challenges with emergency remote learning', *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 118. https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v4i1.1008.
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FIGURE 7.9: You have to read on your own, and then you cannot ask anyone [...] That puts speed bumps in the whole learning process.

Source: Moodley, DL 2022b, 'Post COVID-19: The new (ab)normal in South African higher education – Challenges with emergency remote learning', *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 112–125. https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v4i1.1008.
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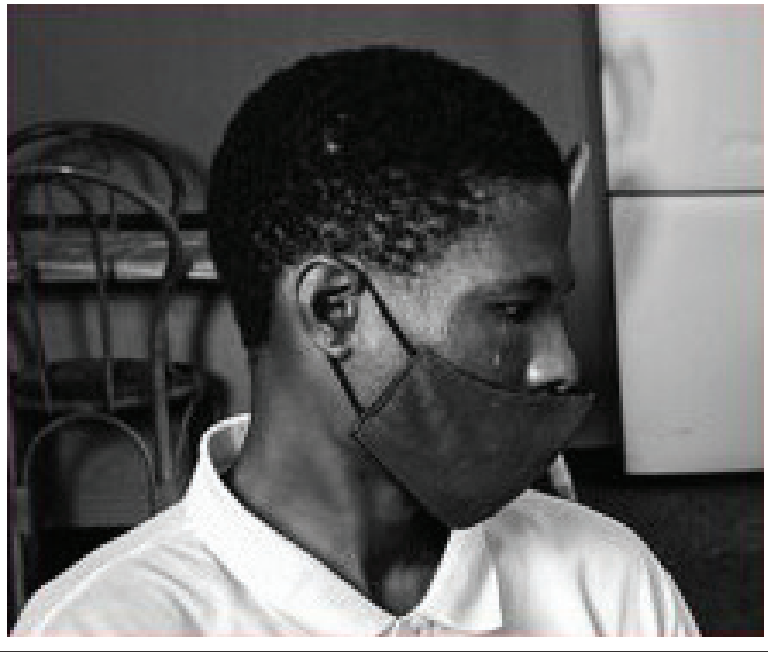
FIGURE 7.10: It also affects [us] mentally and we end up going through a lot.



Source: Moodley, DL 2022b, 'Post COVID-19: The new (ab)normal in South African higher education – Challenges with emergency remote learning', *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 121. https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v4i1.1008.
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FIGURE 7.11: [...] you cannot go on with your schoolwork.

Source: Moodley, DL 2022b, 'Post COVID-19: The new (ab)normal in South African higher education – Challenges with emergency remote learning', *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 120. https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v4i1.1008.
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FIGURE 7.12: It was tough [...] and I had to save data.

While the photo-essay format that Dianna used initially provides a visually impactful representation of the research data, it still remains a fixed visual record – a curated selection of still images and accompanying text. The experiential and embodied nature of live performance praxis offered Dianna an opportunity to extend this engagement further. Rather than remaining within the bounded frames of photography, she ventured to explore how the fluidity of movement could allow for a more responsive, interpretative engagement with the research findings.

What was your role in the creative and production processes of this video,[3] *Dianna?*

I directed and co-choreographed this production, titled 'Ngomso lam – my future is uncertain!'

3. The video, available here, [https://openscholar.dut.ac.za/handle/10321/6179] originally used song titled 'We Ngomoso Lam' by Cama Gwini, licensed under SAMRO and used in the research phase. A substituted copyright-free track 'Despair/Minimalistic Sad Piano' by SoundAudio is used here, due to licensing constraints.

What led you to determine that this medium was the most epistemologically and aesthetically appropriate form for a more 'authentic' representation or communication of your research findings?

Only recently have researchers external to dance communities started adopting dance as a research tool (Biehl-Missal & Springborg 2015). I embarked on:

> [*A*] digital, interdisciplinary contemporary dance piece, highlighting the psycho-social impact of COVID-19 on students' remote online learning. It invites the viewer to experience students' difficulties in adapting to ERL and calls for academics to consider how its current practice marginalises students through inconsiderate ways of learning that play ignorant to students' lived experiences. The performance is infused with imagery and metaphors, highlighting how students [*are*] forced to adapt (or die) in their studies. It is a cry [, *provoking academics, and indeed South African HE on the whole*,] into a brutal, self-conscious introspect and a humanistic response, a radical paradigm shift towards social justice for a post-conflict South African student body. This is a call for an emancipatory approach to teaching and learning – critical humanising pedagogy (2022, Abstract from proceedings – Annual Research Conference and DigiFest, Durban)

As the research locates itself in student experiences, the experiential nature of live performance praxis and embodiment arguably offered Dianna a point of entry here, as a collaborator in the development of the performance, as it is collectively made and collaboratively produced. The development of a choreographed or danced response to the findings offers the potential for interpretation and response that move beyond the stasis of words. The think–feel synergies that emerge are evident in both the response to and interpretation of the findings. Furthermore, they offer multiple potential readings of the findings presented. The style and form of dance chosen are broadly situated within movement praxis, specifically in relation to a broad range of contemporary dance descriptions or explanations.

Contemporary dance in South Africa is relatively new, emerging in the 1970s largely in response to the disenfranchisements of apartheid in the country (Katrak 2021). Katrak so poignantly exhibits the power of Jay Pather's use of 'body politics' to underscore the multiple intersectionalities embedded within South Africa's undeniable pressures resulting from its history as a nation, tackling issues of racism, decolonisation and deteriorating indigenous cultures in particular. In fact, Clare's (2006) study of projects curated by Jay Pather, accentuates how the works prompt:

> [...] critical questioning around the impact of South Africa's historical segregations, and their influence upon contemporary (South African) society [*and*] societies [*enabling reflections on*] 'homespaces' as these relate to access to and ownership of private and public spaces and how this impacts cultural inter(re)actions. (Craighead 2006, p. iv)

Contemporary dance is a form based on embodiment and identities (discursively and materially, as well as formally), so potently evident in South African choreographer, curator and activist Jay Pather's multi-faceted creations in dance drama and dance theatre. What is demonstrated here is the use of responsive methodology, a set of dance techniques, understood in context, unlike traditional classical forms that offer an imposed set of gestural meanings. This form appeals to the audience to feel, before intellectualising, moreover, because it is an abstract form, it invites multiple and diverse meanings, thus enabling an enriching of the research findings that words might not be able to capture. This is precisely the kind of platform needed to respond innovatively to disciplinary constraints that limit open critique and, hence, became very pertinent to the aim of this monograph, to bravely traverse into more effective methodologies to engage with the plight of our university students. In this way, I re-situated the research data in new, re-imagined spaces in order to appeal to shared humanity to those oblivious or ignorant of the lived realities surrounding them.

Furthermore, in relation to live performance disciplines and pedagogies, there is an inherent engagement with embodiments – arguably no more so than in dance and other related physical performance disciplines. In this light, it made sense thus to engage in ways that encourage embodiment, and so the possibility of being able to explore, interpret and deliver the data through dance became an appealing outlet.

What is immediately noticeable in this work is Dianna's use of similar aesthetics seen in the framing of the work, the use of black and white as the (non)colour palette, a single participant–performer in a sparse and under-resourced setting. These techniques enabled Dianna, the performer and the students to contextualise and, in a sense too, embody the fullness of the multiple truths that emanated from the original research. The student's voices here prompting action and reflection beyond their experiences – prompting Dianna to reflect on her own responses to those of the students – how to get these stories 'out there' to 'speak truth to power' in a way and promote much-needed change in South African HEIs.

The use of sound here is also a noticeable link – melancholic, with lyrics that support the mood of the whole. Dianna's clever titles are also a point of linkage that situates the 'I' in the representation of students' stories and experiences in the data collected for the study. In moving from still frame photography to filmed 3D performance, presented via a 2D screen, it is noticeable that Dianna still maintains a sense of similarity in her direction of the camera angles, as well as the proximal framing of the participant–performer in each of the works engaged.

'Ngomso lam – my future is uncertain!' involved a process of Dianna working with Sibahle, a university graduate from the Drama and Production Studies Department where I work, to develop a solo work in response to data collected from students in the Faculty of Arts and Design, describing their experiences of ERT under various COVID-19 lockdown states in South Africa.

In seeking to express the fullness of the data and student experiences, it became apparent very early on that words alone were inadequate. Moreover, in working with students to collect the data, it seemed a natural progression that they be involved in its outputs. Notably here, Dianna used purposive selection with Sibahle, a graduate from the institution researched; she was in the third year of her National Diploma in Drama in 2020 when the world was plunged into chaos because of COVID-19 and its pandemic status. This positions her in a place of knowing and feeling. The performance exudes this authenticity.

The work that emerged, 'Ngomso lam – my future is uncertain!', offers a solo dance performance, performed by Sibahle and shot in black-and-white. The style of dance presented draws from various contemporary dance techniques, also used as profound storytelling performance forms on our African continent (Glasser 2022; Sichel 2018). The choice to engage in a solo, digital performance also deliberately aligns with the emerging data around forced isolation and its consequences under COVID-19 lockdowns. The live performing arts were forced to find ways to reconcile working in the digital domain as our theatres and community performance spaces were shut down and gatherings outside of religious ones (and some sporting events) were prohibited.

In this solo, Sibahle, a young black South African woman, is seen initially enveloped in darkness (Figure 7.13).

She kneels behind her laptop – the glow of the screen illuminating her torso and outstretched arms. A single candle with a flickering flame on the left-hand side of her laptop screen comes into focus, its fragility immediately apparent. The sparse setting here and enveloping darkness with the dominance of the laptop and the solo dancer speak volumes in relation to the forced isolation and resulting loneliness of many that emerged in relation to the COVID-19 global pandemic. For many, their electronic devices (represented here by the laptop) became their only potential connection to the world outside (provided they had and could continue to afford sufficient data).

Notably, too, in this work, Sibahle, a young black woman, is consumed by the multiple roles that she must fulfil in the private space of isolation that COVID-19 lockdowns forced us into – our homes. Her role as a student is

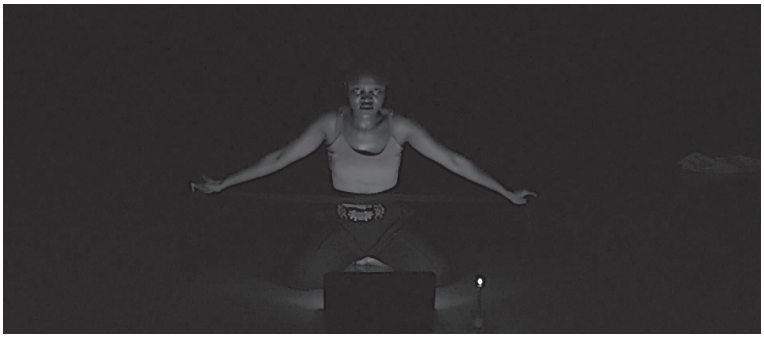

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FIGURE 7.13: Enveloped in darkness.

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FIGURE 7.14: Desperation, isolation and anxiety.

seen here alongside her role as a 'woman' within a conventional household setting, as well as her role as a worker in South Africa's large informal economy. Throughout the work, we see her negotiate the demands of these three roles, and what emerges is a depiction of desperation, isolation and anxiety, revealed through the movement quality with its sharp and clipped form, accompanied by Sibahle's heightened facial expression (Figure 7.14).

This comes to represent the findings of the data collected from students regarding their learning experiences under the height of COVID-19 lockdown pressures in South Africa.

What informed your selection of this particular song in your composition of the work; how does it contribute to the meaning-making processes within your research inquiry?

I purposefully chose the musical accompaniment. Cama Gwini's lively African song 'Ngomiso lam' features The Soil, a well-known a cappella group from South Africa. The English translation of the title, 'Ngomiso lam', is 'My promise'. The heartfelt lyrics, harmonious melodies and drumbeat are palpable and contagious. African traditional music is incorporated into the song in the form of call-and-response techniques, vocal chants and rhythmic drum patterns. These components combine to provide a vibrant and dynamic aural landscape that both modernises and embodies African musical traditions. The purpose here was to appeal to an inclusive audience. Lyrically, 'Ngomiso lam' focuses on themes of love, harmony and commitments made. The song leads to interpretations of the value of keeping one's word and the significance of trust and commitment in relationships.

