

## **Journeys across Difference: Pre-Service Teacher Education Students' Perceptions of a Pedagogy of Discomfort in a Digital Storytelling Project in South Africa**

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### **Abstract**

Understanding and managing diverse classrooms is an important competency for teachers in South Africa today. Critics of the dominant approach to teaching on and with difference in pre-service teacher education argue that it mostly promotes de-contextualised celebrations of diverse cultures without addressing critical issues of power and social forces. One of the reasons that educators shy away from engaging with issues of power and privilege in the classroom is the fear of highly explosive emotions that might emerge. However, proponents of the 'affective turn' (Berlant, 2008; Ahmed, 2004; Ahmed, 2010; Clough and Halley, 2007; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010) in the Social Sciences argue that it is important to work with the emotions that govern our classrooms for social transformation in students to happen.

This study pilots an innovative approach for teaching on and with difference in a South African pre-service teacher education classroom, combining a digital storytelling process with participatory learning and action techniques and a reflective essay. Framed by Boler and Zembylas' (2003) work on the politics of emotions and feminist writings on the role of affect and public feelings, we explored how students experienced and negotiated their cognitive and emotional journey in this project. An interpretive analysis of data collected through focus groups with selected students revealed that this classroom was a divided, complex and contested space, but through interplay of emotional and cognitive labour as part of sharing and listening openly to each others' stories, students began to critically engage with unspoken emotional rules and power dynamics governing the classroom and their lives, disrupting some deeply rooted beliefs and assumptions.

**Keywords:** affective turn, digital storytelling, higher education, pedagogy of discomfort, politics of emotions, social engagement, South Africa, transformation.

### **Introduction**

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Over the last 18 years higher education in South Africa has experienced rapid and deliberate racial integration; however, social integration or cohesion among lecturers and students are lagging behind (Jansen, 2004; Pattman, 2010). While students of different social backgrounds may now learn together in classroom spaces, their friendships and relationships are still often formed based on common social backgrounds built on shared language and culture, fuelled by deeply rooted beliefs and assumptions that impact on their conscious or unconscious choice of social engagements (Jansen, 2010; Soudien, 2012). These notions frame our understanding of ‘race’ or ‘culture’ as social and political constructions embedded in socio-spatial, political and historical structures, and have real and uneven material consequences linked directly to students’ sense of privilege or oppression.

Boler and Zembylas (2003) suggest that one way to overcome these barriers to engagement across difference, in particular in post-conflict societies such as South Africa, is to acknowledge and work with the emotions governing our classrooms. One such post-conflict pedagogy based on intentional engagement with emotions is the ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ (2003). These authors maintain that allowing emotions into the classroom and critically reflecting on their origins may help to challenge dominant beliefs, social habits and normative practices that sustain social inequities, thus creating possibilities for individual and social transformation.

This paper reflects on a digital storytelling project at a Western Cape higher education institution which took up the challenge to introduce the concept of the ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ in a final-year pre-service teacher training programme, to facilitate students’ engagement across differences. Dealing with difference is essential for these students in their future profession. The Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications Policy (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011) sets out roles and competencies for new teachers which inform teacher education curricula, including: ‘Newly qualified teachers must understand diversity in the South African context in order to teach in a manner that includes all learners’ (53).

Although the Ministry of Education promotes a critical, anti-racist approach to teaching about and dealing with issues of diversity (Desai et al., 2004: 58), the current practice predominantly promotes decontextualised celebrations of multiple identities and difference, without addressing critical issues of power and social forces. Critics of this practice argue that it is not critical or transformatory enough to bring about change in student teachers’

attitudes and behaviours (Carrim, 2000; Hemson, 2006; James et al., 2006; Alexander, 2011; Mentz and Van der Walt, 2007).

This study pilots an innovative approach for teaching on and with difference in a South African pre-service teacher education classroom, combining a digital storytelling process with participatory learning and action (PLA) techniques and a reflective essay. For this paper a digital story is defined as a personal narrative which combines voice, sound and images into a short video (Lambert, 2013). The standard digital storytelling model as developed by the Center for Digital Storytelling (Lambert, 2013) was expanded to allow students to enter a space of discomfort, primarily through sharing their life stories using PLA techniques (Bozalek, 2011) with peers outside their usual social comfort zones. This process ended with a screening of their stories in front of a larger audience comprising friends, parents and other family members. Students reflected on this process in an essay submitted at the end of the digital storytelling project.

The main research question is whether or not this approach allowed students a more critical and transformatory approach to engaging with and across difference than more traditional interventions on diversity in the classroom with less emphasis on students' emotional engagement with each other. To be successful this intervention would lead to a change in the deep-seated assumptions and beliefs that students carry about the 'other' as a first step to transformation of their social engagements, creating an opportunity for students to allow engagement across difference that could go beyond the mere sharing of physical classroom space.

While we agree with Boler and Zembylas (2003) that a pedagogy of discomfort asks both learners and educators to move out of their comfort zones and to critically reflect on their emotional engagements with each other, this paper focuses on the student experience. We first discuss the interconnectedness of emotions and cognition as promoted by the 'affective turn' in the Social Sciences and Humanities and its specific application in Boler and Zembylas' 'pedagogy of discomfort' as well as the expanded digital storytelling model adopted here to allow students to enter a space of emotional and cognitive labour. Findings will be discussed drawing from feminist literature on public feelings (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2008; Ahmed, 2004) and Boler's and Zembylas' work on the politics of emotions in the classroom (Boler and Zembylas, 2003; Boler, 1999; Zembylas, 2005).

This paper will thus add to a small but growing body of literature that addresses students' engagement with difference in South African higher education in ways that could potentially lead to a less socially divided student body, focusing on the affective interplay of emotions and cognition in teaching spaces (Bozalek, 2011; Hemson, Moletsane and Muthukrishna, 2001; Jansen, 2008; Soudien, 2012).

