

The Implementation of Difficult Dialogues™ toward Transformation in Higher Education, South Africa: Problematic and Potentialities

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ABSTRACT Difficult Dialogues™, an initiative that seeks to cultivate democratic discourse in higher education, was offered as a teaching approach to lecturers at a historically white Higher Education Institution in South Africa (SA), which, similar to other higher education institutions, bears the brunt of the residual effects of apartheid and its concomitant challenges in the 21-year old democracy. An argument is made that Difficult Dialogues™ needs to be located theoretically within the academic landscape of higher education, positioning it within the nature of universities in SA, grounded by a critical theoretical approach that seeks to promote social justice and responsible citizenship in higher education and moreover; as a pedagogical tool. This contextualisation of Difficult Dialogues™ and overt communication thereof to lecturers, are put forward as essential for its entrenchment as daily practice in lecture rooms, as well as countering the *zeitgeist* ideology within Higher Education of the instrumentalization of knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, a 22-year old democracy, transformation in higher education has been painstakingly slow. This is particularly problematic in view of the Education White Paper that stipulated that education is one of the most imperative tools in bringing about societal transformation (DoE 1997). The Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions in SA (DoE 2008) showed overwhelming evidence of continuous pervasive patterns of discrimination based on social categories such as race and gender. In 2013, the Council of Higher Education (CHE 2013) released a report revealing the deeply flawed transformation in the structural configurations of higher education institutions (cf. CHE 2013). In addition to The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) announcement for a national hearing as it is “concerned about lack of transformation at Universities” (SAHRC 2014), the Chairperson reported that the

commission has observed “close to 500 cases from universities and other institutions of learning relating to racism and gender-based discrimination” (Magubane 2014).

The many forms of discrimination and its intersectionalities endure; often thoroughly obvious and other times subliminally so; barely palpable, but present the one moment, as to seemingly vaporise the next. Educationalists, citizens, contestants and stakeholders are frustrated, stunned, fatigued and perplexed by the continuous remains of a highly effective apartheid system that cultivated and entrenched segregation, engineered who will experience which type of belonging, and ingrained why fear is an essential ingredient in the perfect construct of the ‘Other’. Moreover, perhaps as predicted by Torfing (1997: 7) in his discursive observation almost two decades ago, pointing to global, unrealized expectations of democracies’ promise of ‘liberation for all’, it appears that South Africa’s democracy in its young adult shoes, is deemed stunted in its growth before it could reach full maturity.

Yet, as astutely pointed out by Soudien (2010), in the middle of the confoundedness regarding active and lasting transformation, it is the racialization thereof that has become the way of being. Akin to the colour of our blood we share in all of our veins, except that we seem to

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carry this racialization in our DNA as an incapable, congenital condition as it is ultimately “rendered completely unable to reveal itself to itself” (Soudien 2010: 225). In our inability to recognise the taken-for-granted assumptions regarding transformation and democracy, in addition to the apparent incapacity to escape such *status quo*, does that mean that the university is failing to meet its responsibility of not only offering appropriate education in meeting a society’s needs for modern-day growth but also to “be concerned with the expanded reproduction of education itself” (Habermas 1971: 2)?

Difficult Dialogues™ was implemented as a tool to aid transformation in lecture rooms with the view of starting to open spaces to talk about divisive topics such as race, culture, gender and sexuality, and with the ultimate purpose of cultivating democracy. This initiative was especially welcomed by academic, support and management staff who advocate education for social justice in a learning environment which, similar to other learning environments in SA, on a deep historical level, continues to carry fragments of epistemologies from the apartheid regime; lurking shadows of the pervasive ‘truths’ of patriarchy, and racial, religion and sexual supremacies. Moreover, dregs of oppressive epistemologies that especially forbade to question any assumptions underwritten by authority. However, during the implementation of the first phase of the project and thereafter, some participants (among others, the authors) felt the unease of, yet another transformation initiative that may be tempered and not come to full fruition because of the inescapable historical inscriptions on the ontological and epistemological dispositions from which it unconsciously departs, towards the very institutional environment it seeks to change. Hence, these concerns were continuously raised, throughout the workshop and during follow-up discussions. The authors tenaciously questioned where and how the project was situated within the academic and pedagogic structures of the institution and what its theoretical groundings were. Perhaps the authors wanted to have conversations about the difficulty of having difficult dialogues *prior* unconditionally espousing the process of Difficult Dialogues™. In retrospect, the authors take responsibility for their then, arguably unwitting articulation of their apprehensions in a manner that could be heard and accessed. This writing

entails some critical reflections of the implementation of Difficult Dialogues™ at the authors’ institution. The authors unequivocally acknowledge, within the demarcations of discourse theory that firstly, clarity of insight can occur with much greater ease in retrospect – as an *ex post facto* gaze. Secondly, that critical reflection does not want to produce a ‘truth’ (Foucault 1994: 114) as much as it wants to create meaning (Von Stuckhard 2010). And thirdly, that the authors, do not see themselves separated from the discourse/s they are critiquing but attempt to remain aware of where even their critical views are rooted (Comaroff and Kim 2011). However, it is precisely because of their affinity for and loyalty to their role as educationalists and scholars at a higher education institution, which has not flinched to face the challenges of transformation and its complex intersectionalities that they embarked on writing this critical opinion piece. Here they yield the assurance of Foucault (1994):

Under no circumstances should one pay attention to those who tell one: “Don’t criticize, since you’re not capable of carrying out a reform.”...Critique doesn’t have to be the premise of a deduction that concludes, “this, then, is what needs to be done.” It should be an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is. Its use should be in processes of conflict and confrontation, essays in refusal (Foucault 1994: 236).