When 'Ngomiso lam' begins to play, Sibahle moves jerkily, side to side – an internal tug-of-war expressed outwardly. She is pulled in opposite directions simultaneously, and there is a mood of dis-ease (Figure 7.15).

She picks up a black piece of cloth that is neatly laid on the ground before her and uses it to cover her shoulders like a shawl. This represents both comfort for now but mourning later – and the choreography vacillates between these two states. The expression of worry on her face (Figure 7.16) is highlighted by the glow from the laptop screen as she leans forward, framing her face with her hands, leaning on her elbows – reading from the screen.

She is restless, her movements, quick and clipped – not quite finished – giving a frenetic quality to the work. Unable to focus, darting looks from the screen and then over her shoulder and back again, she cannot seem to settle (Figure 7.17). Anxiety permeates and an overwhelming sense of isolation is felt.

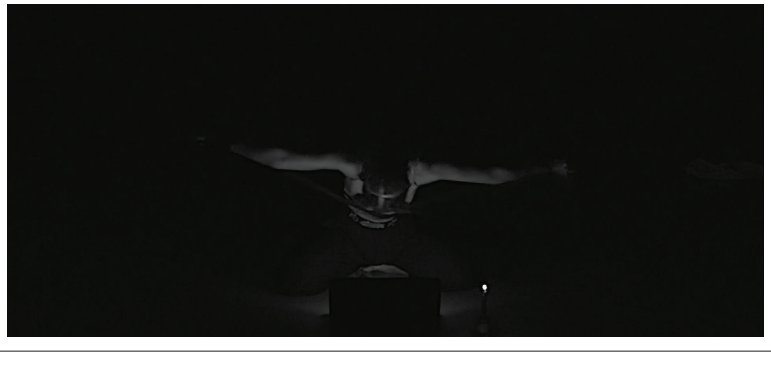

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FIGURE 7.15: Pulled in opposite directions.

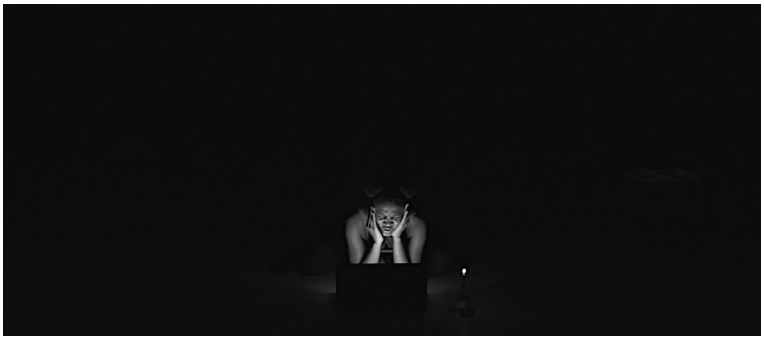

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FIGURE 7.16: Extreme apprehension.

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FIGURE 7.17: She is restless.

The camera zooms in briefly – the space around her becomes smaller, and the expression of fear mixed with confusion on her face dominates. As the camera pans out again, still enveloped in darkness, she lays the black cloth neatly down on the floor by her side. It seems now to represent a person, as she affectionately bids them goodnight (Figure 7.18), before returning to her laptop (Figure 7.19).

A common image in many South African homes, where several people occupy single-room households; homework and sleeping are performed in a common confined space. Her jittery and nervous movement does not settle – confusion and desperation pervade. Shooting her right arm out to the side, angling her wrist to hold her hand at a 90-degree angle [...] she presses her fingers against her thumb, one-by-one – counting (Figure 7.20), and then she shifts her wrist around, as though she is looking at her watch.

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FIGURE 7.18: Affectionate goodnight.

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FIGURE 7.19: Back to study.

The gestural reference to time here becomes a powerful motif in the piece – repeated later in the work – and a strong reference to a skewed sense of time that many experienced under various COVID-19 lockdown levels and the State of Emergency declared in South Africa at the onset of the pandemic in early 2020. Time is an important factor in a student's life – it is also the site of much anxiety in this context too. Some students reported being 'overloaded' and not having sufficient time to complete their remote learning tasks – the passage of time is also a site for frustration at an initial

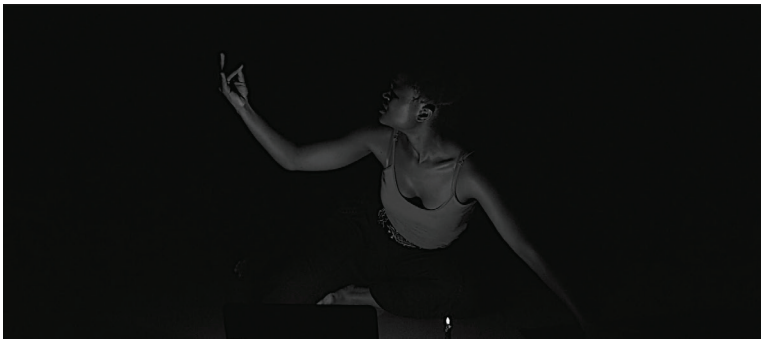

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FIGURE 7.20: Gestural reference to time.

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FIGURE 7.21: She crawls up.

three-week hard lockdown that lasted (in various stages of restrictions) close to three years (the general minimum study duration to obtain a diploma or degree).

Sibahle crawls up onto her feet, awkwardly and as she does, a pool of light fades up, to reveal – alongside her, the burning candle, laptop and black cloth – a crumpled reflective vest behind her off to her left (Figure 7.21).

She runs a circle around the room Figure 7.22 – and on her second circle, she scoops up the vest and puts it on.

A familiar image for South Africans emerges – a car guard at work (Figure 7.23).

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FIGURE 7.22: She runs in circles.

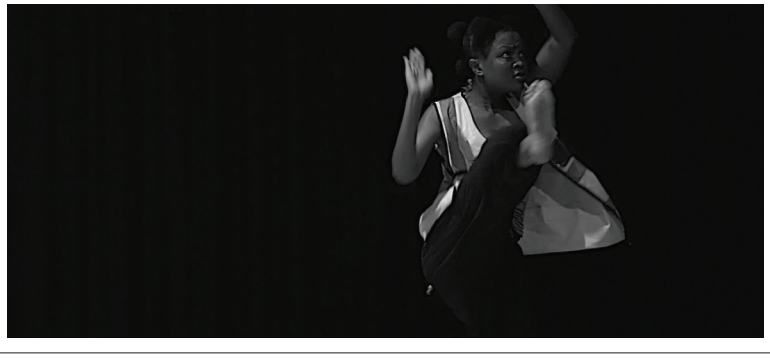

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FIGURE 7.23: Work while studying.

In context, this speaks to the need of many students – to work while studying – to supplement their family income and support themselves. It is established that South Africa has some of the highest rates of poverty in the world and many of our university students come from backgrounds of severe poverty and disadvantage. With the reflective vest (worn by a car guard) still on, Sibahle performs a sequence of movements that carry through the frantic push–pull of her earlier phrase in front of the laptop but here their quality is more fluid, as though being out of the home and able to move around more freely, without the pull of her laptop screen, offers some reprieve from the homebound isolation of the initial lockdown states in our country. Still, she performs with a pervasive sense of anxiety, which is the central motif of this work. With her back to the camera (Figure 7.24),

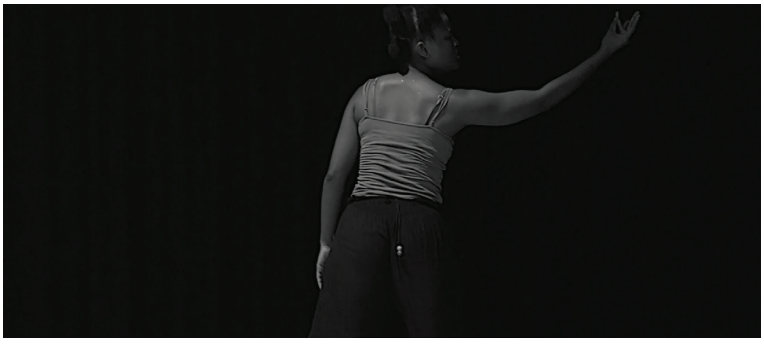

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FIGURE 7.24: Pervasive sense of anxiety.

she repeats the earlier described phrase, culminating in a look at her wrist to symbolise time and its passage. This gesture may also reflect how, under COVID-19 remote working conditions, the boundaries of time became more fluid; classes were recorded so that students unable to attend during the day could access them at night after hours.

Again here, this is also related to household chores and expectations placed on many of our students within the household, where many students expressed that their family members did not accept they were actually 'attending' class through their electronic devices – this mode of learning was, in other words, not accepted by many students' families during the initial lockdown and the push towards ERL.

Sibahle removes the reflective vest and drops it on the ground where she found it. Dropping her weight, she rolls now in a fluid revolution (Figure 7.25) towards the laptop, still front and centre in the frame.

The fluidity of her movement now becomes more frantic as she sits hunched behind the laptop. She types, briefly, frantically and then her attention is pulled towards the black cloth, which she picks up off the floor (Figure 7.26), gesturing apologetically in the direction where it was, as though apologising to an absent other. She darts across the screen and completes a sequence of gestures that indicate her handwashing the cloth (laundry) – a commonly accepted 'women's chore' within the household.

Following this – a repeated sequence where she moves between the laptop, the imagined other person, and her household chores in rapidly escalating succession (Figure 7.27), becoming more and more frantic – the camera zooms in again, her face frozen with worry as she has less and less control of her movement presentation.

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FIGURE 7.25: A fluid revolution.

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FIGURE 7.26: The black cloth.

Her breath becomes heightened, and she is visibly panting. Her panic is tangible and escalating (Figure 7.28).

This repetition is eventually interrupted by a shift in her focus. She touches her forehead with the back of her hand and lays the black cloth neatly down as she kneels beside it (Figure 7.29).

This represents the loss of a loved one and is a common image in many South African homes, especially prevalent under the COVID-19 lockdowns. Many households experienced grief at the loss of their loved ones, and fear of the unknown, in terms of the multiple restrictions and bouncing between different levels of lockdown that ensued in South Africa.

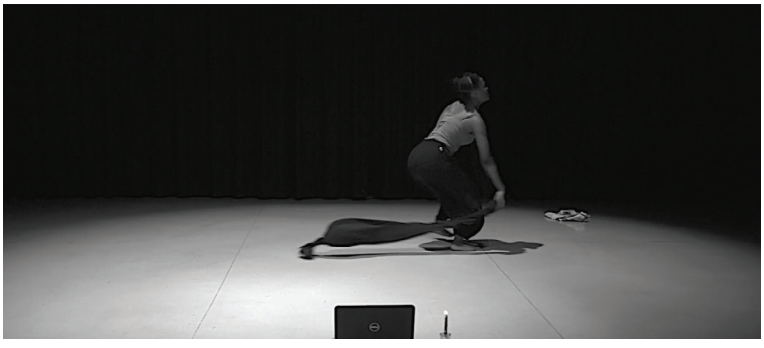

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FIGURE 7.27: Rapid escalating succession.

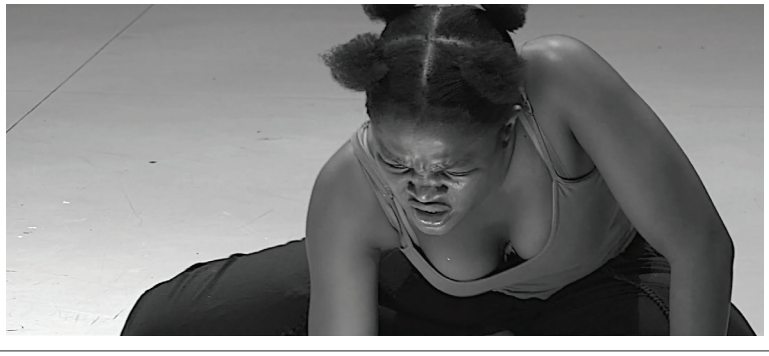

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FIGURE 7.28: Panic – tangible and escalating.

In her final sequence (Figure 7.30), Sibahle rises, swirling the black cloth around her and eventually wrapping it and tying it around her head – a sign of mourning in many African cultures in the country.