### **Post-conflict Pedagogies and the Affective Turn**

In recent years research in Education started to contest the traditional dichotomy of reason versus emotions found in Western culture which views the learner as a 'disembodied, detached and neutral knower' (Zembylas, 2005: 7). However, most research around emotions in learning and teaching largely views emotions or affect as private, individual and internal states of being, placing emphasis on intra- or interpersonal relationships (Zembylas, 2005, 2007, 2011). This focus fails to acknowledge the role of emotions in a broader historical and socio-cultural context, as a site of social control but also of political resistance (Boler, 1999).

There is growing interest in the literature based on the emergence of 'the affective turn' in the Humanities and Social Sciences to see 'emotions-as-practices'. The affective turn is concerned with the relationship of body and mind, of reason and passion, emotions and cognition (Berlant, 2008; Ahmed, 2004; Ahmed, 2010; Clough and Halley, 2007; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). These authors emphasise that only by understanding how the mind and body, action and passions work together can we understand how power circulates through feelings and how knowing is affected by feeling (Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012). Emotions in the classroom are seen as relational, happening in a shared political space 'in which students and teachers interact with implications in larger political and cultural struggles' (Zembylas, 2005: xviii).

Of particular interest for this study is Ahmed's (2004, 2010) work on the cultural politics of emotions. She argues that what makes us happy is culturally and historically pre-defined and not just individual taste, defining social group belonging thus: 'groups cohere around a shared orientation toward some things as being good, treating some things and not others as the cause of delight' (2010: 35). Affect is thus directive and impacts on how we act. She explores how emotions register in the body and are passed on from body to body, how bodies move closer or avoid specific objects or subjects because of the emotions attached. She talks about the contagiousness of emotions, of how some emotions stick and others don't: 'there is a

political struggle about how we attribute good and bad feelings which hesitates around the apparently simple question of who introduces what feelings to whom'. Thus a simple feeling such as happiness can become intensely political.

This complex process of negotiating emotions is also evident in Berlant's work on 'public feelings' and an 'intimate public' (2008), which explores female writers' attempts to resist dominant discourses by 'generating an affective and intimate public sphere that seeks to harness the power of emotions' (12). This allows an 'emotional generality among women', a collective narrative which transcends historical, racial and class boundaries (5) and thus creates an intimate public who can identify with these stories by 'sharing a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience' (vii). These notions are helpful to understand the affective interplay of emotions and cognition experienced by the students in this study through sharing their stories with an intimate public in the process of developing their digital stories.

### **The Pedagogy of Discomfort – Dealing with Difference Differently in South Africa**

One such pedagogy that focuses on the political economy of emotions and requires both intellectual and emotional labour is the pedagogy of discomfort. This pedagogical approach stipulates that for both educators and students to develop a deeper understanding for their own and their shared past and present, it is necessary to move outside their comfort zone (Boler and Zembylas, 2003). By comfort zone is meant the 'inscribed cultural and emotional terrains that we occupy less by choice but by virtue of hegemony' (111). This pedagogical approach is intentionally adopted to enhance the learning experience of students who struggle to understand/engage with social injustices (Zembylas and McGlynn, 2010).

While this process of shattering world views can be deeply unsettling, and produce feelings of anger, grief, disappointment and resistance (Boler and Zembylas, 2003: 111), it can also lead to critical thinking and inquiry (128), 'self-discovery, hope, passion and a sense of community' (129). These are very hopeful assumptions, opening up spaces for learning and transformation.

There is a small but growing body of literature on the use of the pedagogy of discomfort in South Africa to explore issues of difference, such as Hemson et al.'s study (2001) in a South African Teacher Education programme to engage with issues of race and other forms of oppression. Another example is a collaborative research project in the Western Cape which

investigated a course offered for Social Work, Occupational Therapy and Psychology students from two different universities in the Western Cape to discuss issues of community, self and identity (Carolissen et al., 2011; Swartz et al., 2009; Rohleder et al., 2008; Leibowitz et al., 2010; Bozalek and Biersteker, 2010; Bozalek, 2011).

Both studies highlight the importance of creating an opportunity for students to engage collaboratively and across difference to become more aware of differences and inequitable socio-economic, cultural and political practices. The second study made intense use of PLA techniques, through which students developed a richer experiential and conceptual understanding of power relations (Bozalek, 2011: 481). PLA techniques, such as Community Maps or the River of Life, are open-ended, flexible, visual learning methods that allow students with diverse academic literacy backgrounds to explore how they have been placed 'in relation to resources and the privilege and harm emerging from their positioning in relation to resources in the light of their own experiences' (Bozalek, 2011: 475), on their own and in dialogue. These techniques can promote critical reflection regarding the social arrangements of inequality and privilege (Bozalek, 2011). Of particular importance is the collaborative interaction PLA techniques provide for differently positioned students to share their perspectives and begin to engage with each other (Bozalek and Biersteker, 2010: 554).

Hemson et al. (2001) emphasise the importance of concluding the experiential learning process with a re-evaluation of the experienced emotions, to help students locate themselves in the wider socio-economic context and explore the complex interrelationships among different forms of oppression. Both studies raise important questions around the necessity of engaging students with issues of difference, even when resistance is encountered; as Swartz et al. state (2009: 11): 'we have both a right and a responsibility to require students to engage in such discussions'.

### **Digital Storytelling as a Space for Emotional and Cognitive Labour**

In this study we followed the digital storytelling model developed by the Center of Digital Storytelling (CDS) at the University of Berkeley (Lambert, 2013). The CDS has its roots in the community arts movement, which is strongly situated in a social change framework (Lambert, 2009). At the core of their stories is an 'act of self-discovery, and a means to localise and control the context of their presentation' (Lambert, 2009: 29).