This paper is structured by firstly explicating how the Difficult Dialogues™ project came to be implemented at the authors’ institution. Secondly the project and its implementation are problematized by putting forward several critical arguments. Thirdly, Difficult Dialogues™ as a pedagogical project as opposed to a faculty development program¹ is proposed in order to come closer to its potential as a transformative tool.

THE INTRODUCTION OF DIFFICULT DIALOGUES™ AT THE AUTHORS’ INSTITUTION

In 2008, against the backdrop of being one of the historically dominant white universities in South Africa, anew pressure exerted from government, was adhered to in the implementation of racial integration in campus student residences; a second attempt over a period of a decade after the first attempt could not be sustained

throughout a long-term period based on perpetuating conflict among racial lines in (mainly male) student residences. The transformation initiative in 2008 was, as could be expected, met with strong resistance from conservative student groups, ultimately resulting in a legitimisation crisis (Van der Merwe and Van Reenen 2015 in press) of the University at great cost of the university's reputation and public representation. However, it was under the innovative leadership of a new rectorate, later in 2009, that the university actively approached the issue of transformation from a multi-pronged angle. In its institutional strategic plan (UFS 2012-2016) it affirmed its mission with the core values of 'Superior Scholarship'; 'Human Embrace'; 'Institutional Distinctiveness'; 'Emergent Leadership' and 'Public Service' and for its strategic plan put forward the foundations thereof i.e. the Academic Project and the Human Project. While the former and the latter are inescapably intertwined it is under the auspices of the Human Project that the Difficult Dialogues™ project for implementation at the authors' academic institution took shape. The quote below from the strategic plan highlights this agenda.

The University set itself the task of transforming itself from a community of segregation and distrust, through a process of understanding and reconciliation...The associated initiatives are aimed at a university transforming itself into a community underpinned by a universal sense of a common humanity, with openness to the perspectives, experiences and cultures of others, and typified by the best characteristics of academia (UFS 2012-2016: 13).

Difficult Dialogues™ has its early origins in the Ford Foundation's Difficult Dialogues™ initiative (Ford Foundation Annual Report 2006). The Ford Foundation made grants to American institutions of higher learning in an endeavour to "develop academic programs that encourage new scholarship and engage students and faculty in constructive dialogue on subjects that have been a source of conflict and hostility on campuses" (Ford Foundation Annual Report 2006: 7). The idea was to "initiate civil and constructive debate about divisive issues" (Ford Foundation Annual Report 2006: 12; cf. Heierbacher 2012). It would seem that in the United States seven larger categories of Difficult Dialogues™ initiatives have developed. They include: i) faculty development programmes; ii)

curriculum development projects; iii) plans focusing on pedagogical development; iv) student directed programmes; v) interactive theatre projects; vi) civility initiatives; as well as vii) assessing the success of interventions (University of Alaska Anchorage, UAA official website).

One of the recipients of these abovementioned grants was the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) and the Alaska Pacific University (APU) partnership who received two year funding for a project they named *Engaging Controversy* (Landis 2008) – an initiative falling within the ambit of faculty development. Having established a group comprising 30 (senior and junior) teaching staff from UAA and UPA, two, week-long *faculty intensive*² workshops were presented in May 2006; with another in 2007 and 2008 (Landis 2008). The idea was to model a number of techniques structured around selected contentious, controversial or divisive themes as are so often encountered in everyday-life. The wish was to "improve the learning climate on...campuses, making them more inclusive of minority voices and ways of knowing and safer places for the free exchange of ideas" (Landis 2008: ii). These ambitions are articulated on UAA's Difficult Dialogues™ official web site as: the advancement of "innovative practices in higher education that promote respectful, transformative dialogue on controversial topics and complex social issues, thereby reflecting a commitment to pluralism and academic freedom" (University of Alaska Anchorage, UAA official website).

In 2011, the interim director of the *Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice (IRSJ)*, at The University of the Free State (UFS) explored the possibilities of establishing the same kind of initiative at the university and contacted the UAA. A partnership was formed and in 2012 Difficult Dialogues™ as a pilot project was launched with a five-day workshop in May 2012. This was followed up with an intensive workshop the following year. Taking its name from its American progenitor, the Difficult Dialogues™ project was communally supported and funded by IRSJ and the office of the Vice-Rector: Academic, while the newly established institutional *Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL)* became the home of the project.

Engagement in Difficult Dialogues™ at the authors' university may be summarised as two-

pronged (Van Jaarsveldt 2012): firstly, has as its goal to promote mutual understanding, respect for diversity, and a sense of belonging, and, secondly, to advance the scholarship of teaching and learning with innovative teaching techniques. Over the course of a year's involvement the project expected that participants would be able to: i) "encounter controversy in teaching and learning more effectively"; ii) "engage students in explorations of controversial issues relating to curricular content by means of civil discourse"; iii) "integrate research into the implementation process"; and iv) "produce a publication from the project implementation" (Van Jaarsveldt 2012: 4-5). During 2012 it soon became apparent that two streams of the pilot project were emerging on the UFS campus. The first was the *Campus-wide initiative*, and the second was implemented through a *Skills Development module in the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences* (Van Jaarsveldt 2012: 5). It is henceforth to the former that reference is made, since as participants of the *Campus-wide initiative*, the three authors, wish only to comment on the project of which they have first-hand experience. Although they expect that their overarching arguments are applicable to all Difficult Dialogues™ offshoots at their university.