She drops down to her knees (Figure 7.31), exhausted, confused and scared – and returns to her laptop typing frantically, she blows the candle out (Figure 7.32).

[...] and the lights fade to blackness once more [...] (Figure 7.33)

My next venture was in directing and co-choreography of a production titled 'Senzeni na?' – the most expressive way a South African in an oppressed circumstance can cry out. Comparable to the world-famous

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FIGURE 7.29: She shifts her focus.

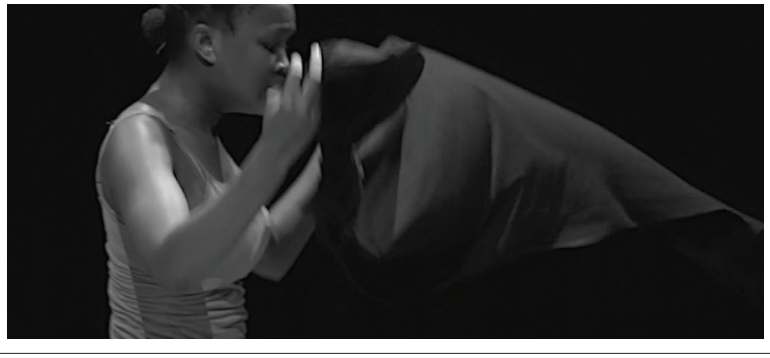

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FIGURE 7.30: Sign of mourning.

protest song 'Senzeni na?', which started as a cry of hopelessness, 'What do we do?', it grew to become a most memorable chant that continues to remind us of the brutality black South Africans endured during the apartheid era and continue to live through. Even in today's democratic South Africa, this work calls for a critical humanistic response to the plight of the majority of university students marginalised in HE, through inconsiderate ways of learning. The so-called pedagogy plays ignorant to the struggles of youth-headed households, where students live through poverty and various social ills inconducive to academic success.

You are not a director, choreographer or dancer by profession or training. Can you explain how you navigated the creative and embodied processes of conceptualising and curating this performance as a research inquiry?

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FIGURE 7.31: Exhausted, confused and scared.

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FIGURE 7.32: She blows the candle out.

These visuals offer layered meanings and interpretations of the findings of my research (Moodley 2022b) while also situating it within a South African context. As a dual response to and reflection of the written data at the heart of that study, this work, with its cultural and symbolic references, is firmly situated within the lived realities of our student participants. The techniques, approaches and processes used in developing the work involved interactivity between me (the director), the choreographer, the performer and the research data. This process of literally creating a physical language, to both explore and communicate the research data, is core to

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FIGURE 7.33: Light fades into darkness.

this study and our intentions to explore the possibilities of communication beyond words. The dance drama enables this and also provides a myriad of possibilities and potentials for an embodied way of data analysis. The impact of using intuition, imagination and creativity was incomparable, resulting in a fusion of knowing (epistemology) and being (ontology) into a new paradigm – into a rich tapestry of understanding the complex phenomena at play within a situated and contextual world around us (Barone & Eisner 2011). The result was a concealing of borders between the researcher and the researched, self and other, experiencer and experienced (Knowles & Cole 2008). In fact, this process of reflexivity aligns with postmodern and constructivist frameworks (Leavy 2015), provoking critical reflection on existential questions regarding existence, meaning and the nature of reality.

Given your background outside of the arts, what strategies and methodologies enabled you to navigate the translation of concepts into visual and performative outputs in collaboration with performing or performance artists with whom you collaborated? How did you bridge the gap between theoretical inquiry and performative embodiment?

Dianna and the choreographer, Musa Hlatshwayo, deliberated back and forth and used storyboarding as a means to map the performance choreographically and filmically. Storyboarding is a well-worn technique used in film-making processes to plan shots and provide a visual draft of the frames of the film, prior to shooting. Ordinarily a planning tool, in this particular collaboration between Dianna and Musa, it extended its function and also offered a deepened engagement with visual methodologies – enabling

Dianna a new communicative tool in working with, in this instance, professional artists and art-makers. The use of storyboarding in this process became an iterative collaborative methodology, whereby Dianna's ideas and intentions were conveyed in a back-and-forth with the choreographer and his artistic team.

Used to communicate the narrative, the storyboards also provided ways through which Dianna and Musa could both show their thoughts, ideas and aesthetic inputs – beyond words. These storyboards serve as an additional layer in Dianna's exploration of ABR and its visual methodologies. They not only convey the research narratives that profoundly influenced her decision to pursue more humanising approaches in her work but also provide her with a means to communicate with the artistic team without necessarily needing to 'speak their language'. Once Dianna and Musa had settled on the storyboards that would be the foundation for the work, these were then given over to the performer Sphakeme Shangase for their interpretation, embodiment and expression. In this sense, this performance exploration worked to combine the two primary techniques used in the previous two iterations – the use of visual imagery to convey a story and the use of (contemporary) dance theatre to embody a narrative or set of narratives. The difference was that Dianna was now collaborating with professional artists, in order to craft a performance. In theatre studies, there is a term for this – verbatim theatre – taking real-life narratives and curating them for public performance. This form of documentary-type performance that stages real-life narratives drawn from interviews, testimonies or archival materials (see e.g. Fisher 2020; Forsyth & Megson 2009) finds particularly powerful resonance through dance as an embodied form (see e.g. McCormack 2018).

At its core, storyboarding provided a shared visual framework – structured and yet flexible; it offered a dialogical space where ideas, movement concepts, and thematic and aesthetic intentions could be mapped, tested and refined. Instead of working from a rigid script, each storyboard iteration functioned as a kind of bridge across Dianna's ideas, drawn from her previous research and prior initial engagements with visual methodologies. Further thematic deliberations – questions about which student narratives to prioritise and what emotional landscapes to explore were included in collaboration with Musa Hlatshwayo's expertise as a professional dance-maker. The iterative nature of storyboarding and its use in this process provides a link between visual and embodied methodologies. While it initially functioned as a planning tool, it expanded. Into an evolving framework generating an embodied response, creative negotiation and interpretative gestures that find foundation in Dianna's original worded research – now turned into professional performance and storytelling. In this, Dianna's approach resonates with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009)

critique of 'the single story', and its warnings against flattening complex experiences into a singular, dominant narrative. The combination of visual storytelling both in 2D imagery (storyboarding) and 3D embodied practice (contemporary dance) and mediated through filmic techniques, this process embraced a multiplicity of voices and interpretations, resisting a singular and fixed reading of the research narratives. Moreover, in working with professional performance practitioners, Dianna in some ways fulfils her intentions to make heard the oft-silenced narratives of our students. The performance here, co-produced with professional artists, is a medium for public consumption beyond just academic engagement, it is more widely opened up and can be used to advocate for change and activate activism towards this within South African HEIs. South African theatre history is rich with similar examples where performance (including dance and physical theatre) has been used as a form for conscientisation and protest – consider the robust protest theatre movement of the late 1970s and 1980s in the country and its anti-apartheid activism.

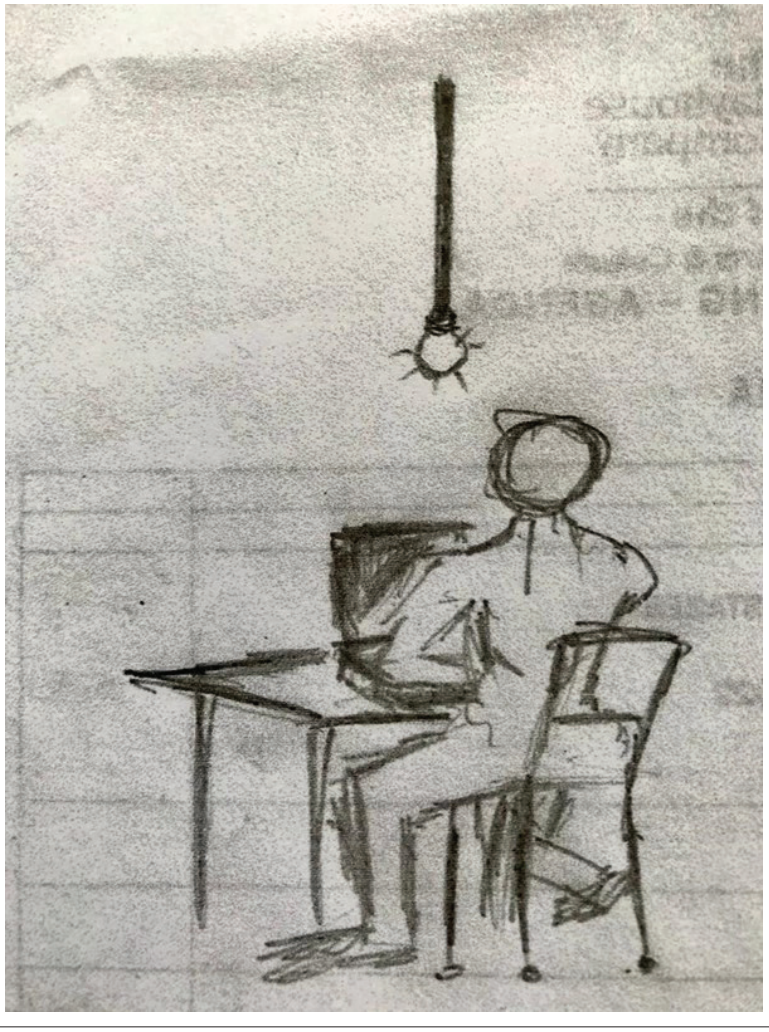
By combining visual storytelling in the development of the storyboards in this particular iteration of Dianna's explorations into ABR, and movement-based meaning-making through Musa's choreographic language and the embodied engagements of performer Sphakeme Shangase, the work ultimately functions as an intersection between research, artistic practice, performative knowledge production and activism. The interplay between storyboarding, dance dramaturgy and filmic techniques here transforms the research process into an evolving multi-sensory act of meaning-making – where interpretation and affect are integral components in engaging the work (and therefore the stories of our students in a humanising and urgent way – that calls for further attention and meaningful engagement).

The sketches (Figure 7.34 to Figure 7.38) illustrate examples of the visual storyboarding involved in producing 'Senzeni na?'. They are included here to complement the film, the film stills, and the subsequent description of the work.

Can you walk me through your experience of using storyboarding as a methodological tool in visually structuring and augmenting the articulations of your research findings? How did this process give shape to your meaning-making and analytical approaches?

'For ease of mind, I had to ensure constant synergy of data interpretations with the choreographer during the production process. The following synopsis[4] emanates from our shared understanding.'

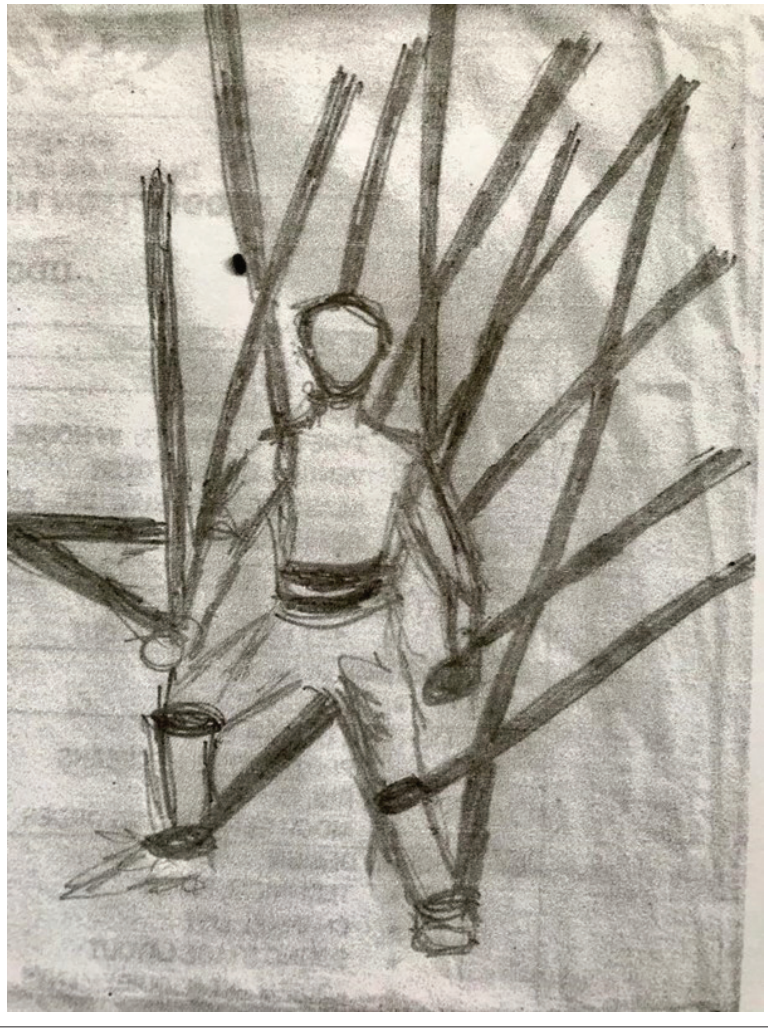
4. Email exchange between Dianna Moodley and Musa Hlatswayo on 20 April 2022.