The CDS's model of creating digital stories is specific and typically involves a three-day workshop where participants collaboratively develop their stories. The communal sharing of stories is the main element in the process of digital storytelling, called a 'story circle' (Lambert, 2013). Because these digital stories originate directly from participants' lived experiences, and often deal with significant episodes, the process tends to be very emotional. Lambert (2013) maintains that by listening to and sharing these often 'big emotions' that surface especially in the story circle, one can start make meaning of one's story and help the audience 'understand the journey' contained within it (57). As he explains it:

...having an awareness of the contrasting and complex nature of a story's emotional content will not only help get us in touch with the core of the story's meaning, but also determine which emotions to include, and in what sequence to present them to help the audience understand the story (58).

The product of this workshop is an individual account that 'can often be confessional, moving, and express troubles as well as triumphs...' (Hartley and McWilliam, 2009: 4). This authenticity has been one of the most powerful elements of digital stories, leading to intense emotional engagement by both the author and audience, as Burgess argues (2006: 210):

Somewhat paradoxically from a critical perspective, it is the very qualities that mark digital stories as uncool, conservative, and ideologically suspect – 'stock' tropes, nostalgia, even sentimentality – that give them the power of social connectivity, while the sense of authentic self-expression that they convey lowers the barriers to empathy.

There seems to be a need and an opportunity in higher education to expand this rather prescriptive digital storytelling model, where interaction with participants is confined to the days they spend in the workshop, to allow a more critical engagement with texts and reflections on the process.

Work on digital storytelling in the Humanities by Oppermann (2008), Coventry (2008) and Benmayor (2008) are examples of such an expanded digital storytelling model. They explore the potential of digital storytelling for a student's development of voice and intellectual engagement with issues of dominance and marginalisation in a semester-long course, by complementing the experiential, emotional learning through the digital storytelling process with a more cognitive, intellectual analysis of these stories, theorising them through engagement with critical texts and the writing of reflective essays. Calling on Boler's work (1999), Oppermann states that this expanded digital storytelling process allows for an

intersection of the cognitive and the affective and can help ‘reclaim emotions as sources of social and political resistance’ (184).

## **Background to the Study**

This study is set within the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences in a South African University of Technology based in the Western Cape. This paper is part of a larger research project, started in 2010, which investigates the use of digital storytelling in final-year pre-service teacher education, to promote digital literacies, foster student engagement, reflection and dealing with issues of diversity (Chigona et al., 2012a; Chigona et al., 2012b; Condy et al., 2011; Ivala et al., 2012).

This study focuses on the 2011 student cohort, who developed digital stories as part of their teaching portfolios. The brief was broad and asked students to reflect on a critical incident where they encountered issues of difference, and how this impacted on their teacher identity. This digital storytelling project was a complex eight-week project; students attended weekly workshops closely aligned to the CDS model, such as a focus on story circles, and were guided and supported through the process by a large team of lecturers and student facilitators. The project ended with a screening of the digital stories to which students invited parents, family, friends, former teachers and other people important in their lives<sup>2</sup>. In addition to the digital story, students had to submit a reflective essay in which they reflected on the process of developing their digital story.

A series of activities was designed to help students explore their own identity and life trajectory in relation to the wider student population and related issues around race, class and gender, such as a ‘Who am I’ exercise (Carrim 2000) or PLA technique, the ‘River of Life’ (Bozalek, 2011), a visual technique in which students identify, draw and share critical incidents along their own life journeys. The students’ demographic composition was diverse in terms of gender, race and language (see Table 1). Student groups were randomly selected to encourage students sharing and engaging with each other outside their existing comfort zones and social engagements (Pattman, 2010). Sharing of students’ stories was actively promoted during activities through pairing of students during the writing process and public

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<sup>2</sup> For a selection of digital stories created by these students visit <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL5oHsfRWAnSZI0dAWwPRJad-uevbYfII>



screening of the stories at the end of the project. (See Appendix 1 for an outline of the project.)

Table 1: Students' Racial, Linguistic and Gender Background

<b>Race<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Black	11	20
Coloured	30	55
White	14	25
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	
<b>Language</b>		
English	35	64
Afrikaans	9	16
isiXhosa	11	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	17	31
Female	38	69
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	

## **Methodology**

This study followed an interpretative qualitative research approach. Data were collected through four focus group interviews with students in the project, one day after the final screening of the digital stories. In total 19 self-selected students took part in these conversations, which lasted between one and two hours. We chose focus groups as a method of data collection to create a less intimidating, more gratifying and stimulating space for students than is possible, for example, in a one-to-one interview (Madiz, 2003). We deliberately kept the groups small to allow a safe space for students to reflect on their emotional engagement in the process of creating, sharing and listening to each other's digital stories.

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<sup>3</sup> We are following the Department of Education racial categorization distinguishing between African, Coloured, Indian and White students, which albeit highly contested is unfortunately still widely used (Department of Education 1997).

Although self-selected, we aimed to have focus groups that would mirror the diversity of students in the classroom. Some researchers argue that homogeneous focus groups help in particular marginalised students to collect ‘collective testimonies and group resistance narratives’ (Madiz, 2003: 365), but we followed Pattmann’s argument (2010) that it is of absolute necessity to have conversations in diverse student groups. All authors of this paper were involved in facilitating these focus groups; however, not all of the researchers had met the students before. Authors 1 and 3 had had regular interactions with the students: author 3 as course convenor and author 1 as facilitator of the digital storytelling project. While an existing relationship with a researcher may allow for more informal and deeper conversations, there may also be a possible conflict of interest for students. Some students may feel uncomfortable being honest with their course lecturer who is going to mark their work, or with the digital storyteller facilitator who is invested in the project. Having four focus groups with students facilitated by researchers with varied levels of engagement seemed a viable option to lessen this potential conflict of interest.