The project material that Difficult Dialogues™ draws upon for its implementation at the authors' institution consists of mainly two sources. The first is the *Start Talking* (Landis 2008) manual that has been compiled by various faculty members from the University of Alaska Anchorage and Alaska Pacific University for the Alaskan context. It includes five sections for a five-day intensive workshop which are "Ground Rules"; "Rhetoric, Debate"; "Race, Class, Culture"; "Science, Religion" and "Business, Politics, Social Justice" (Landis 2008) and this outline was adopted for the programme of the workshop at the authors' university. The second source, which is also mentioned as the main source for the abovementioned manual, is Brookfield and Preskill's (2005) book titled *Discussion as a way of teaching: Tools and techniques for democratic classrooms* (in addition to the first edition of this book). The Difficult Dialogues™ pilot project in essence began, on the first day of the workshop and would come to an end twelve months later, would constitute the first implementation cycle, and would be regarded

within the faculty development programme of the larger scope of Difficult Dialogues™. Since 2012, the project has been implemented among approximately 60 academic personnel from various faculties, and support staff affiliated with the authors' institution³. Twenty-two academic personnel members from diverse faculties and departments committed themselves to participate in the initial pilot project. The staff intensive workshop was structured around two alternating parts. On the one hand, various speakers discussed controversial topics such as race, privilege, and religion. The other part consisted of experiential sessions applying various techniques as provided in Brookfield and Preskill (2005). Examples of these techniques included active listening, 'circle of objects' (i.e. introducing personal artefacts symbolising individual and collective identities), reflective writing, 'naming ourselves' (i.e. talking about one's racial affiliation or ethnic 'label'), and monitoring that ground rules of respect and mutuality are upheld during the course of the workshop. A second cycle of the Difficult Dialogues™ project commenced in May 2013 and much like before, a group of twenty university personnel members participated in the five-day workshop.

Following the workshop a *learning community* was established. The learning community, a group of Difficult Dialogues™ participants roughly met once a month to share successes in implementing of the tools and techniques proposed by Brookfield and Preskill (2005); offer support (where necessary); and harness the inputs from guest facilitators. And, to satisfy the imperative second prong, which comprises the third and fourth outcomes for the project, it also served as a platform where participants' espoused research projects about the efficacy of the techniques employed in lectures, could be talked through. Putting forward evidence, in form of a publishable paper, of how and to which extent Difficult Dialogues™ techniques were employed by each of the 22 participants, was regarded as a particularly valuable outcome of the Difficult Dialogues™ pilot project, as stated in its 2012 *Progress Report* (Van Jaarsveldt 2012). Furthermore, in the report it is argued that as pioneers among South African universities the research findings emanating from all the individual tool and technique implementation projects will be useful for not only the authors' own, but also other national universities inter-

ested in following suit (Van Jaarsveldt 2012). At the time of writing this paper, the project planned to bring out a *Case Book*.

PROBLEMATIZING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF DIFFICULT DIALOGUES™

The authors argue that there are several problematics regarding the implementation of the Difficult Dialogues™ project. These are: that the project must be contextualised in an institution's historical *a priori* (Foucault 1966/2002; Foucault 1969/2011), taking into account the pre-existing hegemonic binary pre-suppositions, and subsequent weighted interpretations when engaging with the term of *difficult dialogue*; it must be presented as theoretically grounded in its critical social paradigm in order to question taken-for-granted assumptions; and finally that the project must remain cognizant of the imperatives of pragmatism, the latter of which may render the purpose of the project as a mere means that are limited to lecture rooms, stopping short of attaining its ends in cultivating democracy as a meso-representation of society.

Difficult Dialogues™ Must be Contextualized within an Institution's Historical 'A Priori'

In this section it is argued that for the successful implementation of Difficult Dialogues™, the historical *a priori* (Foucault 1966/2002; Foucault 1969/2001), including the political aspect of the institution where it is implemented, must be considered in order to come closer to the project's transformative potential. The historical *a priori*, also intermittently referred to by Foucault (1966/2002: xi) as the 'positive unconscious of knowledge' (O'Farrell 2005: 139) is defined by Foucault (1966/2002) as

the starting-point from which it was possible to define the great checkerboard of distinct identities established against the confused, undefined, faceless, and, as it were, indifferent background of differences[...for example] [t]he history of madness would be the history of the Other – of that which, for a given culture, is at once interior and foreign, therefore to be excluded... (Foucault 1966/2002: xxvi).

At issue here is firstly, the problematic of hegemonic binary disposition (Davis and Steyn 2012) that is a residual effect of apartheid and is inscribed along the unavoidable racial lines of

South Africa. The second argument is that based on this divisive disposition, the interpretation and application of the term Difficult Dialogues™ must be amended accordingly.