Source: Author's collaborative work with choreographer.
FIGURE 7.34: Storyboarding sketch 1.

This piece, 'Senzeni na?',[5] highlights, through imagery and metaphors, the internal struggles many students deal with as a result of the newly adopted methods of teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlights the emotional and psychological traumas our scholars are subjected to in being forced to adapt (or die) to ways of learning that do not consider their living conditions, their inability to access help and

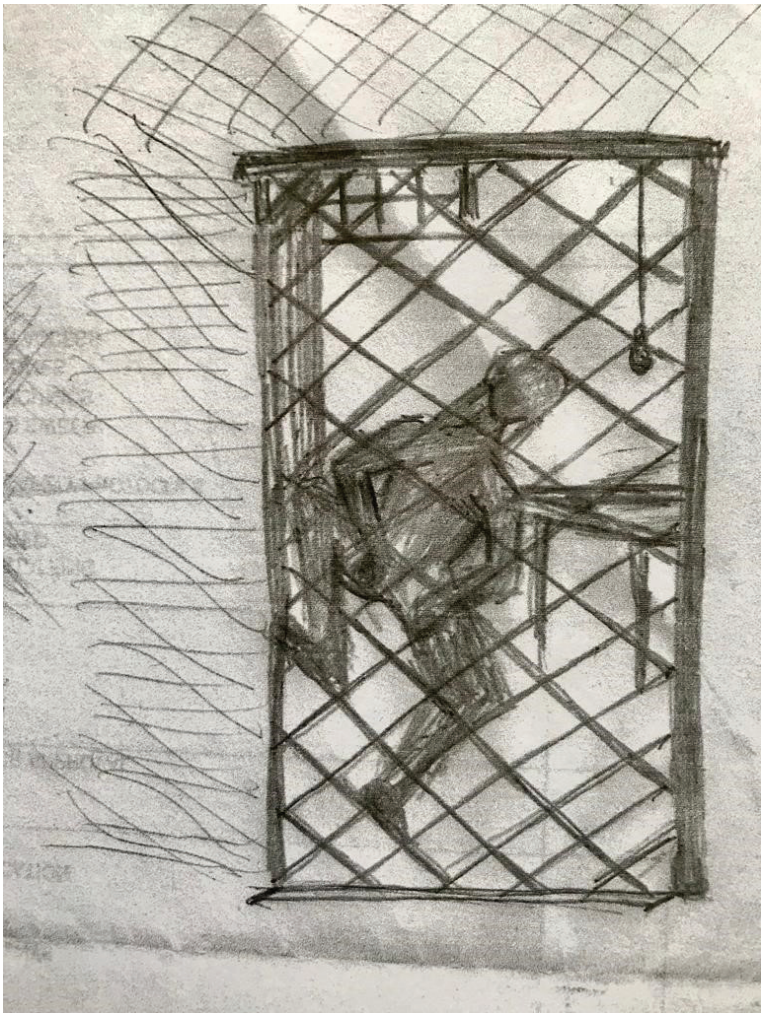
5. The video, available here, [https://openscholar.dut.ac.za/handle/10321/6179] originally used song titled 'Lonely Spirit' by Meredith Monk, licensed under SAMRO and used in the research phase. A substituted track 'Atmospheric, Electronic, Dark' No Copyright Music by Rexlambo is used here due to licensing constraints.



Source: Author's collaborative work with choreographer.
FIGURE 7.35: Storyboarding sketch 2.

guidance of various forms, including psychological counselling, as they deal with the newly imposed ways of studying. It emphasises how imposed and inconsiderate expectations clearly break our scholars, instead of equipping them with the required confidence and improved self-knowledge, motivated and supported by skill sets, resulting in a generation of critical thinkers and functional citizens that will effect holistic growth in our democracy.

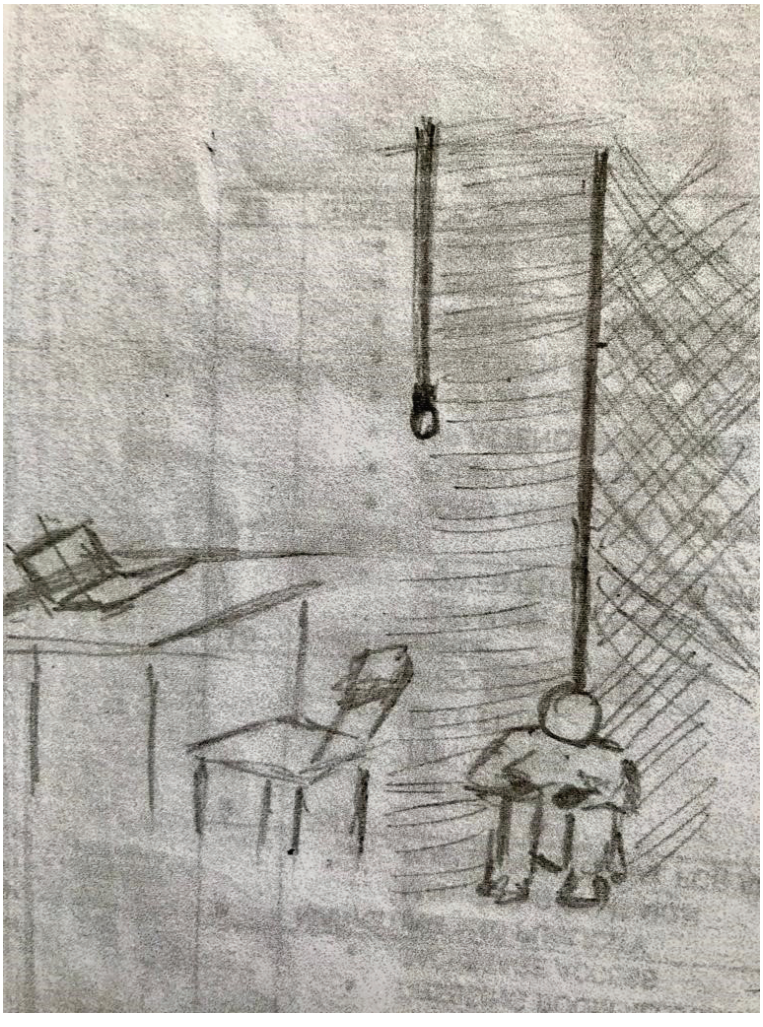
The performance is a simultaneous cry and protest through the medium of dance drama. It is an indictment against our newly formed ignorance towards how people in less fortunate households continue to endure the



Source: Author's collaborative work with choreographer.
FIGURE 7.36: Storyboarding sketch 3.

lack of basic service delivery required for scholars to be able to study and learn successfully online. The idiomatic physical language of this work creatively borrows from some of our notable sayings and idioms in isiZulu. These include 'ukubambisa udonga', a saying that speaks of feeding someone with empty promises and making them believe that if they hold the wall and prevent it from falling, while you go out seeking tools to fix it, you will return with many fruitful rewards to their benefit.

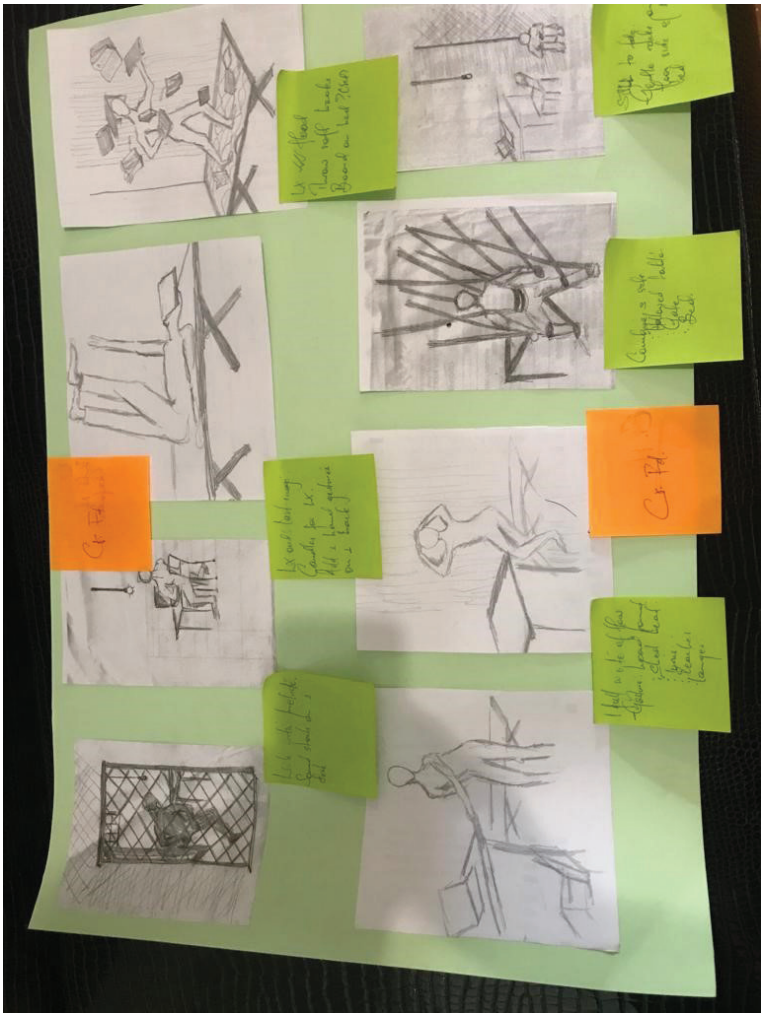
This work uses a confined living space as a metaphor for a prison. It hinges on experiences of lockdown and isolation at its base and offers some insight into the fear and trauma experienced by students forced to



Source: Author's collaborative work with choreographer.
FIGURE 7.37: Storyboarding sketch 4.

study online in the 'new normal', as it was referred to. This plays with layers of imagery and coded visuals found in Nguni culture. The use of candles is one such example. While candles do provide some form of light, the act of lighting candles in Nguni culture is a symbolic ritual performed when someone has died while the family is mourning and preparations for the burial are underway. In other instances, lighting a candle is a form of praying, a ritualistic invitation of light into a dire and dark situation.

The short film opens with the sound of crickets chirping – the screen is black and it is nighttime. The first frame fades in and I am on the outside looking in. Dancer Shangase is in a small room, looking out through a closed



Source: Author's collaborative work with choreographer.
FIGURE 7.38: Storyboarding sketch 5.

gate leaning on the bars, arms above his head (Figure 7.39), as he turns his head, the scene fades to black and the choreographic credits flash on screen.

A few seconds later, the image of Shangase leaning on the closed gate, looking out fades back up, and he turns his back and walks away from the gate. A while later, the camera moves into Shangase's room (Figure 7.40), no longer watching him from the outside in. The setting is sparse, a white plastic chair, a desk pushed up against the wall with a small mirror hanging and above a rectangular lever window, some clothes hanging on the burglar bars. The walls made of ash brick are partially plastered. A series of

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FIGURE 7.39: Looking through the darkness.