The focus groups were loosely structured, which heightened ‘opportunities for participants to decide the direction and content of the discussion’, decreasing the power and control of the facilitator over participants (Madiz, 2003: 371). It is important to note that in this project a focus group was not only an opportunity for data collection for the researchers, but was also seen as an integral part of the reflective process for students. Consequently, while we tried to create spaces for open and unstructured conversation, facilitation of these conversations by the interviewers in terms of asking critical questions that would help students engage in critical reflection was necessary.

Following the approach of qualitative data analysis outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), the interviews were transcribed, searched and organised around emergent themes. Ethics approval was sought through the appropriate institutional channels and students gave informed consent to participate in the study. To foreground the student’s voice in this study we include lengthy quotes in the findings, often in the form of dialogue among students and interviewer to show the rich interactions that took place. We see students both as both as distinctive individuals and embedded in a community of primary importance to them (Henkel, 2000: 250–251). The community in this classroom is mainly defined by students’ racial background, closely linked to their linguistic and cultural background, as will be shown in the findings. Therefore, where possible we add for clarification students’ gender and racial background to the individual quotes.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This study set out to investigate students' perceptions of the potential of a digital storytelling process to learn about and address issues of difference and disrupt students' beliefs and assumptions about each other. In this section we first discuss students' perceptions of the existing social structures and power relations in their classroom, and then explore the emotional and cognitive journey they underwent during the eight weeks of the digital storytelling project (see Appendix 2 for an example of a students' emotional journey throughout the process). Following Ahmed (2010), we were interested in the 'conversion' points: the points where students felt that their perceptions of themselves and 'others' changed, where they experienced 'disrupting moments' (Jansen, 2009). A discussion of potential changes in the way students started to perceive and question current power dynamics and privilege through the digital storytelling process concludes this section.

### ***Students' perceptions of their classroom's social structures and power relations***

The classroom in which this study took place was racially diverse; however, as other authors have noted, racial integration does not equate to social integration in South Africa (Pattman, 2010; Jansen, 2010). The way students described their patterns of social interaction and the way the researchers observed the classroom at the start of the digital storytelling project reflected this segregation. Students identified along racial background and constructed identities in opposition to each other, confirming findings of previous research (Pattman, 2010; Rohleder et al., 2008; Swartz et al., 2009; Bozalek, 2011). The following quotes by a White, Coloured and an African student show the 'taken for granted' feeling of belonging to a certain group across all racial backgrounds:

I felt you know, no offence, well okay from a White person's perspective we don't mix. Coloureds have their groups, Blacks have their groups, foreigners have their groups and White people have their groups and it's been like that for four years. (WF<sup>4</sup>)

Whenever we sit in class we always sit like groups - you'll see. Especially in education you'll see like - the African people sitting on that side - the coloured people on this side - the white people on that side... (CF)

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<sup>4</sup> W=White, A=African, C=Coloured, M=Male, F=Female

We start to be separated from the way we live, where we live - I mean how we do things and then those kind of things are really separating us because if I go with white [students] I know I won't be able to engage them with the way I would engage with my buddies...I mean we've got very few things in common. (AM)

Similarly, the following quote, in which a student tries to explain why his experience of engagement with difference is seemingly unique compared to his peers, showcases the strong impact of the informal segregation students have been exposed to (Dixon and Durrheim, 2003). In many cases this does not provide students with the space to explore and experience the 'other', and consequently limits their engagement with each other:

I used to go to a project in the township schools where we have a camp and we are Coloured people and White people together. So for me that has built a strong foundation, because I engage easily with White people because I am used to that...I have been with them...I know them...I know what they eat...I know how they dance...I know what music they listen to. So for me it goes down to the foundation...in the township, little children should have projects or expose them to other cultures...so that when they come to a university such as this – a mixed one, a diverse one – they relate to it. They understand the environment better. (AM)

Students see this social segregation not just at university but also in the schools they did their teaching practices in:

Yesterday I was in the staff room, and I could actually see: hey there's Bonteheuwel, there's Bishops Court, there's Langa and Nyanga.<sup>5</sup> (CF)

In the students' responses one can also find a sense of how power relations are established among groups. The following quote by an African student reflects his analysis of class dynamics and how this establishes the rules of engagement among students of different colour:

It all goes down to the issue of race, racism and the issue of power play. I think honestly White people have - I think they know that they are the most-haves [as opposed to] the Black ones. ...I mean even though sometimes I feel okay, let me go to whitey and join him if [laughing together]. But again I feel as if they feel that they are superior. Why must they come to us and join the group? So now we must go to them and join the group... (AM)

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<sup>5</sup>Different townships/areas in Cape Town characterised by the racial composition of their population.

This perceived ‘white privilege’, their sense of entitlement (Solomona et al., 2005), also impacts on who dominates the discourse in the classroom. In our interactions with students we noticed a lack of engagement from African students in class discussions around issues of identity and diversity. It is interesting to note how students tried to explain this phenomenon in the focus group discussions by referring to the social capital some students possess, having been exposed to a culture at home and at school that allows a spirit of critical inquiry, which in turn allows students to challenge authority. They also alluded to potentially racist assumptions their lecturers bring to their classrooms, which fostered the feeling of alienation in students (Hemson et al., 2001), as emerged in the following exchange between a Coloured and an African student:

Student 1:     What I’ve witnessed is that most white students are not afraid to speak out to lecturers...they challenge them. (CF)

Student 2:     And they [lecturers] don’t pick out on them too much because they know they are going to be challenged. And as for us they [lecturers] feel like they can say whatever they want because they’ll get away with it, you know what I mean? (AM)

Student 1:     We need to go be equipped as well, to be able to challenge [them]. (CF)

These quotes give a brief glance into the intricate politics of emotions as a ‘primary site of social control’ (Boler, 1999: x) that play out in this classroom, where students may view each other with mistrust, sometimes resentment, stemming from a lack of social engagement with each other. It also shows how they carefully navigate this space, control themselves and each other, normalised by dominant discourses which dictate which emotions to allow and which to oppress in order to keep the classroom safe (and keep the status quo) (Boler, 1999). However, emotions can also be seen as a site of political resistance when emotional rules and existing power relations are challenged by students and social engagements are transformed, as explored in the next section.