In the South African context, a significant challenge when engaging in difficult-to-talk-about-topics is the competing hegemonic binary disposition of *us* and *them*, or *us* versus *them*, drawing from the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1999). A classroom dynamic of oppressor versus oppressed is often created, while the assumptions adopted are either one of being apologetic as the previous perpetrator on the one hand, or assuming the historically inscribed posture of victim on the other; a dynamic that reinforces and often perpetuates competing ideological positions that may ultimately compromise efforts to engage with difficult issues. In addition, based on students born post-1994, who do not possess the temporal experience of apartheid, a general retort when attempting to explore difficult topics such as subliminal racism, sexism and religion discrimination, is often one of 'not being part of apartheid...being a new generation that wants to put the past behind' (Jansen 2009: 171). In this regard Jones (2005: 67) is of the view that when optimism and an avoidance of what he calls 'cautious critique' predominates, dialogue between individuals of the dominant and 'other' groups can reproduce and reinforce inequalities. Perhaps though, the challenge of hegemonic binary dispositions is as impassable as it is unavoidable, given the structural grid incised into and onto the consciousness of South Africans as a historical *a priori* (Foucault 1969/2011); hegemonic binary disposition that is infused with "profound racialisation" (Soudien 2010: 225).

However, in order to stabilize such dominant discourses (Keller 2013), the phenomenon of 'racial microaggressions' described by Sue and Constantine (2007: 137) as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people that belong to minority groups", appear to be a prevalent discourse in South Africa and especially in uneven demographical groupings. Within the authors' institutional context, as tend to be the case within other historically white universities, these codes of microaggressions are reproduced by among other, parallel medium language as teaching and assessment practices. Although the university's parallel medium of instruction language policy has been relatively

successful in some aspects, it does not encourage optimal interaction among students. Students opting for Afrikaans language lectures are mostly white, and students choosing English as language of instruction are mostly black – English being their second or third language. Therefore, and in addition to dividing students along the lines of primarily, language preference with a secondary consequence of racial division, parallel medium also divides students along the lines of apparent competence. Engaging in dialogue across language groups is limited by structural divisions and, instead reproduces an environment for relatively homogenous groups to reinforce and encourage resort to default, often subconscious ‘micro-aggression’ codes. In such ways, students are often neither enabled the opportunity to learn how to engage with students from differing sociocultural backgrounds, nor does it prepare students to engage with a plurality of perspectives (Lyle 2008). In classroom settings the authors observe groupings that form majority opinions and these silence minority voices. Varying levels of English proficiency, for example, establishes a skewed ‘us – them’ conversational transaction or dialogue. The covert message is that those articulating from a ‘lower’ level are reluctant to participate because they feel threatened by the social capital (Bourdieu 1986) accumulated by students with striking vocabularies and high levels of basic interpersonal communication skills, acquired at semi-private secondary schools. This translates into an ‘us and them’ discourse of perpetuating inequality in lecture halls and extends itself to interaction spaces (both physical and virtual) on the university grounds and beyond.

A second problematic that constitutes part of a contextual *a priori*, pertains to the interpretation of the term ‘difficult dialogues’. While some might draw stark contrasts between the concepts dialogue, discussion and conversation, Brookfield and Preskill (2005), one of the main sources for the Difficult Dialogues™ project, appear to make little distinction between these terms, preferencing the group talk concept of ‘discussion’ *vis-a-viz* ‘dialogue’. For them “discussion incorporates reciprocity and movement, exchange and inquiry, cooperation and collaboration, formality and informality” (Brookfield and Preskill 2005: 6). Landis (2008: viii) does however acknowledge that in the Alaskan context ‘difficult dialogues’ became the

“most common shorthand for referring to the controversial and contentious issues ... addressed throughout ... [the] project”. Nevertheless, the project’s retention of ‘difficult dialogues’ as the capstone phrase that emanated from the Ford Foundation’s Difficult Dialogues™ initiative (Landis 2008: viii; Ford Foundation Annual Report 2006: 12) and as presented within our institutional context needs to be revisited, as this term was uncritically assimilated into our institutional project.

The word ‘dialogue’ originates from the Greek word *dialogos*; *logos* understood as ‘meaning of the word’ and *dia* translated as ‘through’. In contemporary language, ‘dialogue’ may then be interpreted as a “stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us” (Bohm 1996: 7). However, when the process of reaching the ultimate goal of dialogue, to create new meaning, cannot be seen through until that point has been reached (Bohm 1996), in our institutional context, ‘difficult dialogue’ may be described as the “exchange of potentially conflicting ideas, opinions, beliefs or values about concepts such as race, racism, homophobia and ethnicity” (Watt 2007: 116). Encounters of such a nature hold the potential to trigger discomfort, controversies, stress and defensive reactions in participants. Bohm (1996: 22) iterates that with true dialogue, that is naturally difficult, “frustration will arise, the sense of chaos, the sense that it is not worth it [and] the emotional charge [that] will come”, which is exacerbated within the *a priori* frame of hegemonic binary predisposition. In addition, the adjective ‘difficult’ elicits ideas related to being contentious, not easy, complex, challenging, awkward, or possibly even educing strong emotion. Given the historical *a priori* (Foucault 1966/2002: xxvi, 172; Foucault 1969/2011: 142-148) of hegemonic binary disposition that constructs a ground zero of ‘us versus them; when ‘difficult’ is used in conjunction with (an uncompleted development of) ‘dialogue’, the tacit supposition often entails something analogous to: ‘we are already different, and as such, are granted reprieve from trying to understand each other...we effectively agree to disagree since everything will and is contested, anyhow.’ This complexity was not sufficiently engaged with when the project was introduced, though the meaning of Difficult Dialogues™ as it originated, was described.