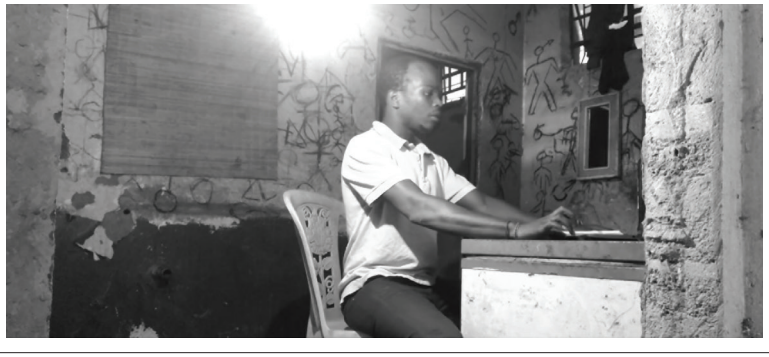

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FIGURE 7.40: Silent witnesses to the loneliness.

overlapping Keith Haring-esque figures are drawn or painted on the walls. These 2D figures offset Shangase's 3D form, silent witnesses perhaps, to the loneliness and isolation of lockdown and the pressures of ERL on our students.

Shangase sits at the table, pushed against the wall, he briefly adjusts some papers on the table and then strums his fingers on the table, he is rocking back and forth – and his eyes dart from side to side. He rests his elbows on the table, and then, his chin in his hands [...] the camera angle cuts, and he struggles to hold his head up. An open laptop and an unlit candle in a makeshift champagne-bottle candle-holder now come into focus (Figure 7.41).

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FIGURE 7.41: Makeshift candle-holder.

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FIGURE 7.42: Bare metal bed frame.

A bare light bulb hanging overhead goes dark, and Shangase drops his head onto the table and frantically taps at his temple. His clean movement is sharp and darting – the tension is tangible. Meredith Monk and Randall Wong's 'Lonely Spirit' from the opera 'Atlas' fades in. Her wordless song and its haunting melody prompt a camera shift, revealing Shangase on the edge of a metal spring bed frame. One hand is stretched above his head while he presses a book against his face with the other (Figure 7.42).

The scene cuts and on screen, an open laptop and two burning candles are revealed in the foreground, with Shangase now on the bare metal bed frame. The camera shifts again, zooming closer now, as Shangase stands, pressing his book open against the wall and scraping it across its length (Figure 7.43).

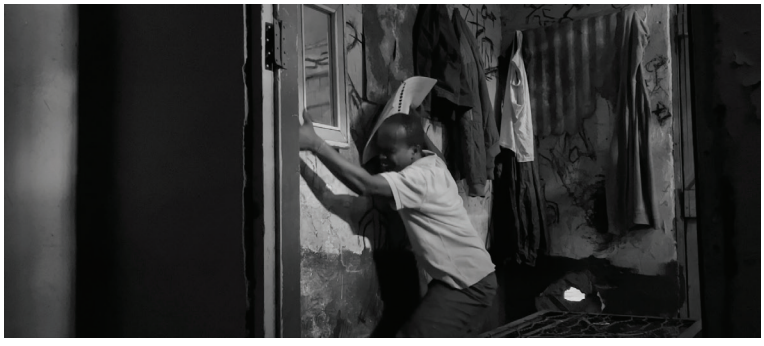

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FIGURE 7.43: Scraping against the wall.

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FIGURE 7.44: Beating himself.

His movement here is laboured, heavy [...] the image of a young black man struggling with the demands of academic overload is powerful. Shangase vocalises his effort in grunts and snorts, sliding against the wall and then falling back onto the bed. A piece of corrugated iron stands in for a window and there are shirts and blazers hanging off this. As Shangase struggles with the book, his movement becomes heavier – the weight of the book – a crushing weight. An image of great significance within a post-apartheid and post-#FeesMustFall South African landscape.

In the next section, Shangase stands, back against the wall, beating himself with the book (Figure 7.44), while crumpled papers thrown at him from off-screen pelt his body.

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FIGURE 7.45: He ducks and swerves.

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FIGURE 7.46: He seems to be freer.

He ducks and swerves as papers fly at him, and he beats himself with his open book (Figure 7.45).

Then, another cut and shift of the camera angle, now we see him standing, facing his laptop and freshly extinguished candles – as smoke spirals up from the wick – he moves his hand first in a snakelike motion and then his arm. Without the book – he seems to be freer – his movement taking up more space in the room (Figure 7.46).

A cross-fade and Shangase is now standing on a table with elastic strips tied around various parts of his body, extending out and connected to the walls, roof and floor. Shangase moves frantically, his movement restricted with limited range (Figure 7.47).

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FIGURE 7.47: Pulled in multiple directions.

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FIGURE 7.48: Huddled on the floor.

It is as though he is being pulled in many directions simultaneously and has no control. The image and feeling it evokes are overwhelming. He cannot seem to escape – a reference to the many demands upon students during COVID-19 lockdowns and the push to ERL.

The scene fades, and the frame reveals again the laptop screen and one candle alight, as the camera moves to the left, Shangase is seen, huddled on the floor in a corner. He clutches his book, and his head is nodding back and forth – an image often associated with some kind of psychological break (Figure 7.48).

He brings his hand up to wipe his ear and the camera moves off his face, revealing a pile of papers, books and magazines at his feet. Big bold

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FIGURE 7.49: Fading back into black.

lettering on the cover of a magazine reads 'CHEF!' (Figure 7.49) and the screen fades to black.

I am reminded that, aside from COVID-19 and the anxiety caused by multiple lockdowns and restrictions, many families lost their breadwinners – typically men, both young and old – who could no longer financially support them. The stark reality is that many students in South Africa live below the breadline. Emergency remote learning forced students to choose between purchasing data or buying bread, a topic that may warrant further discussion, though it is beyond the scope of this book.

The next section will unravel the graphic interpretations to provide the findings in textual format, supported by evidence of the present circumstances of the majority student population in South Africa, rife with alarming poverty and unemployment rates, often leading to financial debt in living below the breadline. It touches on how stereotypical gender roles occupied by female students at home were even more pronounced during the pandemic, such as the ramifications for Sibahle as she darts across the room doing chores, while her studies call for her attention. It touches on how students juggle work with studies to eke out a living, and this under the most vexing circumstances. In the end, the section that follows expands on the 'inconsiderate ways of learning' demonstrated, not only by ineffective pedagogies but also by ill-prepared HE responses.

Chapter 8

De facto evidence of pedagogical disconnect

The ABR pronouncements highlighted a significant issue, especially within the context of South African HE. While academics were expected to adapt their teaching and learning approaches (Boyer 2012) to facilitate meaningful engagement during the unprecedented volatility of ERL, this was not the case. Additionally, the findings indicated that lecturers appeared to have abandoned pedagogical strategies such as connectivism (Siemens 2005) and constructivism (Hedden, Worthy, Atkin, Slinger-Friedman & Paul 2017), opting instead for passive methods. Online platforms were primarily used to post content, such as recordings and notes, resulting in a one-way transmission of information. This is supported by growing literature post-COVID-19 that ERL contributed to stress, anxiety, frustration and negativity towards using online mechanisms (Aristovnik et al. 2020). What followed were definitive advancements by university decision-makers to alleviate students' delayed start to learning, which, if not remedied, would potentially result in poor understanding of foundational concepts and hasty delivery of sub-standard work. Furthermore, the research revealed the lack of supplementary learning, should it be left unattended, would lead to underdeveloped research and partial learning skills in students.

A dominant theme emerging from the ABR results related specifically to pedagogy or the acts of teaching and learning. This is the focal point

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of my discussion – a specific phenomenon that was challenging students – a new pattern in teaching and learning. Understandably, academics were also overwhelmed by the effects of the pandemic (Shepherd 2021). However, since the study objective was to mainly explore how students experienced ERL, the focus was on pedagogical approaches adopted by lecturers.

The ABR outcomes highlight students' sentiments of alienation, online boredom accompanied by lack of motivation, deficiency of feedback and support, and deprivation of social learning, as well as insufficiency of experiential learning, under-preparedness for assessment of learning, mental and physical fatigue, and unhealthy learning environments. The confusion regarding new content and limited engagement with lecturers in real time was a pervasive theme. It became evident students felt estranged from the teaching and learning experience. What was concerning was whether academics were conscious that when the learner is decontextualised, and removed from the context, his or her learnings are compromised. Lecturers tended to disregard learners' learning styles, personalities and competencies.

The ABR verdicts demonstrated strongly how online learning increased the transactional distance between lecturers and students. Furthermore, networking disruptions created student discomfort and disruptions to the learning process, leading to fragmented learning and fissured conceptualisations. Dhawan (2020) also reports one of the first responses by most universities was to facilitate access for students to learning resources. Moreover, there was recognition that insufficient data were causing students to economise on online learning, resulting in missing classes, selective attendance, as well as lack of communication with lecturers and peers outside class time, leading to knowledge gaps. Indeed, HE should already have ensured appropriate infrastructure and resources were put in place to support the sudden change. Of course, measures ought to have been in place to address poor service delivery, inadequate communication and student consultation.

Some lecturers were ill-equipped on how to use online platforms and tools to become familiar with learners' identities, competencies and circumstances. Others may have perceived the shift to online learning as an opportunity to do less work, and as such, they may have not taken the initiative to access and effectively utilise available online tools (Van Wyk, Mooney, Duma & Faloye 2021). The neglect to adapt teaching and learning practices to the demands of ERL to ensure quality education rendered to students was the quintessential factor in the final analysis. While various scholars have argued technology can dehumanise learners (Lewin & Lundie 2016), other scholars such as Hardwick (2000) propose a collaborative

model of technology implementation to humanise teaching and learning via the distance education mode.

Perhaps the dysfunctionality on the part of the institution was the failure to adequately train and assure lecturers are competent on how to optimise engagement on the online platform Microsoft Teams. After all, this app enables interactivity by providing audio, video, chat and small-group capabilities, in addition to enabling lecturers to oversee small-group activities and roam in and out of groups ad lib. It was further acknowledged that online learning remained a challenge where there was the absence of focused engagement on the part of all participants in the learning process. Both students and lecturers may have attended to other issues and, or web applications while in an online class. On the one hand, while students eagerly awaited lecturer interaction, content such as PowerPoint presentations were posted online and left running for student access. On the other hand, even though lecturers may have delivered engaging content, students may have been passive and non-participatory.

As a longtime advocate of embodied learning and practice, this experience of engaging with Dianna's research and the challenges of ERL has reinforced my belief in the value of physical presence, experiential engagement and relational pedagogies. This said, I have been provoked to renewed ways into thinking about how visual methodologies, particularly storyboarding and digital mediation can function as extensions of embodied knowledge rather than as substitutes. The research highlights what I felt as a lecturer during COVID-19 and the frantic push towards ERL – a pedagogical disconnect. To clarify, the pedagogical disconnect that I felt upon reflection relative to Dianna's research was not simply about the absence of physical presence, it was about the erosion of relationality and the erasure of spontaneous, co-creative exchanges that define deep learning. As is clear from Dianna's original research, re-presented here using ABR (and indeed from my experience as a lecturer during the COVID-19 pandemic), students felt unseen, unheard and decontextualised. They felt alienated, and this was both in relation to technological challenges and the digital divide with its infrastructural inequities, as well as pedagogical difficulties. My takeaway here is that this reaffirms the necessity of teaching approaches that centre the learner as embodied and learning as experiential as well as agentic regardless of the learning platform (be it face-to-face, live or digital).

There were strong indications that lecturers either lacked knowledge of learners, learning styles, personalities and competencies, or the know-how of how to optimally engage with students using customised learner-centred approaches or simply, even more unsettling, were apathetic to students' learning contexts. The disengagement between academics and learners

was blatant. There appeared to be a keenness on content delivery, while the educational subject was not accounted for (Fataar 2016). A banal off-loading of information seemed to have been persistent. The mere transmission of information occurred, where passive, non-participative learners were involved in primarily plenary sessions. Furthermore, there was a noticeable deprivation of experiential or practical learning experiences in the learning process – its value so vehemently defended by scholars such as Yardley, Teunissen & Dornan (2012) in their perspective on the theoretical basis of experiential learning from a social learning, constructionist standpoint. Traditional teaching may have sufficed decades ago when universities were educating the elite few who were privileged to access their own resources; however, it is not suitable to prepare a generation of diverse learners with increasing complexities in a progressively more unpredictable world.