### ***Emotional and cognitive labour through digital storytelling***

This section traces the complex journey through the emotional and cognitive learning student experience in this project. We identified three major disruptive moments of ‘conversion’ in students’ responses: the collaborative exercise the River of Life activity; the solitary process of script writing and editing; and then the coming back to the group for screening of their digital stories, which allowed students to engage with their own and each others’ differences individually on an intrapersonal, inter-personal and intra-group level (Boler and Zembylas, 2003).

#### The River of Life – the emotional start of the journey

In an attempt to facilitate students’ sharing of their individual backgrounds, the project was redesigned in 2011 to include the PLA technique ‘River of Life’ (Bozalek and Biersteker, 2010). For students this engagement with their life, looking back at their life trajectory, became an intensely emotional experience. Students experienced the drawing of their River of Life as sometimes painful but cathartic (Benmayor, 2008). It highlighted to them, in some cases for the first time, the role of exploring their emotions as an integral part of their personal growth and journey to becoming teachers (Boler, 1999):

I think the whole project helped us in finding out more who we really are...during that period when I was doing the River of Life and then telling how did I get here and then, I mean I started to feel sad because I never knew that I could be emotional in my life. I never realised this thing but during this whole process I could see that there was a need for me to cry out, I mean to let out all the things.... It was really a hard experience for me. (AM)

In line with Zembylas and Boler’s concept of the pedagogy of discomfort (Boler and Zembylas, 2003; Boler, 1999), we set up groups to ensure a racial, cultural and linguistic mix, counteracting students’ tendencies to group along socio-economic backgrounds, thus forcing them to step out of their comfort zones. In students’ comments the discomfort of being forced to share often painful moments of their lives with randomly assigned students came up strongly, but also the value of sharing their stories with each other:

I have to say that initially when you introduced it, I didn’t want to share with people that I didn’t know - I didn’t want to tell them things that happened in my life. (WF)

Just not being with the group you're always with, it's quite daunting having to share with people you don't really know. You're in class with them but you don't know them. (CF)

It pushed me out of my comfort zone because I had to share...they are looking at me – that happened, really?...they didn't know because I kept everything to myself...yes I share, but only to a certain extent ...(AM)

It was such an emotional experience with the River of Life...everyone just sat there...[the lecturer] had tissues, we all had tissues...my story was about my family, who has always been there for me...and then there were two other people from different cultures, that never had mothers...I was just so different to see how I...thought I have had such a hectic life, we are complaining about everything and then I saw his – when I heard his [story], I was like, like – little small hill compared to his mountain... (WF)

#### Scripting of the story – entering a reflective space

The next step in the process of digital storytelling was the scripting of student stories. Frequent opportunities for sharing and critiquing each other's stories were built into this process. The following exchange describes the feeling of vulnerability students experienced when sharing their stories, but also the feeling of support and safety they received from their peers:

Student 1: And then I think what the most challenging to me was having to read it out aloud – the story.

Student 2: Sharing your story.

Student 1: And then there was that dot - dot - dot moment where you just went I'm - I'm naked. I'm just exposed.... And not knowing the responses that you are going to get and even in responding people were so aware...the sensitivity that went along with giving input and not criticising but more moulding and shaping the story it - it was profound ...

We knew when to laugh and we knew when not to laugh. I think there was a time and a place for everything in that classroom. You didn't even tell us guys be sensitive towards this. We know it all on our own...

The process of condensing their life story into 500 words, often done in students' own time outside the classroom, and writing their reflective essay alongside the digital storytelling process, seem to have facilitated a deeper level of reflection and cognitive labour. Many student responses indicated the importance of the combination of emotional release through collaborative sharing and having to look back at their lives, reliving critical moments, and the messy, painful process of writing their story up. The following comments show how emotions and cognition are never fully separable, but feed from and into each other (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010):

So my reflection actually started at home sitting on my own thinking and as I started typing, I thought it would be difficult for me to start typing out my essay because I thought there's not much that happened in my life. But once you started typing you started realising this took place, that took place...everything just started coming back, I was reliving going through the River of Life, I was reliving all those phases of my life and so for me my true reflection, my true going into everything in deep, started at home. (CM)

I don't think we would have been able to reflect the way we did now with our digital story and to critically think about it if we didn't do the River of Life - like those steps helped us to think critically in the end... (CF)

...there is such a lot happening in your life, that you don't actually think okay, that's what made me stay here or not stay here...so if you don't do the River of Life and stuff like that...you won't be able to finish your script in the end... (AM)

This story it freaked me out completely because it sort of scratched open wounds and not just surface-wise. I was digging deeper into getting an understanding of me and even just consolidating the things that I came up with, what I felt and how it impacted and unpacking that and sort of putting it back where it belongs again or rearranging your whole mode of thinking. ...it's unnerving and it left us sort of scattered, you know. (CF)

#### Screening – emotional connectedness as an endpoint of the journey

This project ends with a screening of all the digital stories to which students invite their families, friends, loved ones. As the marked end of an emotional rollercoaster, it was a moment of immense vulnerability and pride for students, showing their stories not only to their immediate class peers but to an extended audience of strangers. The next comment



shows the potential of digital storytelling as a ‘social pedagogy’ (Benmayor, 2008) that approaches learning as a collaborative process, allowing collaborative and social learning through sharing and disclosure and initiating a ‘process of bonding and cross cultural alliance’ (198) in which ‘vulnerability is transformed into pride’ (199):

When my story was played along with everyone’s story, I could not help but get emotional, for the first time in four years I cried and felt very proud and less ashamed of my background...and another thing that made me feel very proud was when some colleagues of mine were touched and inspired by my story. I will never forget that Wednesday, because I got to know my fellow students more, they got to know me more.