What was glaringly absent from the workshops and, later, the learning community gath-

erings, was precisely the *difficulty* of the process in engaging in true dialogue as Bohm (1996) describes it as above. To the contrary, albeit inadvertently, what the Difficult Dialogues™ project was doing under the auspices of a liberal agenda, was to fall trap in offering a “smorgasbord of alternative perspectives in discussion” (Brookfield and Preskill 2005: 258) at a superficial level, purported by time constraints during workshop and the learning community gatherings. But as Brookfield and Preskill (2005) warn – drawing from Marcuse’s notion of repressive tolerance – such an omission leads to committing a cardinal sin of communicative engagement. By failing to deeply engage and allow for immersion; listening to others’ truths, while suspending one’s own (Bohm 1996), alternative or even radically different stances were not sufficiently considered as viable challenges to the mainstream discourse (hereby legitimizing the dominant view) and again silencing not only alternative stances, but participants with contrary views as well. The project therefore negated its important task of suppressing “familiar, mainstream views” (Brookfield and Preskill 2005: 258) by positioning marginalised ideas and views for cursory discussion.

The authors do concede, though, that people can successfully dialogue where hegemonic binary oppositions exist. However, engaging in deep and difficult dialogues toward the cultivation of democracy, *a priori* patterns of equally, deep conflict is imminent. Subsequently, in the attempt to contain, neutralise or avoid looming conflict as a result of dialogues that are difficult and divisive, a secondary disposition of ‘civility’ often emerges and becomes a reproductive mechanism that steers away from authentic engagement in dialogue. The word ‘civil’ evokes multiple interpretations. One is rooted in civil rights, and the notions of civil society. ‘We all have voices. We don’t necessarily have to agree.’ Another interpretation encompasses the term ‘civil’ towards its more repressive associations of control, order and being polite. Because ‘civility’ becomes the hypernorm during difficult dialogues, it regrettably also becomes a mechanism for ensconcing “pluralist tolerance” (Brookfield and Preskill 2005: 258) via Marcuse’s apparatus of ‘repressive tolerance’; leaving the previously unsaid just as that; yet not voiced. In proposing this argument, the authors are not advocating for a deliberate, disruptive disposi-

tion that promotes unnecessary tumult. The authors do, however, challenge a choreographed dialogue milieu that purports civility in the name of ‘political correctness’ or a so-called liberal stance, over and above the requirement of truly engaging with ontological differences via dialogue. Civil discourse as a hypernorm, tends to make the *difficult*, easy. The authors argue that heralding a civil disposition requires one to filter what is said, and be mindful in all of one’s utterances in order to avoid committing fallacies (cf. Landis 2008) but it does not imply to sacrifice the *difficult* for ‘civility’. And it does not connote to cease a certainly difficult process before a point has been reached where new meaning is created (Bohm 1996). This is all the more relevant in a country such as South Africa with so many polarised positions where citizens are trying to find common ground without reinforcing binaries.

Difficult Dialogues™ Must be presented as Theoretically Grounded in Order to Enable Critical Reflection

In the preface to the second edition of *Discussion as a way of teaching*, Brookfield and Preskill (2005) acknowledge the omission of overtly stating the theoretical grounding of the discussion tools and techniques presented. They defend the initial exclusion as not wanting “any extensive theoretical analysis [to] get in the way of [its] practical focus” (Brookfield and Preskill 2005: 247). The authors ameliorate this by the inclusion of two chapters. Chapter 13 deals with key constructs within the context of three theoretical frames and Chapter 14 entails Habermas’ theory on communicative action as a basis for democracy. The first theoretical framework that is spoken to in the former chapter is that of a neo-Marxist structuralist analysis including Althusser’s concept of ideological state apparatus (ISA) which serves as an explanation of how dominant ideologies can be reproduced when e.g. “teachers function as ideological managers” (Brookfield and Preskill 2005: 249); the second being a post-structural interpretation of Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power and how the mechanism of self-surveillance is internalised by lecturers’, or societal figures of authority’s judgment of what is considered acceptable and what not (Brookfield and Preskill 2005: 252); and thirdly Marcuse’s conception of ‘repressive

tolerance'. It is the latter concept that operates in a particular insidious fashion as its "meta-narrative of democratic tolerance" (Brookfield and Preskill 2005: 256) may ideologically be appropriated with ease toward the reproduction of marginalised views by masking the injustice with "pluralist tolerance" (Brookfield and Preskill 2005: 258), all whilst the dominant discourse prevails.

When considering how Difficult Dialogues™ was formalised via the Ford Foundation's call for proposals of programmes and plans to change the status quo (Ford Foundation Annual Report 2006) in addition to Brookfield and Preskill's (2005) theoretical foundations argued for discussion as a tool for transformation, it appears that the Difficult Dialogues™ project does not lack critical theoretical underpinnings. However, the authors argue that in an education environment which possesses historically inscribed epistemologies that are not critical in its ontology, it would be imperative to present a pedagogical project with the view of transformation, within a clearly, overtly stated critical social theoretical framework as part of the workshop.

The contextualisation of a critical social theoretical framework to persons who attend a Difficult Dialogues™ workshop must be situated and put forward to the participants in the historical *a priori* (Foucault 1966/2002; Foucault 1969/2011) of the institution's knowledge formation. It must be elucidated to participants via its critical theoretical grounding. In particular, how the historical reproductive mechanisms of power and truth regimes of apartheid and its residual, consequential effects that are still present in the consciousness of faculty and students alike, must be explored. In addition, why there would be an ontological exertion to have dialogues that are difficult, must be foregrounded. This need *not* to be done in abstract theoretical manners that leave participants alienated from the purpose of the workshop, but in a way that attempts to cultivate a sense of awareness on the possible inscribed ideological forces that may distort the very transformative agenda it seeks. As Brookfield (2001) argues in an earlier writing regarding the value of ideology critique in adult learning, the employment of critical theory must enable participants to recognise the dominant ideologies in their own context (Brookfield and Preskill 2005) and be clear of their political purpose. If the point of departure is not clear, if dominant ways of thinking among facilitators

and participants are not consistently challenged, reversion to a pragmatist imperative as the cost of theory dilute the political potential that such a project could have (Aronowitz in Horkheimer 1995), and attenuates its purpose of questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and reflexivity in view of change for the greater good of the society.