The question of whether lecture-based sessions were setting students up for failure comes to the fore here, as active interaction is essential for curiosity and authenticity to be manifest if learning is to be optimised. Eyler (2018) emphasises how active learning has proven to close the performance gap. Meaningful, constructive learning is hindered, and meaningful curriculum cannot translate when understanding learners' context and real-world experiences are not significant in the learning process. Hence, learners' identities are suppressed, as so aptly presented by Fataar (2016). Indeed, new knowledge cannot be developed upon undefined knowledge.

The ABR findings reinforced that online learning led to students' boredom because of time spent onscreen, compounded by studying alone in the absence of social interaction. Succesful online learning requires a concerted commitment not to digress from the learning and teaching mandate, yet this shift towards embracing the new and novel learning mode was expected to have been a given that students will reconnect with peers and lecturers despite the several challenges that prevailed. Such connections needed to be maintained and sustained, as their potential benefits outweigh the challenges of disconnection. The need for educators to provide motivation or stimulate engagement is underscored by scholars such as Yang and Huang (2021). For example, for lecturers to motivate learning, prodding and prompting students to participate can potentially initiates active engagement within the academic space of teaching and learning. Students verified that lecturers appeared oblivious to the online fatigue they experienced – this coupled with an absence of attempts to prompt student responses propelling their lack of interest in even attending sessions.

This has prompted me to reflect further, critically on the assumptions underlying embodied learning itself. While I have long used techniques of

embodied learning in my own teaching practice, particularly in my teaching of performance and practice-based disciplines, this research forces a deeper investigation into how embodied learning is enacted and mediated in various contexts. The notion of embodiment in pedagogy cannot be binary (i.e. digital or physical), it must instead be understood as a continuum that includes multimodal, affective and participatory dimensions of knowledge production. As Asilia Franklin-Phipps (in Dernikos, Lesko, McCall & Niccolini 2020, p. 123) offers: 'Embodied pedagogy "begins with conceptualizing the body as enfleshed – that is, by factoring the flesh as the location upon which a person's positionality meets her body's materiality"'. Beyond the pedagogical, this research also surfaces the deeply political dimensions of knowledge production in South African HE. The digital divide, as evidenced in students' frustrations, is not only a technical issue but also sociostructural inequality that is indicative of broader patterns of epistemic exclusion and socioeconomic stratification (Tobi 2022). The assumption that learning could seamlessly transition online with no real accounting for the differentiated access to resources, digital literacy and domestic spaces that had to double as learning environments, reveals a persistent failure to engage with students as situated and embodied subjects (hooks 1994). Emergency remote learning, in this sense, functioned as an epistemic crisis, exposing the limits of dominant and conventional educational paradigms that still privilege content transmission above critical engagement, assessment over process and where institutional convenience trumps student (and lecturer) agency.

My engagement with this research has also expanded my perspective. While I have long positioned embodied learning as a counterpoint to conventional (and in this context digital) learning, this experience has made me more alert to the potential for visual methodologies to bridge gaps between abstraction and embodiment. Storyboarding, for instance, when approached, as Dianna and Musa have here, dialogically and iteratively, is not just a planning tool, it becomes a relational method, and a space for negotiation between concept and movement, research and performance, learner and lecturer, and peer and peer.

Students exhibited notable reservations about engaging online. This could have been because of uncertainty on the part of students regarding their competency in speaking English publicly (Moodley 2022a); hence, they could have chosen to remain silent, rather than communicate. It is further questionable why students were not offered the necessary support outside timetabled sessions, to advance communication skills and increase their online engagement, as suggested by Dhawan (2020). Students were left to fend for themselves without such support from their lecturers. They were not provided with feedback in the form of individualised revision, reinforcement or tutoring, coupled with a flagrant

absence of tailored formative development, as advocated by scholars such as Merisotis and Phipps (2000). The data showed no suggestions of such effort from lecturers.

Yet another encumbrance to learning became pronounced in the ABR analyses – deficiency in the feedback loop to students. Lecturers provided limited follow-up on learning. By continuously evaluating what students have learned and what was vague, academics could enhance more sophisticated levels of understanding by connecting the dots (Merisotis & Phipps 2000). While lecturers often provided reinforcement in the form of audio or video recordings, this online content could easily have been misunderstood or misinterpreted, specifically in instances where students could not immediately access further guidance from lecturers. This situation prevails, possibly because of lengthy bureaucratic processes that delay the appointment of tutors who could offer timely feedback. In a contact class context, delays in the appointment of tutors should not necessarily disrupt the learning process, because the lecturer can assume the role of tutor while waiting for their appointment. However, in online learning contexts, students require real-time support from their earliest engagement with the course, but lecturers are not always available. This alludes to the need for a level of assurance required within the teaching and learning environment, for learning to be maximised.

Within this stark arts-based context, as much as the institution provided data bundles meant to last for the duration of a month of online learning, students soon ran out of data, while they sought additional learning material available online or attempted to reach out to their peers through Microsoft Teams or WhatsApp. Here too, they had to economise on data. Acquiring additional data was challenging, particularly because of high data costs in South Africa. The Internet connectivity situation became dire under the then socioeconomic circumstances, with most menial jobs shut down because of the hard lockdown. Loss of jobs was rife and breadwinners of families became susceptible to illness, and even death, because of COVID-19. Some students experienced poor connectivity in their very location. To make matters worse, social learning was missing from the learning process, and students had insufficient data to reach out and associate with peers outside the classroom. Students ought to have been provided optimal opportunities to interact within well-rounded learning experience. The effectiveness of peer learning simply cannot be downplayed.

The tremendous pressure instilled on students for the purposes of meeting assessment deadlines, regardless of whether students were adequately prepared or not, was strikingly displayed in the ABR findings. It became evident that there was unpretentious intent to deliver information to provide assessments on schedule in spite of the mental,

physical and emotional state of students. The availability of online recordings could have been embraced as a boon, as students could easily access the recordings and refresh their memory or merely catch up on missed classes. On the contrary, besides the mental fatigue involved in revisiting content, the availability of recordings may have given students a false sense of security in deliberately missing classes in the hope of catching up on recordings. Recordings, nonetheless, cannot replace class attendance, because, in class, students learn spontaneously and organically while the teaching and learning experience unfolds.

Adding to students' woes, the ABR elicitations typify most students' upbringing in indigent or at best, modest socioeconomic home backgrounds, lacking the comfort, convenience and proper learning resources as vividly described by Boughey and McKenna (2021). Factors such as load-shedding, water shortages and social distancing made living conditions unbearable. To make matters worse, other unavoidable physical factors rendered their home environment inconducive to learning. In most homes, household activities and domestic duties occurred concurrently, which deviated and distracted from the academic intentions a student desires.

A situation that emulated students' everyday disconcerting learning experiences presented itself during the focus group session. While responding to the researcher's question, a very enthusiastic student was interrupted by multiple background voices, insistently calling his name. The student intermittently muted himself in an attempt to minimise the background sounds but apologetically remarked that he had to leave although he wished he could engage further. Such a scenario typifies the intersecting difficulties students were confronted with in an unavoidably disruptive environment (Boughey & McKenna 2021).

From a personal and political standpoint, this experience has reinforced my awareness of socioeconomic and infrastructural inequalities that shape access to learning in our post-apartheid and postcolonial university spaces. I am reminded of the need for radically reimagined teaching and learning praxis that is context-responsive and socially engaged as well as student-centred, and I am re-reminded here of the power of education and its humanising potential. For me, this enables ways to liberate our university spaces from their corporatised models that ignore broader social inequalities and injustices that shape how (and indeed whether) our students access tertiary-level education. I make this claim both in terms of my own experiences in South African HE initially as a student and subsequently as a tutor, then contract lecturer and following this, a full-time lecturer, as well as in relation to the abundance of peer-reviewed research on the corporatisation of HEIs (in South Africa). As Dlamini (2019, p. 56) argues:

> *It is very difficult to find any correlation between 'social justice and access to higher education' and operational efficiency of universities. However, there is a strong correlation between operational efficiency and restricting access to tertiary education. It would seem universities are transitioning from being knowledge producers to rationalized education service providers which is problematic. […] The corporate model suffers from dominative principles [regulation of knowledge, top-down approach, and cultural individuation] which promote hegemonic tendencies. (Borg, Buttigieg & Mayo 2002)*

This research has far-reaching implications, challenging not only how we teach but also how we value knowledge – an ongoing and necessary engagement in our contemporary contexts. It raises questions about what counts as learning, who gets to participate and how meaning is co-constructed across different modalities. This understanding allows us to move towards more humanising pedagogies that, while unconventional, foster deep, lifelong learning and promote the development of productive, critical and empathetic members of society.

This aligns with research on affective pedagogies that emphasise that pedagogy:

> *[I]s not a vehicle for exchanging information from one being to another; rather, teaching has immanence – 'it creates new connections, new styles for thinking and new images and ways of seeing.' (Dernikos et al. 2020, p. 15)*

When students are reduced to passive recipients of content, learning becomes transactional rather than transformational. As the student voices in Dianna's research highlight, the erosion of interactive engagement resulted in cognitive dissonance, motivational depletion and a sense of alienation from the learning process.

The ABR findings vividly exemplify de facto indications that teaching and learning had regressed into a practice, compounding students' existing learning challenges – it had degenerated into a callous routine, with the science of learning clearly not being prioritised. 'Signature pedagogies' such as reflective practice, action research, problem-based learning and communities of practice, as well as the scholarship of learning (Shulman 2005), were markedly absent. Connectivism (Siemens 2005) and constructivism (Hedden et al. 2017) were plainly abandoned. Moreover, teaching and learning appeared to have been oblivious to how the pandemic had negatively impacted students' physical, mental and psychological conditions, coupled with trauma, fear, isolation and depression, all counter-productive to learning (Browning, Larson, Sharaievska, Rigolon, McAnirlin & Mullenbach 2021). Any defence that online teaching is a deterrent to familiarising oneself with learners' identities, competencies and circumstances, is a pitiful rationale, as it depends on the preparedness of academics to take the initiative in accessing and effectively utilising available online tools to achieve this (Van Wyk et al. 2021).

Through my interactions with Dianna's research and reflections here on my own processes as an educator, practitioner and researcher, I am ever convinced that the pedagogical transformation that we so need in our South African HEIs cannot be separated from questions of epistemic justice (Mbembe 2021; Tobi 2022). Pedagogy is not neutral, the ways in which we design, deliver and facilitate learning are always political; the challenge that emerges here is not just how we teach, but rather how we create learning environments that are truly relational, situational and transformative and how do we encourage our students within these spaces – particularly when conventional modes of learning, teaching and assessment delivery are commonplace within the institution and our programmes.

On the whole, unless HE adapts its teaching and learning practices towards sensitivity to the lived realities of students, inferior education will not only continue but also further intensify an already flawed South African HE landscape. Through our use of ABR methodology, we advocate for a fitting solution to the learning dilemma encountered by students during ERL, while living under unnerving actualities. We petition South African HE to engage in transformational teaching and learning practices for a country such as ours, providing a healing pedagogy for a tattered education system. Teaching and learning cannot merely be a callous routine, devoid of empathy for students who are struggling to overcome inherited challenges, especially now that they are even more disadvantaged under ERL. What the institution under study, and indeed South African HE (on micro–meso–macro levels) need, is a systems-based approach to teaching and learning as key to empowering learners (and educators) – a pedagogy of healing, an emancipatory approach to a pedagogy for the oppressed – critical humanising pedagogy (Freire 2012; hooks 1994). Arts-based research methodology served to accentuate the cracks in the education system – fissures maintained and sustained within a dysfunctional system. Critical humanising pedagogy is fitting for a society such as South Africa because it levels out inequalities and paves the way for social justice. The question remains whether actual implementation of critical humanising pedagogy is possible, for how does humanising pedagogy 'operate' in institutional milieus that remain untransformed? This could be a case of attempting to 'put new wine into old wineskins'.

Being involved as Dianna's critical friend on this project has prompted me to reflect on my own practice. Beyond engaging the case studies that Dianna presents here and offering my insights into and around these and ABR in general, I have also gained insights into how I am able to implement both old and new knowledge in an integrated way across the various classroom settings that I am immersed in. One of the key critiques of ERL as it has emerged through this research across its iterations was its failure to recognise students (and lecturers) as embodied, relational beings.