In students’ responses we could also see a deeper understanding of their own past through their peers’ stories, what Zembylas (2007) would call ‘personal witness accounts’, that allow students to connect to historical facts in a more immediate/visceral way:

I think earlier yesterday I spoke to D’s story about apartheid...I told her that it was an eye-opener to me because we didn’t go to school up to here...I mean...in first year she was in our class and I was thinking: what is this old lady doing in our class? And only as the time went by you heard her real story...you always hear stories about Apartheid but not as real as hers was - it was totally an eye-opener... (CM)

It became clear to us how, albeit deeply personal, these autobiographical stories are part of a collective narrative (Berlant, 2008), known to its public based on the expectation that ‘the consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience’ (vii), and as such also help students who find it more difficult than others to share their stories:

It was very emotional, I didn’t go much in depth with my personal challenges like most people have. I’m going through a lot of personal transformations and it was just a big struggle for me. What was wonderful about watching others was that I could relate to most of their stories and their experiences personally. (CF)

I didn’t touch much like most people touched on their personal lives...but then I could relate so much to other stories that touched me... (CF)

Ahmed argues that some feelings, such as happiness or sadness, are ‘contagious’, that they circulate among bodies and are being passed around (2010: 35). During the screening we could feel how the raw emotions emerging through the digital stories permeated the room and

connected this audience of virtual strangers ('the intimate public' as Berlant (2008) would call it) consisting of students, teachers, parents, family members, partners and friends:

Female student: didn't you feel like – quite close and it was like – a very –

Male student: Connected ...

Female student: Yes, I would say connected ...

You see parents who don't know a student from a bar of soap crying at their story and things and that made it so much more touching I think and emotional. (WF)

So I think with the story or the telling of the story...it connects because everybody felt connected at some point, at some time with watching each other's stories, you couldn't isolate yourself... (CF)

### ***Emotions as a site of political resistance***

The pedagogy of discomfort naturally does not engage all students on the same level, as other studies have shown that such pedagogical interventions can also result in strong student resistance (Hemson et al., 2001; Zembylas and McGlynn, 2010; Kumashiro, 2002). However, we found that by discussing the resistance experienced to the digital storytelling process, students started to question some of the power relations governing their classrooms.

Students refer to their discomfort when talking about sensitive issues, such as race, for fear of hurting others, as the following quote by an African male student depicts:

Student: And when I speak I put my emotion in there and for me that could affect other people in a very bad - in a different way. I struggle when I get too emotional, when I speak I struggle to control what I say, it just came out ...

Interviewer: Have you ever tried to say something and get into a discussion?

Student: Ja I think I did. I have done it a couple of times and I noticed that people were offended.

In particular the sharing of students' life stories in randomly selected groups was for many a deeply uncomfortable experience, seemingly more so within the White student group. When asking students in the focus group about a predominantly white resistance to this process, they argued that certain groups may have more to lose than others. In the following exchange two Coloured female students recall an anecdote about a white male in class:

Student 1: He said that everyone on campus sees him as like this big man ...

Student 2: Funny guy.

Student 1: Big funny, like this happy guy on campus - confident. He doesn't want them to know that when he was in high school he was not like that at all. And his insecurities and -

Student 2: Yes, I think that was quite interesting when he said that - it's like the first thing that he said - is like what happens if the people see me in a different way?

In a similar fashion, this student reports on an exchange between her (Coloured female) and a White female student:

You see I spoke to one student after this viewing of the digital story - a white student and me...we were talking about the silence and those things. Like this student said to me 'I would never have said that I failed a Grade' but I did. So I said but that is why I'm here - this is what made me want to become a teacher, because somebody showed an interest in me. And I said that is why I put it in my digital story, and she said 'I would have never said in front of everyone that I failed at school'. (CF)

In terms of power dynamics another interesting aspect was that for some students who may usually be more dominant in a class, this project – which may have favoured stories of survival, 'against all odds' – proved challenging, as can be seen in the following quote from a White student:

I'll just be honest – White people are very reluctant [to share]...I mean I sat there and you showed us a few stories and I watched those stories and I was like – how can I compare my story to that? I have a normal upbringing and came here, that's it...So I sat there thinking this is so pointless, I don't have anything to say... (WM)

These vignettes again point to the complex spoken and unspoken rules concerning which emotions are allowed and which are frowned upon in a classroom, establishing emotions as a site of social control (Boler, 1999). It is interesting to note how certain emotions are socially acceptable among students of a certain racial and cultural background, while they are not accessible to others. In particular, the defensiveness and resistance by predominantly White students, who may have more to lose (Leibowitz et al., 2010), gave students useful avenues for unpacking some of the usual power dynamics that often go unnoticed in the classroom. However, they also reveal how this project started intra-group conversations across their

usual social relationships and comfort zones, that might be signs of how assumptions and deeply held beliefs start to crumble and existing power relations and dynamics may be revealed and challenged (Boler, 1999; Zembylas, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

This paper set out to interrogate a digital storytelling process implemented with final- year pre-service teacher education students. The aim of the project was for students to open up and listen to each other's stories of difference, in the hope that this would allow students to learn to deal with difference 'differently', challenging some of the beliefs and assumptions they carry about the 'other', and finally lead to a change in their social engagements.