Brookfield and Preskill (2005) refer a great deal to Habermas' communicative action, including the rules of discussion as a critical process that has to occur in a democratic milieu where it will be free from domination and manipulation. Thereby, one eliminates all forces other than that of the better argument; though, fundamental to understand that such argument is not for the better of the individual but in solidarity of the greater good of society toward social justice. As this condition of the better argument is seen as ideal since it is difficult to attain in society on an everyday basis, it would be key for universities to make the most of in lecturing contexts. It would then be justifiable to allow and even invite critique of a Difficult Dialogues™ process, and not fall prey to a dormant neo-liberalistic attempt to, at all times, validate every point of view and *not* critique it. Moreover, validating all opinions and views without critical resistance (Hoy 2004), and if displaced by an imperative of 'caring' (an attribute put forward by Van Jaarsveldt 2013), carries the danger of resulting in more of a self-indulging 'group-therapy' (Bohm 1996: 18), or a 'confession-room' milieu than actively cultivating a democratic space where new meanings can take form. This misappropriation of Habermas's communicative action entrenches the inscriptions of an individualist, neo-liberalist ideology and possibly, albeit unintentionally, serves as a reproductive mechanism via Marcuse's concept of repressive tolerance; precisely and paradoxically what Brookfield and Preskill (2005) argue to counter via discussion as a teaching tool.

In addition, if participants pose questions of where and how a project, such as Difficult Dialogues™ is theoretically located, it would be precarious to reply with the common phraseology of 'apply these techniques in a way that works for the lecturer, the lectures, the students, the material and so on' for the following two reasons. Firstly, interpreting knowledge production and meaning within a liberal tradition that is *de facto* seen as an individualistic exercise, is

not meant by, for example, scholars such as Derrida, who intends to broaden meaning beyond a binary configuration or a logo-centric reduction (Van Reenen 2013). Secondly, emphasising a practical approach over and above that of theoretical groundings, may reify a pragmatic constraint that shies away from a critical-political stance that deliberately and actively seeks change; tempering the potential of a transformational tool into that of 'pluralist tolerance' (what Brookfield and Preskill 2005: 258 argue against), whilst dominant discourses abound.

Difficult Dialogues™ Must Counter the Instrumentalization of Knowledge

Within the *zeitgeist* phenomenon of rapid social change, universities too, are arguably subject to the ideology of neo-liberalist imperatives *viz.* commodification of knowledge, managerialism and bureaucratization (Nussbaum 2007; Lategan 2009; Osei-Kofi et al. 2010). And according to Habermas (cf. Brookfield 2001), not only do these imperatives become infused with daily ways of being, doing and becoming, but may also supersede the tasks of a university. Here, his argument pertaining to the democratizing role of the university is:

Universities must transmit technically exploitable knowledge. That is, they must meet an industrial society's need for qualified new generations and at the same time be concerned with the expanded reproduction of education itself (Habermas 1971: 1).

Furthermore, he identifies the following three responsibilities of a university (Habermas 1971: 2-3). Firstly, the university must be able to provide students with adequate qualities to pursue a career though such traits are not limited to professional skills and knowledge only. Secondly, the university must assist students to interact with cultural identities of the society the university represents and must enable students to "transmit, interpret, and develop the cultural traditions of a society" (Habermas 1971: 2) in order to become aware of the constraints of reproduction. And thirdly the university must, as it always had to, cultivate a political consciousness among students as citizens of a country. It can be argued then that at a university, where knowledge is produced, it is unavoidable that such knowledge is subject to its internal, historical *a priori* (Foucault 1966/2002; Foucault 1969

/2011) structures where its participants cannot reason from outside of such structures; e.g. its institutional culture, symbolic representations and traditions. Therefore, a form of self-critique would be regarded as central to, though one is not able to escape dominant discourses entirely (Jørgenson and Phillips 2002); at least attempt to counter such discourses via interrogating the limits and assumed truths of knowledge in order for the university to meet its academic and societal responsibilities, including that of cultivating responsible citizenship (Nussbaum 2007).

However, the neo-liberalist exigent of capitalism, individualism, bureaucratism, and technocratization reifies the instrumentalization of knowledge and carries "the underlying logic that knowledge is most useful when it is used as a means" (Oladi 2013: 3). While there is certainly agreement about the potential value of having more dialogue within a young democracy, a clear present danger exists of it becoming a mere *means* of having more dialogue, especially when Difficult Dialogues™'s tools and techniques are presented to the participants being attached to a pragmatic instant. The question remains though, to which *end*? Does a critical pedagogical tool not stop short of its purpose when being bound to a lecture room only? Though the university is not necessarily a complete reflection of the broader society, it is irrevocably connected to the broader society and remains to have a civil responsibility for cultivating citizenship, including that of democracy. The authors argue that as long Difficult Dialogues™ is presented devoid from a conscious critical theoretical grounding and political orientation, it finds itself entrapped by a fundamental flaw of neo-liberalist ideology that circumscribes to the hypernorm of instrumentalization of its 'new' knowledge, and hence attenuates its potential of contravening existing hegemonic knowledge patterns.