The emphasis (at least initially) on content delivery rather than engagement resulted in alienation and disconnections in the learning and teaching environment. As we move now into our post-lockdown life, and more hybrid modes of learning, teaching and assessment – I have sought to develop both digital and live environments that are invested in community and dialogue. My involvement in this study has reminded me of hooks's (1994) assertion that education is a 'practice of freedom'. Through this perspective, I am compelled to critically examine the ethical dimensions of my own teaching practice alongside ethical imperatives of pedagogy that extend beyond content delivery. Herein lies the responsibility of educators to create spaces where students feel seen, heard and valued – whether online, offline, remotely or collectively. As we move into more hybrid teaching modes post-lockdown, I am increasingly aware of the need to consciously acknowledge structural disparities that affect our students' access to learning – while also attempting to design flexible, responsive and relatable teaching strategies that do not default to single mode of delivery or engagement. Instead, a multimodal approach – where online and in-person interactions complement rather than replace one another – opens space for greater inclusivity and adaptability in contemporary HE contexts.

Questions of ethics loom large in any research dealing with pedagogical reform and transformation. Ethical research must not only highlight injustices but also offer practical strategies for redress – Dianna's study attempts this. Her interactions and explorations with and into ABR prompt questioning about how to create inclusive and participatory spaces that acknowledge our students' diverse realities. However imperfectly, her research challenges the hierarchies of exclusion in South African HEIs by prioritising students' voices and the desire to amplify them, which has inevitably highlighted broader systemic issues within these structures. This has in turn prompted deep reflection of our own practices as researcher-educators. The pandemic and subsequent reliance on ERL amplified existing fractures in HE. Critical humanising pedagogy presents opportunities towards redress that is both socially just and pedagogically sound; however, as Dianna's study has illuminated, the challenge lies in implementation. For me, the question begs: How do we operationalise a pedagogy of care, love and justice within institutions that remain structurally and systemically resistant to deep and meaningful transformation?

Ultimately, for me, the role of pedagogy extends beyond facilitating learning, it must also work towards social justice. Dianna's study has reaffirmed this and reignited this for me as a lecturer. In light of the insights drawn from this study, I remain committed to integrating humanising pedagogical principles into my own teaching – across hybrid learning environments that are both intellectually rigorous and carefully attuned to the complexities of student experiences. I realise too that I am not only

responding to the challenges posed by ERL but also contributing to a broader (and I would argue necessary) transformation in HE pedagogy through conscious centring of care, relationality and justice across my teaching praxis. As South African HE continues to grapple with systemic inequalities, the need for a truly humanising pedagogy remains crucial. My ongoing commitment is to extend this work further through my explorations into renewed and revitalised ways of integrating embodied and relational learning, not just as an occasional practice but as an embedded pedagogical ethos. This requires critical engagement with how hybrid learning environments can serve as pragmatic responses to logistical constraints and as intentional student-centred spaces of knowledge co-creation. In doing so, I aim to meaningfully contribute to the decolonial imperative in South African HE, recognising that humanising pedagogy is not an endpoint, but a continually evolving process of engagement, resistance and the potentialities of reimagination.

Chapter 9

A clarion call to South African higher education

The findings make a definitive call for HEIs on the whole, to refrain from practices geared towards curriculum stringency (Maton 2009) and instead focus on addressing particular challenges students face in the online (and offline) classroom. A deeper look into the situation on the ground suggested a tendency towards a productivity model – the shoving down of a 'cookie-cutter', 'sausage factory' curriculum. There was a blatant institutional agenda towards incremental throughput rates, which, while not necessarily a result of COVID-19 and the move to ERL, certainly warrants some critical engagement.

As discussed, the 'digital divide' and issues related to access – whether it be to data, network, devices and learning-conducive space – are not equal, which has had a bearing on responses to throughput rates under COVID-19. There seemed to be an unspoken commitment to delivering the curriculum but with little critical engagement as to how the online environments largely excluded already vulnerable students. The conundrum here, of course, relative to institutional realities, is what the alternative would be if universities did not 'go online'? The impacts involve wider considerations, possibly forming a branch-off study from the one presented here, related to the intersecting impacts of shutting down universities.

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There must be an urgency to fundamentally resuscitate pedagogy in ERL practice, an earnestness towards reapplication of the art and science of teaching and learning, a determination towards investment in academic labour, and a resolve to engage students in their academic becoming, in addition to an insistence on providing a supportive online learning environment (Dhawan 2020).

In the Zinn and Rodgers (2012, p. 76) study, 'A humanising pedagogy: Getting beneath the rhetoric', the authors point to 'the historical and the contemporary realities in education related to South Africa's dehumanising past and present'. They assert a central issue related to dehumanisation is its presence – or as they astutely argue, absorption – (in)to education, both at secondary and tertiary levels. In seeking to explore more humanising pedagogies and teaching and learning practices, this book has ventured into arts-based methodologies and particularly, too, an application of these relative to embodied performing arts engagements. Such embodied teaching and learning engagements are inherently linked to teaching and learning practices, situated both in embodiment (as generative in terms of knowledge production) and practices of collaboration (in creative practices, for instance, dance and choreography).

In this instance, such embodied praxis acknowledges the need to 'rethink thinking' (Odora-Hoppers & Richards in Zinn & Rogers 2012, p. 77). The call to 'rethink thinking' (Odora-Hoppers & Richards in Zinn & Rogers 2012, p. 77) has been central to local student protests – most notably in the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall calls towards quality and decolonised education – in essence an inclusive education that speaks to and from our contexts as South African. For us, in this book, this necessary rethinking of thinking additionally includes the capacities of or for embodiments and various embodied practices with the potential to transform teaching and learning practice, towards more humanising engagements. As Freire (2012, p. 99) notes, 'critical perception is embodied in action'.

The significant surge, in recent years, in interest surrounding creative practice and cultural production is noteworthy here (Barone & Eisner 2011; Leavy 2015; McNiff & Whitehead 2010), indicating a growing understanding that creativity is a social and cultural phenomenon, with culture and cultural practice operating as dynamic and transformative processes. There is, perhaps, a movement towards unapologetically creative research practice and praxis, as this monograph charts, in part. These creative ways of and into research provide fertile links to what Dianna engages initially in this monograph, as a movement towards a more humanising pedagogy – one that moves beyond data sets and finds creative (and embodied) expression, often beyond words (and numbers). This is not to say this monograph

charts new methods of doing and knowing, rather, as Liamputtong and Rumbold (2008) state in their 'Knowing differently: Arts-based and collaborative research methods':

> *[We] are conscious that the methods presented here have been in use by researchers for decades now [but they do however] point to less dominant ways of knowing that are emerging as increasingly relevant for researchers [...] in the social sciences. (p. 1)*

This idea of 'knowing differently' (Liamputtong & Rumbold 2008) is largely what we have tried to pursue in this monograph, starting with Dianna's frustration at the inadequacies of words in capturing the very humanness at the centre of this research, and continuing to include my own senses of embodied praxis – both in pedagogy and performance praxis. The impulse towards 'less dominant ways of knowing' (Liamputtong & Rumbold 2008) is, in this instance, a lucrative and generative site for more inclusive and collaborative research enabling genuine dialogue between researchers and research participants that, in many ways, seeks out less dominant narratives and often under-represented voices in the academy. In this way, the research is more collaborative, subjective and embodied, and these qualities enable potentially more diverse and nuanced understandings of the human experiences at the heart of educational and pedagogical praxis (as this monograph charts). These approaches not only enrich the research process towards more collaborative, even empathetic, engagements but also actively contribute to the advancement of methodologies more attuned to the complexities and diversities of human life. As Rolling (2013) rightly articulates, it is a sentiment we used to develop this monograph:

> *The idea that scientific knowledge is best is a powerful story, but it is only one story of many that may be told about how humans have historically created, recorded, and extended knowledge. (p. 5)*

There is a greater array of approaches available in our contemporary context, and current scholarship, including this monograph, is indicative of researchers seeking out creative and alternative methodologies with the capacity to enable more diverse and representative research indicative of contemporary life and living. Following Leavy (2015), ABR offers platforms that illuminate the often invisible and emotional dimensions of human life. In light of this study and its engagements with visual and performing arts, I would add that it transcends the boundaries of written and spoken language, enabling communication that may be better expressed beyond words.

The push towards ERL under COVID-19 restrictions and the various lockdown stages in South Africa has revealed the need to 'rethink thinking' (Odora-Hoppers & Richards in Zinn & Rogers 2012, p. 77). The move to ERL and its impacts (some revealed in this study) have both caused a deepening of existing fractures within HE, while also very vividly revealing these cracks.

As Freire (2012, p. 43) asserts: 'Concern for humanisation leads at once to the recognition of dehumanisation, not only as an ontological possibility, but as an historical reality'. Importantly, while this study has grown out of a particular COVID-generated context, many problems in local HE, particularly those related to delivering quality education, were on the agenda well before the onset of COVID-19 and its various restrictions. Arguably, and as demonstrated in this book, arts-based methodologies in teaching and learning (as well as data generation and analysis) offer critical and collaborative alternatives that require teachers and learners active in knowledge production, thereby also decentring traditional modes that situate learners as passive receptors of knowledge, imparted by expert teachers.

What has become increasingly evident in our engagements across this study is that teaching and learning needs to adopt critical pedagogy. This involves radical self-realisation and internalised reflection regarding the effects of traditional pedagogies, their impacts and their value in contemporary teaching and learning practices. Particularly pertinent here is the need to re-evaluate what Freire (2012) refers to as 'Banking Education' that maintains knowledge production as a static process, favouring hierarchical models, where students are placed outside knowledge production. These 'banking' models do not allow for knowledge exchange processes that open learning and teaching up to all participants within a classroom setting – whether online or offline.

A critical pedagogy involves a conscientising response to questions, such as those posed by Fraser in his 2009 work. And so we ought to interrogate our teaching and learning practices by probing: What kind of student have I moulded, shaped and nurtured? What type of student will have a positive impact on society? Have I equipped students adequately to go out into the world, establish a viable and productive life and contribute positively to improving society? Are our masterfully crafted policies envisioning glorified graduate attributes truly achieving its educational mission? If not, we then perpetuate unemployment, unemployability and non-employment and are directly morally responsible for the degeneration of society.

These questions require a repositioning from a perspective of conscientising that requires interrogation, if we want to change the present status quo of our education, which is deeply uneven; often exacerbated by institutional cultures of 'compliance, fear [*and*] the suppression and loss of voice' (Zinn & Rodgers 2012, p. 76). Otherwise, academics then become obsolete, leading to a question of whether they will need to find alternative ways of making a living, instead of indulging in a perpetual, damaging, abusive practice that amounts to academic terrorism.

When contemplating local solutions for quality education, considering the numerous uncertainties that prevail, South African HEIs can model solutions from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) or the other BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) countries with similar student demographics to South Africa, facing similar trials regarding students' pedagogical challenges with ERL. There are also developed and developing countries further abroad that South Africa can draw solutions from.

The ABR renditions amplify the gross injustice of having students who are mentally, physically and emotionally unwell participate in teaching and learning. There is a gaping disjuncture between the embodied realities of students' well-being and the disembodied nature of the education they were receiving behind screens. Bearing in mind the scant attention paid to students' subjective embodied experiences during ERL, as evident in the findings, a further recommendation would be to consider 'body pedagogy' as a solution (Rich 2010). Although Rich (2010) embeds her study within health practice, she integrates it with pedagogical activity and education policy. According to her, the introduction of academics to an approach of 'body pedagogics' can help integrate embodiment as a core value of pedagogy and instructional design. Body pedagogics emphasises learning as an essential and explicit physically embodied process, which can be translated into curriculum, practice and education policy.

