# STRENGTHENING THE REFLEXIVE IN CRITICAL PRAXIS: EXPLORING A CONTEMPLATIVE, COMPASSIONATE PEDAGOGY

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# Introduction

Drama for Life's 10th anniversary provided the opportunity to reflect on the Critical Reflexive Praxis (CRP) course for Masters students. The department's mission is to inspire social transformation and healing, with a particular focus on HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence, prejudice against the LGBTIQ+ community and experiences of poverty and marginalisation. Given the complexity of these issues, and the imperative to create opportunities for behavioural change, CRP was incorporated from the start. As a new member of the DFL staff, I am evaluating the CRP course to suggest additions based on feedback from staff and students, and my own research in the emerging field of contemplative neuroscience.

The debates on the decolonisation and transformation of education in South Africa have focused predominantly on *what* is taught in a decolonised curriculum. Yet, there is equal need to address the question of *how*. It is of critical importance that the pedagogy is aligned with social justice work when training young activists, in order to offer them lifelong skills for wisdom and sustainability.

# Method

Population: Drama for Life staff and students.

Data Collection: Interviews, departmental meetings, presentations, primary texts including reports of interventions.

Analysis: Inductive and theoretical thematic analysis.

**Interventions**: Theatre performances and community engagement projects created and implemented by Drama for Life.

# **Preliminary Findings**

Staff reported five key challenge areas identified while facilitating student learning:

- 1. The high prevalence of trauma in the South African context, which undermines students' ability to learn;
- **2. Internalised oppression** based on race, gender and sexuality, which is then projected outwards;
- 3. The challenge of holding paradox and complexity, without jumping to swift, superficial solutions;
- **4. The need for personal sustainability** in the activism space, and
- 5. The fear of writing reflexively, revealing vulnerabilities and weaknesses, as well as talents and strengths.

Which pedagogy can best support students to overcome their vulnerabilities, while still encouraging them to be critical thinkers? Can compassion, in its gentle and fierce forms, offer additional skills for young activists?

# References

Orgyen Trinley Dorje (2014) *The Heart is Noble*. Shambala Publications

Kaufman, P. (2017) Critical contemplative pedagogy. *Radical Pedagogy*, 14(1), pp.1-20

Sizemore-Barber, A. (2017) National Arts Festival. *Theatre Journal*, 69(3), 419-423

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# **Combining Pedagogies**

## Critical Pedagogy

Advocates of a critical approach state the importance of freeing people from oppression, through the awakening of a critical consciousness, in order to motivate them to affect change in the world.

"Critical pedagogy, as a form of teaching and learning is explicitly intended to problematize these social ills so that students and teachers can work together towards their eradication (Kaufman, 2017:5).

## **Contemplative Pedagogy**

According to Zajonc (2013), this approach includes "educational methods that support the development of student attention, emotional balance, empathetic connection, compassion, and altruistic behavior, while also providing new pedagogical techniques that support creativity and the learning of course content."

Contemplative pedagogy, like contemplative practices, revolve around introspection, reflection and attention." (Kaufman, 2017:5).