DIFFICULT DIALOGUES™ ASA PEDAGOGICAL PROJECT

The authors propose that Difficult Dialogues™ be situated as a pedagogical project rather than a faculty development programme. There are a plethora of available educational pedagogies. For the purpose of this paper the authors draw from i) *Pedagogy of Discomfort*,

(Boler 1999; Boler and Zembylas 2003), ii) *Transformative Pedagogy* (Nagda et al. 2003) to facilitate dialogue, and iii) the *Humanism Pedagogy* (Freire 1970/2000) to realize civic humanism principles. The authors regard all three as useful pedagogies to engage difficult dialogues at our university. In addition, the authors argue for an approach that first situates the nature of dialogue and secondly optimizes acknowledgement of the contextual specific nuances. The authors look at the contextual hindrance of engaging in a dialogue as well as provide an overview on pedagogical approaches that will facilitate difficult dialogue within their institutional context.

The pedagogy of discomfort challenges both educators and students to move out of their comfort zones and critically reflect on their own traditions and beliefs (cf. Nussbaum 2010; Mezirow 2003). This pedagogy resonates well with the outcome that seeks to nurture the adult ability of critical self-reflection, as well as with the higher education social purpose set out by the South African Department of Education of “producing responsible and constructively critical citizens” and “helping with laying the foundations of a critical civil society, with a culture of public debate and tolerance” (DoE 1997: 1.3, 1.4). The pedagogy of discomfort emphasizes both cognitive and emotional effort, perhaps exertion, to facilitate reflective judgment, especially given the recognition and problematization of the deeply embedded emotional dimensions that frame and shape daily transactions (Boler and Zembylas 2003: 110). Inherent to this pedagogy Boler and Zembylas (2003: 111) caution, are “feelings of anger, grief, disappointment and resistance”.

The transformative pedagogy “combines elements of constructivism and critical pedagogy to challenge the status quo and promote democratic and emancipatory learning contexts” (Ukpokodu 2007: 318) where participants engage in a dialogic transaction as co-constructors of new meanings. The authors regard transformative pedagogy as a difficult dialogue process facilitation practice that will help participants to look at issues in broad social contexts, challenge their abilities for deep, reflective and critical inquiry, and to constructively consider multiple viewpoints and perspectives in dialogue with others. Concomitant engagement in socially just actions enable the preparation of a new citizenry for an increasingly pluralistic democracy (Zuniga et al. 2002; Nagda et al. 2003).

Regarding the pedagogy of humanism, Freire (1970: 51) defines the humanising pedagogy as a teaching method that “ceases to be an instrument by which teachers can manipulate students but rather expresses the consciousness of the students themselves”. Important for this paper is the argument that optimises mutual humanisation in a dialogic approach which challenges everyone to ultimately develop a critical consciousness. This, the authors argue, is particularly important to satisfy the challenge set to higher education institutions by Habermas (1971), and the social purpose of the Department of Education requires that lecturers help student-citizens move from assured taken-for-granted truths and habits of everyday and challenge them to see themselves as actors or models of imagined nations/communities (Anderson 1991) and the world (Nussbaum 2010). The authors argue that incorporating the humanising pedagogy will facilitate this process and they challenge for the cultivation of humanity (finding the human in the ‘other’) beyond the lecture halls (Nussbaum 1997).

Below is a schematic representation (Fig.1) of a pedagogical process that may facilitate dialogues that are difficult. In particular, it challenges for teaching and learning that is transformative. In other words, curriculum should be transformative for both the lecturer and the student; for the lecturer in teaching and for the student in learning. Contextual variables, including assumptions as put forward within the first section of the figure, need to be interrogated through espousing pedagogies of discomfort, the transformative and the humanising in order to optimise the civic humanism principle.

The integration of *context* and *pedagogical* process is seen as a prerequisite for a successful *outcome* (cf. Fig. 1), though the authors concede that often it may be an ideal that is constantly strived for, more than an aim that is attained without exception. Many educators however often focus on one or the other aspect, rather than the integrated process. Curricular content without a transformative pedagogy may be rhetorical, intellectualising, and divorced from reality (Mezirow 2003). Challenging taken-for-granted frames of reference does not come easy whether one is a lecturer or student. It requires a concerted effort to do so. If anything, they are ready to defend conservative, socialised ideologies (Ukpokodu, 2009; Zembylas 2012), main-

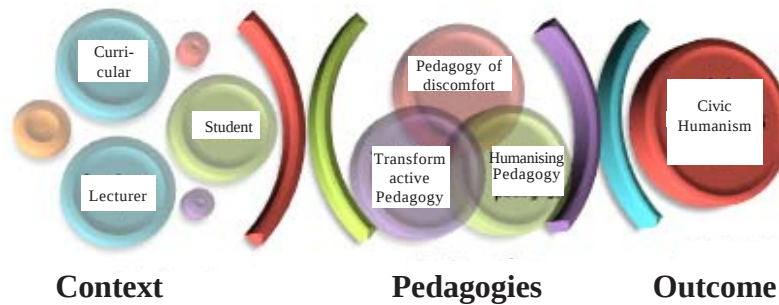


Fig. 1. A process that facilitates dialogues that are difficult
 Source: Author

tain power positions (McGregor 2004) and indirect knowledge (Jansen 2010); hence reverting to “previous ideological conditioning” (Brookfield and Preskill 2005: 261). In this regard, the value of the pedagogy of discomfort is critical. Any context that fails to recognise the existence of such influential knowledge and fails to challenge the underlying ideologies and emotional attachment may result in a temporary feel good emotion, which is unfortunately contrary to the aim of cultivating humanity (Nussbaum 1997).