Helen Owton (2017), in her book Doing poetic inquiry*, offers a call towards greater corporeal engagement in both living and research, a call to return to the body. These perspectives lend to interdisciplinarity – as is indicated in this monograph. While this study leans towards performance and performance praxis (particularly contemporary dance), there is the possibility for further creative inquiry towards potential further research and analysis in the areas presented in and through this monograph. The breadth and depth of ABR and creative research practice are expanding, widening its umbrella towards greater inclusivity, covering areas that include narrative inquiry and fiction-based research, poetic inquiry and music as method (Leavy 2015, 2017), alongside those briefly engaged here: in the form of the photo-essay, contemporary dance theatre (and to the extent that two of the studies are filmed, also film). To expand upon this work, future research could investigate potential intersections between various forms of artistic expression, as well as their pedagogical implications.*

All too often, ABR is situated as supplementary, rather than central, within academic frameworks. Perhaps, as this monograph partly illustrates, there is potential to incorporate these methodologies more firmly within academic programmes and courses. This would enable wider training and exposure to these varied approaches, which in turn, has fertile potential for

the production of more diverse research to emerge across disciplinary fields within the academy. Such integrated and interdisciplinary engagements could provide rich insights into the embodied experiences of both students and lecturers (and beyond, contingent on the scope of the research project). This expanded scope – made possible through ABR and associated creative research practice and praxis – has the capacity to enable transformative research that does not leverage students (and indeed other vulnerable groups) as mere data, but preferably finds more human and humane engagements that challenge more static modes of research (and in this instance, pedagogy).

Coetzer and Ebrahim in their 2023 unpublished poem are all too familiar with the challenges students face in South African HE. As academics, educators or artists, they are immersed in a space of 'knowing' within the HE environment. The work is created during the most dismal time of isolation, fear and anxiety among students. Their poem 'Locked In', inscribed during the hard lockdown, poignantly captures the vivid and evocative images emerging from the study and offers some hope of a transformed education – 'radical empathy'.

Locked In

Cracked earth
Chapped lips
An empty bottle
lusting for sips

The globe flickered
Closed eyes to the skies
No message to seed sighs
The reservoir of data
and ink had dried

The tick-tock of the
grandfather clock
No longer the bedrock of
my security

The glass shatters
Cutting through self-pity
The shimmer of the
candle spreads light on
the words I had written

Slimmer the hope
in tumultuous times
Breathing a vision for
sharper arrows

(Coetzer & Ebrahim 2023 – unpublished poem, reproduced with permission of the copyright holders)

The tone is one of desolation and yearning, echoing the sentiments felt by the research participants. The poem opens with stark imagery: 'Cracked earth / Chapped lips / An empty bottle / lusting for sips'. These lines immediately evoke a similar sense of dryness and thirst, both literally and metaphorically, experienced by the students during the hard lockdown. The cracked earth and chapped lips suggest a parched, barren landscape, which aptly symbolises an emotional and intellectual drought – themes that emerged strongly from the data.

The 'empty bottle / lusting for sips' introduces a personification of inanimate objects, emphasising a deep craving for fulfilment or sustenance of support for learning, while in a state of physical, mental, emotional and social isolation. The theme of drought and desolation extends into the second stanza, where 'The globe flickered' and 'Closed eyes to the skies / No message to seed sighs' captured by the imagery, become more abstract, and similar to the students, lonely and remote, suggests a loss of connection or communication on a global scale. The 'reservoir of data and ink had dried' further reinforces the notion of depletion, implying a cessation of knowledge, creativity or expression in a forlorn space, while pressure to perform academically mounted.

Reminiscent of the sudden onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic, the third stanza unfolds a temporal disruption, with the reference to 'The tick-tock of the / grandfather clock'. The clock, typically a symbol of stability and continuity, is seen as no longer 'the bedrock of / my security'. This disruption of temporal certainty adds a layer of existential anxiety, akin to how students felt during the hard lockdown, as the once predictable, scheduled flow of time was no longer a source of comfort.

Not unlike the breaking point students experienced, in the fourth stanza, the shattering of glass, 'The glass shatters / Cutting through self-pity', marks a pivotal moment in the lives of students. This violent break can be interpreted as a cathartic release in this poem – it may signify a similar disruption of the cycle of despair by the subsequent 'shimmer of the / candle' spreading light on the written words. Perhaps the data drawn from the research could evoke signs of enlightenment and revelation for the future of education in our country. Perhaps, for the students, the candle may not wither into complete darkness, devoid of illumination, clarity and understanding. Hope could be conceivable in breaking the boundaries that entangle us:

> In its most general and simplistic terms, the idea behind the usefulness of autobiographical reflection is in the process of reflecting on the past from the perspective of the present where one achieves understanding that will hopefully lead into a better future. (Abbs 1974, in Tidwell et al. 2009, p. 5)

Chapter 10

There is liberation in breaking 'rules'

> [... *s*]uch methodological inventiveness is not 'innovation for the sake of innovation'. Rather, it is innovation for the sake of enhancing and nuancing interplay between inner and outer dialogues, personal, cultural, and educational implications, self-understanding and social change [...] offer[*ing*] rich, embodied portraits of educational experiences that are interwoven in dense tapestries of relationships with people, places, and histories and yet are also shifting, fluid, and alive with transformative possibility. (Pithouse-Morgan et al. 2014b)

In daring to 'dance' the data, we discovered the artist in me by approaching the work from a radically different paradigm, one that has similarities with conventional paradigms but is flexible enough to be creatively transformative. In so doing, we discovered the true, authentic me, remaining uncertain whether we are right but then questioning the need to be right and what even IS right? Self-study helped us touch parts of my own personality – incessantly curious, always discovering and eagerly risk-taking. It also helped us confront our inner prejudices against humanity – our preconceived perspectives on HOW people ought to respond without fully understanding context and circumstances. We thus open, more than ever, to personal, intellectual and professional growth. This study's focus on inclusionary, embodied engagements has affirmed our own knowing in relation to the real value of practice and learning.

Clare and I discovered that by engaging in reflective–reflexive self-study or self-enquiry, we explored our own professional practices with

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a different and nuanced lens, which facilitates our learning processes and professional research and teaching development. In this way, it improved our effectiveness in our respective fields, making us more conscious of the need to challenge conventional models and modes of research and pedagogical praxis. As both researchers and participants, we critically examined our own beliefs, actions and experiences, aiming to enhance our professional knowledge and make positive changes in our practice.

The collaborative co-authoring strengthened the relationship and the trust between us. In a sense, Clare and I, the subjects of this study and the researchers ourselves, became one and the same – a hyphenated identity of sorts. We acknowledged our vulnerabilities as researchers, academics and writers, as well as engaged in collective solution-seeking during the process. Hence, creating a deeper, more authentic understanding of ourselves as educator–researchers and also gaining renewed respect for the transformative potentials of embodied practice. Together we realised the immense richness of process over product in research. This co-scholarship was gratifying, which has us contemplating further collaborative research endeavours.

The self-study offered a deeper understanding that this type of research defines the intent and nature of the inquiry, not just the research methodology. Probably most gratifying, is the confirmation that research CAN occur in reverse – that there is no set linear progression – similar to thought, it can be randomised and then slowly organised into multiple potential meanings. Through this experience, we affirmed more strongly, the participatory, iterative and generative nature of research. We further acknowledged this self-study was, in itself, practice-based research rooted in creative practice and pedagogical praxis.

The ability to breathe life into undeviating text was empowering. Our defiance of linear sequencing in processing was enabling. We came to a clearer understanding that disorganised intellectual discovery is liberating. We discerned that creativity is innate and often thwarted by cognitive conditioning. *Dianna initially concerned herself whether intellectual analysis would be lost in the process and instead found that 'Creativity is intelligence having fun' (Albert Einstein)*. Thinking 'without the box' offered us a greater degree of freedom of expression, as we crisscrossed, merged and blurred the lines that shackled our siloed habits of thinking. We recognised that practice is not merely the application of theoretical knowledge to instrumental ends but a form of knowledge in its own right. We discovered the organic nature of intuition in making art, not emanating from any particular cognitive operation but unfolding naturally from imagination, creativity and importantly too, collaboration.

We learned it is useful to unlearn and re-school into better ways of navigating within the academic enterprise. That self-reflexive inquiry enables an exploration into 'what we know but do not know that we know; what we do not know and want to know; how to value subjectivity' (Bolton 2010). We discovered that unaccustomed knowledge dared to rouse, 'a different future beyond the pandemic [...] a radical re-imagining of humanness and the ethics of being-human-in-the-world' (Misra, in Govinden 2020). Booker Prize Winner 2017, Arundhati Roy's sentiment that 'There's really no such thing as the voiceless [...] there are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard' has been a guide for us. Therefore, the use of embodied practice and its capacity to transcend spoken and written words as a new academic territory will allow us to continue to travel with incremental confidence as we engage, reflect and learn new ways of being.

Our immersive and in-depth engagement of research in motion effected change, even in a minimal, yet significant way. We came to recognise the futility of latent research. This was practice-based research in action, meant to contribute towards a meaningful impact on society and in research models. It is positioned within a growing field of arts-based and non-ABR that adopt arts-based methodologies. In this, it potentially also contributes to a profoundly broader theoretical and epistemological understanding of social constructivism in HE teaching and learning. As with Govinden (2017), we hope this work:

> Slowly transmutes into a liberatory project in the widest Freirean sense [...] where the objectified (passive and coerced into anonymity through a weighty palimpsest of systemic factors) become free, vibrant, self-supporting, active [*partners*]. Breaking down our disciplinary walls [...] history [...] becomes a richly rewarding educational enterprise! (p. 58)

We trust too that while this study explores innovative methodologies, it makes a novel contribution to the limitless, uninhibited ways of doing research.

Conclusion

This study has shed light on the transformative potentials of embodied, arts-based and self-reflexive methodologies in HE research and pedagogy. Even though Dianna's approach happened in reverse, and our resulting collaboration on this manuscript has also been, at times, unconventional and messy – we suggest here that there are multiple avenues for further exploration. These are not only limited to theoretical frameworks and applied research but also relative to artistic co-creation, beyond the confines of academia and its contexts. The following recommendations highlight possible future research trajectories.

Expanding the scope of embodied research methodologies

While this study takes root in embodied practice as a research methodology, further research could explore its applicability across different disciplines and contexts. These could include STEM fields, to assess whether movement-based, arts-based and experiential learning techniques enhance conceptual understanding. Another area that begs exploration is relative to embodied methodologies across geographical contexts in the Global North and the Global South, and how these impact and influence their efficacy. Another intersection within an emerging field of research could be the intersection of embodied research with neurodiversity – through explorations into how movement-based and non-textual research methods have capacities to create inclusive knowledge systems.

Collaborative knowledge production and co-scholarship

The collaborative nature of this research, with its multi-pronged influences and inputs, has been integral to its outcomes. Future studies could pick up these explorations in relation to ethical and epistemological dimensions of co-authorship in embodied and ABR. There is also space for the development of co-mentorship models that encourage reciprocal knowledge exchange between students and lecturers in ABR contexts.

Research as activism – extending impact beyond academia

This study positions practice-based research through ABR as a vehicle for social change and a movement towards social justice (particularly in contexts of South African HEIs). This could be extended through further engagement around the efficacy of ABR as a tool for intervention in community-based and participatory research projects. Other possibilities here include research into the ways in which non-textual research findings can be made accessible and impactful outside of traditional academic publishing models.

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This monograph is a significant, innovative and explorative work that engages with challenges of the subjective and lived experiences of South African higher education students during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and subsequent national, high-level lockdown periods. It highlights aspects of student learning that traditional methodologies often overlook, offering a reflective account of the researchers' own journey in navigating this complex data.

The collaboration between Moodley and Craighead provides a dynamic dialogue, showcasing how unconventional, arts-based methodologies can reveal deeper insights. Rather than guiding student participants through a typical arts-based exploration and study, the authors used methods such as photo-essay and modern dance choreography to capture and interpret interview data, connecting it to their own experiences as academics within South Africa's higher education system. This approach honours students as embodied participants shaped by colonial structures, rather than reducing them to data points.

The self-reflective study takes readers on a transformative research journey – particularly Moodley, who is new to practice-based research, supported by Craighead's expertise in site-specific dance theatre and posthuman subjectivities. Their creative methodologies expose forms of discrimination that conventional approaches often fail to illuminate.

This scholarly work will resonate not only with academics and researchers seeking more humanising ways of working with lived experience data, but also with practitioners – offering a valuable model for overcoming disciplinary constraints.

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