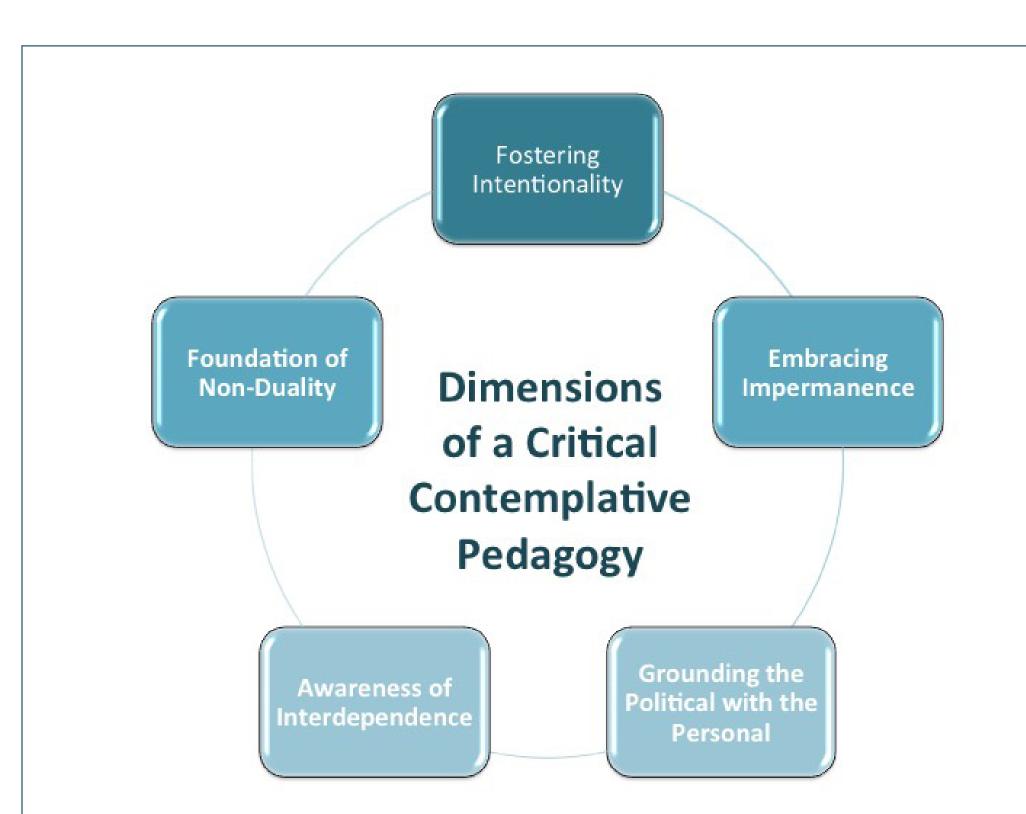


Fig 1. Kaufman's Five Dimensions of a Critical Contemplative Pedagogy

# Towards a Critical Contemplative Pedagogy

The importance of critical theory and practice is widely accepted within tertiary education, especially when studying the need for change within society. The application of the contemplative is slowly gaining momentum.

# Five Dimensions of a Critical Contemplative Pedagogy

- 1. Fostering Intentionality requires a genuine commitment to personal transformation, alongside social transformation. Activists need to look at their own unseen motivations.
- **2. A Foundation of Non-Duality** refers to a mature state of consciousness, where we move beyond the binaries of either-or, and leave behind self-centredness. Compassionate social action is not viewed as us helping others, but about our mutual liberation.
- **3. Awareness of Interdependence** describes the state of profound connectedness. All of life is linked and we are continuously interacting with the world around us. "Everything we do matters because the effects of our actions reach far beyond ourselves." (Ogyen Trinley Dorje, 2014)
- **4. Embracing Impermanence** reminds us of the transient nature of all things. We envision change and work to bring it about, without attaching to the outcomes.
- **5. Grounding the Political with the Personal** supports the shift from self-interest to social interest, by connecting with a felt experience of harm.

# **Projects and Interventions**

# HEAIDS

The project asked in what ways critical reflexive praxis could reduce HIV/AIDS stigma and better prepare professionals-in-training to work in the field of sexual health. It explored whether this pedagogy was able to shift attitudes from fear and prejudice to compassion and embodied knowledge. Embodied, arts-based, learner-centred education were identified as valuable in supporting behavioural change.

#### Afriqueer

This performance is a dreamscape, a queer meditation created to open up a space for reflection, compassion and understanding of, and for, queer identities. The audience is challenged to contemplate masculinities, sexualities and relationships differently, in non-judgmental ways. The performance directly challenges tendencies to discriminate against LGBTIQ+ groups, and critiques the view that homosexuality is UnAfrican. The prevalent "binary cites a unified, heterosexual, African culture in opposition to an imported Western sexual pluralism. Afriqueer encourages audiences to participate in a new healing narrative" (Sizemore-Barber, 2017).



Photo 1: Afriqueer Performance. Photo credit: Goethe Institute

#### **Eden Park**

This community engagement project is located in a coloured township, with high incidents of drug use. DFL has a long-standing relationship with the community and the engagement has shifted focus, as mutual understanding has deepened. There was orginally a 'problem focus' which has shifted to Appreciative Enquiry, in order to see the best in people and their environment.

"The community has already come up with solutions so we come in as a catalyst that enables the community to see their gifts, and bring them into conscious awareness. At DFL we work a lot with the shadow, which can be tiring and overwhelming, but we can also see the ability within each human being, and the community, by appreciating what is good." DFL Lecturer

#### **#Build a President**

This social change project encourages all citizens of South Africa to speak truth to power. It asks every individual what they would do if they became President of South Africa, to get them in touch with their own sense of agency, democratic responsibility and voice.