The expanded digital storytelling process adopted for this project (Benmayor, 2008; Oppermann, 2008; Coventry, 2008), replacing the typical three-day CDS workshop with eight weekly workshops and combining development of digital stories with PLA techniques and a reflective essay, proved an useful vehicle for facilitating both cognitive and emotional labour (Zembylas, 2011). Concurring with Zembylas (2007), we regard the disparity between criticality and emotions as false - it is not possible to separate emotions and reason (Zembylas, 2005: 182).

Sharing of students' life stories, in particular through the highly uncomfortable process of sharing their River of Life with randomly selected peers, led to an intense emotional experience that opened up a space for subsequent more critical/analytic/cognitive engagement through script and reflective essay writing. This allowed students to distance themselves and reach a more critical reflective level of engagement with themselves and each other. This resonates with Ahmed's argument that instead of avoiding or trying to 'better' bad feelings, one should try staying in the moment of discomfort, 'staying with and accepting the bad feelings long enough to make a personal sense of them' (Orbach, cited in Ahmed, 2004: 197). The final screening of the story took students and their audience back to an emotional space, where an intimate public of near-strangers (Berlant, 2008), shared an intimate moment of connectedness, based on the raw emotions that circulated in the room and the audience's identification with a collective narrative.

This study has revealed the inherently complex range of emotions that set up the power relations in this classroom, on an inter-personal, intra-personal and intra-group level (Zembylas, 2012). The causality of both 'our power to affect the world around us and our

power to be affected by it' (Hardt, 2007: ix) is found, for example, when students started to question certain student groups' resistances to the process or in students' accounts of shedding the shame and embarrassment of their backgrounds through the strong sense of pride emanating from their peers when watching their stories. When observing students and their audience during the screening process, their tears and hugs, we could understand Benmayor's (2008: 196) claim that creating a digital story and theorising it is 'at once, a bodily experience – a physical, emotional and intellectual act.'

The study has showed the extent to which students essentialise race, identify along racial background lines and construct identities in opposition to each other, confirming findings of previous research (Leibovitz et al., 2010, Pattman, 2010; Rohleder et al., 2008; Bozalek, 2011). However, it has also showed how indirect knowledge (as Jansen (2009) calls it) that is passed on from generation to generation and still impacts on students' social engagements can come to the surface through these disruptive moments of sharing and listening openly to each other's stories, and may constitute a first step to transform students' engagements with one another.

Hemmings states 'in order to know differently we have to feel differently' (2012: 150). Do our students feel and know differently after this process? What we could see – at least within some students – is that this complex interplay of emotional and cognitive labour opened up a pedagogy of possibility – as Boler would say, an act of 'self-discovery, hope, passion and a sense of community', in which students may be able to envisage a better South Africa.

Bearing in mind the kind of support, space and time these kinds of projects that render students intentionally vulnerable require (Do Mar Pereira, 2012) and the resistance that one will encounter, this approach to teaching and dealing across difference could be an alternative to traditional diversity education. This is of particular importance in South Africa where the legacy of Apartheid is still so strongly felt and emotions linked to the experience of privilege and oppression simmer so closely under the surface. It seemed beneficial for both students identifying with privilege and with disadvantage, as authors such as Benmayor (2008) have found, who argue that not only marginalised students felt empowered and gained from the process, but also privileged students benefitted and experienced transformation, allowing them to understand their realities more meaningfully.

One limitation of this study was its timing, right at the end of the students' educational journey, making it difficult if not impossible to gauge whether the change experienced during

the digital storytelling process had longer-lasting effects and really led to a change in students' social engagements with each other. Further research is needed to establish the potential of this specific pedagogical intervention to lead to long-lasting social change.

We would like to end this paper with a last student quote, which shows both the hesitation but also the promise that a digital storytelling project based on a pedagogy of discomfort may provide for students:

I'm hoping that next year when I'm a qualified teacher I can use [this project] as a way to sort out these problems. I wouldn't change the world but I know I can do that and I don't think those wounds will close - I just think more will open, but over time – yeah, I think at least people are aware of what happens out there ...