To elucidate the possibilities of an effective difficult dialogue process, in addition to context and pedagogical facilitation as presented above, two additional interrelated practices *viz.* Freirean’s dialogic education and Kwenda’s (2003) mutual vulnerabilities, are relevant for consideration in order to support desired pedagogical outcomes. Freire (1970/2000) in his advocacy for emancipatory strategies discourages the ‘banking disposition’ and calls for an educational context in which the knowledge, perspectives, and experiences of students and teachers are honored as central to the education process. Mutual vulnerabilities on the other hand, challenge “the normative frame and human-default drives, unveil and interrogate them in an educational context of shared moderation, learning and critical self-reflection to create space for renewed and negotiated meaning” (Keet et al. 2009: 109).

CONCLUSION

This article critically analyzed the implementation of the Difficult Dialogues™ project at a particular institution of which the authors are

also part of faculty. A discursive approach was followed; hence the authors irrevocably stand to the acknowledgement of being part of the discursive context and process from which arguments were put forward. In the same vein, the critical reflections in this piece are not necessarily attached or delimited to any particular institution, faculty, center or individual, but rather their broader representations as part of larger, dominant discourses. While various institutional circumstances regarding the implementation of the project were put forward in the analysis, some constituent aspects of the Difficult Dialogues™ project were also problematized.

The Difficult Dialogues™ project was adopted at the authors’ institution against the backdrop of painstakingly slow transformation across Higher Education institutions in South Africa. The project was introduced in view of creating democratic spaces to engage with residual forms of racial, sexual, gender and religion discrimination that manifest in various forms in everyday lives of students and faculty. However, upon close examination, it is put forward that for such a project to be deeply effective, it must wholeheartedly be endorsed by those in positions of power at the university. Such an endorsement may be demonstrated by calling for and insisting on the large scale involvement of significant numbers of participants across all faculties as opposed to less than two percent of lecturing, and support staff who are associated with institutional teaching and learning. The university needs to put its full weight into this and similar projects if it wants to disrupt dominant discourses and provide needed, declared and unambigu-

ous support that are put forward as priority to project leaders, and not make in merely an administrative exercise. That also means that the university must take initiative in placing as much emphasis on how content is *taught* as how it is *assessed*. In order to entrench such a collective agenda, Difficult Dialogues™ needs to be offered to all staff, perhaps first by means of experiential learning for staff before it is required to take to students as part of the transformative frameworks. Perhaps, in such a way, introducing Difficult Dialogues™ as a pedagogical programme rather than a faculty development programme, the project could be entrenched as a legitimate institutional teaching and learning endeavor rather than an *ad hoc* effort towards transformation. Furthermore the implementation of a project that seeks transformation cannot occur successfully without the conscious consideration of any institution's historical map that shows the discursive paths most often travelled, at times with deliberation and other times seemingly less so, in spite of attempts to carve out different footpaths. For that reason, consciously grounding Difficult Dialogues™ in its critical social theoretical paradigm is perhaps one of the measures where lecturers can determinedly question their deeply engrained assumptions about what is regarded as true above other 'truths' and why. 'Truths' about, for example, what difficult dialogue and its concomitant spaces mean; and for whom; to which means; and to what ends? To the authors' minds, this is perhaps the only way one may at least attempt to become aware of how knowledge and epistemologies become reproduced as nothing and nobody can entirely escape discourse.

Subsequently, Difficult Dialogues™ is also subject to dominant discourses of the day, cannot be presented as "arbitrarily bounded" and should too, be vigilant of *zeitgeist* ideologies impeding on its purpose. The neo-liberalist imperative of individualism as a main focus in discussions during workshops coupled with a pragmatist constraint when encouraging participants to appropriate the tools and techniques according to how they see fit, precisely contravene the theoretical groundings Difficult Dialogues™. The authors argue that a precatory to validate each and every contribution at the expense of critiquing it, creates a space where Marcuse's mechanism of 'repressive tolerance' operates, reproducing the suppression of marginalized voices. The authors contend that such an indi-

vidualist slant is not what is meant by theory of communicative action. The authors put forward that a hypernorm of pragmatism when offering Difficult Dialogues™'s tools and techniques, shies away from its critical theoretical groundings and political purpose and reproduces *status quo*.

A critical analysis notwithstanding, the authors believe in the immense potential of Difficult Dialogues™ as a teaching tool that can advance democracy through creating new meanings, in class rooms and beyond, as their Alaskan counterparts have clearly demonstrated. Perhaps that is precisely the motivation for writing this piece, an 'essay in refusal' for being left wanting; wanting more transformation and more democracy toward social justice.

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NOTES

- 1 Faculty development project is used here as understood in our university context as the training initiatives offered to lecturing personnel, not according to the UAA's classification and their use of lecturer enrichment programmes.
- 2 *Faculty intensive* is used in Landis' (2008: iv) *Start Talking* as "a faculty development opportunity that focuses on critical topics and takes place over several days".
- 3 This translates to approximately 1.3% of the 2740 academic staff across the three campuses appointed to service a student body of 33 000 students from six faculties viz. Health Sciences, Law, Education, The Humanities, Natural and Agricultural Sciences and Theology (UFS 2012: 31, 33).

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