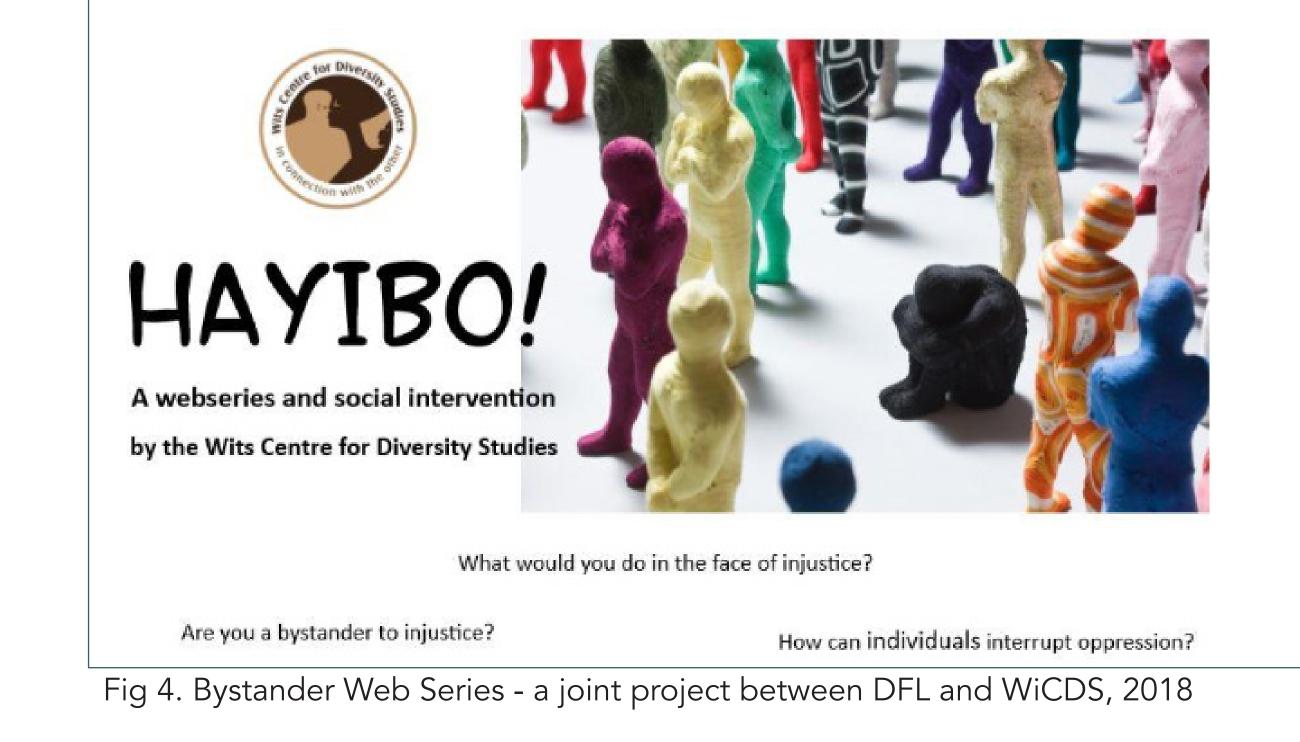


Fig 3. #BuildAPresident Postcard Campaign, 2015

In recent years, RSA experienced what Fanon, Freire and Memmi foretold, that the colonized can become the colonizer. This campaign highlighted the nature of interdependence, recalling what Mandela had promised, "When I walked out of prison, that was my mission, to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both... For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."

#### Bystander Series 'Hayibo'

DFL and the Wits Centre for Diversity Studies explored the social psychological phenomenon in which individuals are less likely offer help to a victim of injustice if other people are present. The intention of the web series is to stimulate a national conversation about diversity and difference in South Africa from a critical perspective, interrogating the intersectionality of oppression. The web series asks viewers to question: "What would you do in the face of injustice? Are you a bystander to injustice? and How can individuals interrupt oppression?"



# **Casestudy Analysis**

DFL's performances, direct action campaigns and community engagement projects, have all served to address different dimensions of a Critical Contemplative Pedagogy. In the past, though, these were not explicitly taught, but a shift to an integration of contemplative practices, and the honouring of first-person experience, through reflexivity, allow for a more conscious engagment with these valuable dimensions of intentionality, non-duality, interdependence, impermanence and the intersection of the personal and political. For activism to be effective, in both the long and short term, it demands an understanding of the importance of building relationships.

# Practices for a Critical Contemplative Curriculum

With the intention of secularising contemplative practices, so that they can be utilised in multi-cultural and multi-religious contexts, I have found it useful to divide them into Cool, Warm and Hot Practices.

Contemplative Practices		
Category	Practice Examples	
Cool	Feet on the Floor	
	Settling the Mind	
	Regulating the Breath	
	Body Scan	
	Mindful Movement	
Warm	Self-Compassion	
	Compassion for Others	
	Sending Well Wishes	
Hot	Transforming Strong Emotions	
	Facing Difficulties using RAIN	
	Forgiveness	
	Celebrating Success	

Table 1: Categories of Contemplative Practice

For work with passionate activists, it is also necessary to address the issue of strong emotions, in order to work towards their wisdom aspects.

Transforming Strong Emotions (Mind Poisons)				
Strong Emotion		Wisdom Aspect		
Anger	Patience	Mirror-like wisdom		
Jealousy	Joy	All-accomplishing wisdom		
Greed/Desire	Compassion	Discriminating wisdom		
Pride	Equanimity	Wisdom of equality		
Ignorance	Wisdom	All-pervading wisdom		

Table 2: Mind Poisons, their Antidotes and their Wisdom Aspects

# Summary

Combining the contemplative with the critical promises a potent pedagogy and a powerful praxis. Contemplation helps prevent burnout of activists, but also has the potential to convert the accumulation of knowledge into wisdom and skillful action. This offers a delicate activism rooted in relationships of connection, not otherness. Work to effect social change becomes a joint project, seeing others as equal, and acknowledging that we need to reflect deeply on our own conditioning, in order to create a better world.

### Future Research

DFL is currently seeking funding from Mind & Life in order to develop a collaborative, interdisciplinary research agenda for African Contemplative Practices, that alleviate suffering and enhance human flourishing. These are predominantly embodied, movement-based and community-orientated.

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