### **Bionotes**

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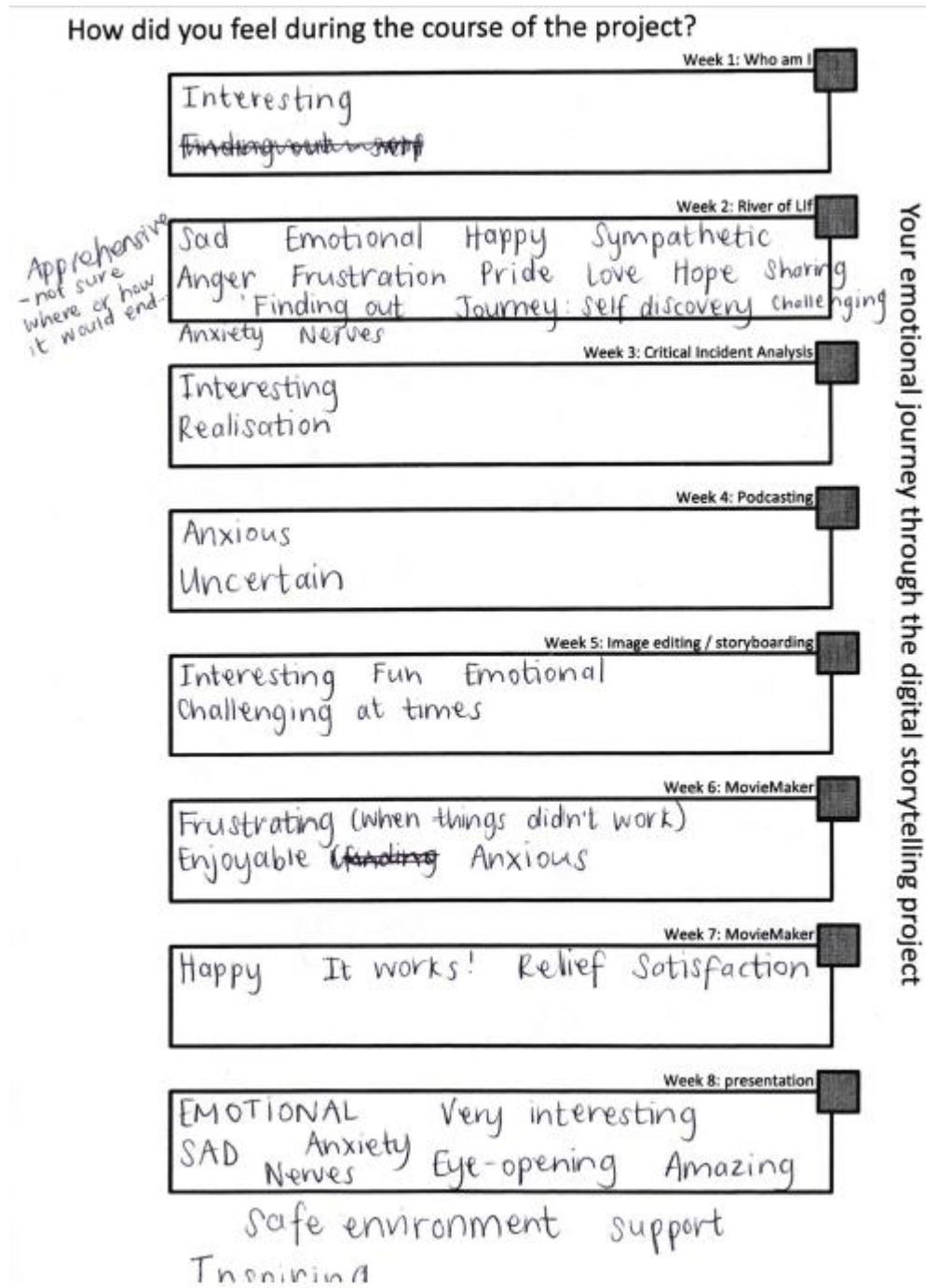
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**Appendix 1: Digital storytelling project outline**

<b>Weeks</b>	<b>Activity during workshop</b>	<b>Out of class activities</b>
Week 1	<p><b>Introduction</b></p> <p>Presentation on digital storytelling, showcasing stories</p> <p>Injection: Multicultural education/diversity in the classroom</p> <p>Who am I exercise</p> <p>In groups: River of Life, Free writing exercise</p> <p>Introduction of research project</p> <p>Ground rules</p> <p>Joining of Facebook group</p>	<p>Collection of first ideas</p> <p>... start writing</p>
Week 2	<p><b>Sharing/editing</b></p> <p>Sharing of written stories in groups, editing stories in pairs</p> <p>Students read out selected stories to class</p>	<p>Finalise story, collect/download images (focus on images under creative commons licence)</p>
Week 3	<p><b>Sharing/editing</b></p> <p>Reading aloud to teaching staff and feedback</p> <p>Performance techniques with the academic literacy lecturer (breathing techniques etc)</p> <p>Storyboarding</p>	<p>Finalise story / reading out story to colleagues, collecting images</p>
Week 4	<p><b>Introduction of Photostory - images</b></p> <p>Collection of images</p> <p>Importing/ordering images</p> <p>Editing of images</p>	<p>Recording of story</p> <p>Recording of background song</p> <p>Integration of story/sound</p>

		Collection of images
Week 5	<p><b>Photostory - narration</b></p> <p>Development of final assessment rubric</p> <p>Recording of stories and background music</p>	<p>Work on movie</p> <p>Start reflective essay</p>
Week 6	<p><b>Photostory – background sound</b></p> <p>Recording of stories and background music</p> <p>Questionnaire ‘digital literacy skills’</p> <p>Finalising movie</p> <p>Publication of final movies onto Facebook group</p>	<p>Complete movies</p> <p>Work on reflective essay</p>
Week 7	<p><b>Feedback</b></p> <p>Final students’ completed digital movies</p> <p>Peer review of final product in groups</p> <p>Research: focus groups</p>	<p>Complete movies</p> <p>Invite friends and family for final presentation</p> <p>Work on reflective essay</p>
Week 8	<p><b>Presentation and reflection</b></p> <p>Presentation of selected stories to students, teachers, colleagues, family and friends</p> <p>Reflection</p> <p>Deadline reflective essay</p>	

## Appendix 2: Examples of students' emotional journeys



How did you feel during the course of the project?

Week 1: Who am I  
Reflective; Emotional, happy, proud; clueless  
'I also discovered myself-unbelievably'

Week 2: River of Life  
Emotional; touching; personal; happy;  
Sad; (☹) scared; - weight lifted off  
my shoulders.

Week 3: Critical Incident Analysis  
found my calling - happy, sad; humbling

Week 4: Podcasting  
Uncertain; happy; excited to hear myself  
speak; to hear my story - emotional &  
stressful

Week 5: Image editing / storyboarding  
Stressful; clueless with regard to  
the use of technology. happy that  
I gathered all the things I needed  
on time.

Week 6: MovieMaker  
struggled; stressful; unsure; when  
all was done and put together I  
was happy

Week 7: MovieMaker  
Fun experimenting. Emotional to see  
my final story; Happy.

Week 8: presentation  
EMOTIONAL - connected.

Your emotional journey through the digital storytelling project