

# ANALYSING A DISCUSSION ON AN ONLINE UNIVERSITY FORUM: A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO DISCURSIVE DEMOCRACY

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## ABSTRACT

South African academics' online discursive interactions about racism on a university's forum are of interest. Iris Marion Young informs the model of choice for the interpretation of emancipatory discourse. Rather than focusing on argumentative discourse such as in the deliberative model of Jürgen Habermas, the communicative model promotes an understanding of the positions of others through discursive engagements. The findings indicate that participants who prefer argumentative discursive interaction, do not appreciate diverse social-historical contexts. If participants appreciate diverse contexts, they follow a mitigating and sympathetic approach and thereby create doubt in the consensual opinions and negative judgments of participants who follow the deliberative model of discourse. These interactions do however not persuade all participants to critically reflect on limiting opinions, attitudes and ways of interaction. An online moderator can encourage participants from diverse contexts who will enable a more nuanced discourse and who will create the opportunity to understand multiple realities and facilitate a transformative discussion.

**Keywords:** communicative democracy, deliberative democracy, emancipation, narratives, online discourse, online forum, transformation

## INTRODUCTION

The article's objective is to demonstrate how a discourse between academics which echoes elements of the communicative rather than a deliberative model of democratic discourse contributes to the emancipation of participants in an online forum of the New University (NU) (pseudonym).

The article is structured as follows: how the communicative model of democratic discourse is more inclusive than the deliberative model is discussed by relating to:

- the contrasting types of discursive engagement which both models of democratic discourse prescribe
- the difference in the objective of both models of democratic discourse.

These two main points of difference are used as the theoretical basis for the evaluation of the participation in the discourse as far as they relate to the emancipatory potential of the form of engagement (communicative or deliberative/rational) which the discussants assume. Theorists' opinions concerning the emancipatory potential and the architectural characteristics of online spaces also inform the evaluation of discussions which take place in online spaces. The questions which this article focuses on are:

- How do the discursive interactions on the online forum which have elements of the communicative and deliberative models of democracy in discourse influence the emancipation of the participants?
- Which changes have to occur before the online discourse can become an emancipatory space?

### **The research tradition and the communicative model of democratic discourse**

Critical theorists in Information Studies focus amongst others on the mediation of democratisation and change through email communication by management (Čečez-Kecmanović 2001; Čečez-Kecmanović, Treleaven and Moodie 2000). The contextuality of meaning in email communication is also a topic of interest (Ngwenyama and Lee 1997). Enlarged thinking, reflective judgement and trust in online communication (Thorseth 2008; 2011) are explored. The deliberative model of democracy of Habermas (1990a; 1987; 1990b; 1993) is the dominant theoretical influence in these works. As this critique favours a kind of rationality which does not make it possible to identify and analyse persistent power relations, it is necessary to broaden the scope of critique in order to allow a diversity of multiple voices, which do not meet the strict rules of rationality within the Habermas model. Such an expansion of communication is present in Young's (1996; 1990; 2000; 2003) communicative model of democracy, which aims to be more inclusive. The researcher explores knowledge new to the field of emancipation through online dialogue in this article, as the implication of the communicative model of democracy and the emotional attributes of both models in discourse is not apparent in online academic environments.

### **Research on online forums at universities**

The existence of an online forum in universities for academics to have a discourse about issues of concern is not a common occurrence. The only other forum exists at UKZN (University of

KwaZulu Natal), named “Change@UKZN” which corresponds to the forum at the NU as it was meant to provide a space for academics “to discuss UKZN issues, particularly as they related to the national question of “Transformation” but as applied to UKZN as institution.” (Morrell 2012).

No research exists up to date on online forums for academics. Online student forums, such as “Dissent” at Yale University created the opportunity for debate on free speech on campuses and the issue of safe spaces for critical discourse about racism and sexism. The students also voice criticism about managerial issues (Bell et al. 2016). Other studies focus on forums within political (Thakur 2012; Karlsson 2011; Brysk 2013), business (Campbell, Fletcher and Greenhill 2009), professional (Yuksel and Tozun 2013) and informal recreational contexts (Arde' vol, Nu' ñ ez and Vayreda 2006).

Idealistic and pessimistic views on the potential of online spaces articulate discourses on the potential empowerment of the participants in virtual environments. The idealistic view holds that a virtual environment supports and follows the principles of an open, free and democratic society (McGuire, Kiesler and Siegel 1987) and that it provides an inclusive and safe space for discussions between employees (Fernback 1997; Sproull and Kiesler 1991; Franks 2011). The pessimistic view focuses on the power hierarchies in these environments which lead to the disempowerment of participants (Čečez-Kecmanović, Treleaven and Moodie 2000).

A reflection on the idealistic and pessimistic view of the emancipatory potential of the forum against the statements above will follow as part of the conclusion.

## **THE DISCURSIVE MODELS OF DEMOCRACY**

The two models of democratic discourse do not share prerequisites for the attainment of emancipation, although they hold the respectful interaction between discussants as a mutual ideal.

### **The deliberative model**

The Habermas (1990a, b) model proposes that the objective of discourse is for parties in disagreement to reach agreement through a process of rational engagement. This engagement is defined and formalised by the respectful and reciprocal provision of arguments and evidence, referred to as Ideal Speech.

This rational model proposes that moral dialogue requires people to adopt an impartial position towards the presentation of experiences which are subjective and to support only a discourse which is consistent with objective judgements and positions.

Emotions do not have a place in the deliberative model and do not have value in discourse.

Objective, impartial standpoints are viewed as a valid reflection of objective reality, and the subjective experiences of reality are invalid in moral discourse. The role emotion plays in revealing own experiences is perceived as distracting and a potential dangerous deviation for the rational mind. Attention is given to the universal and objective, and not to the particular and subjective. In the rational paradigm, the expression of emotion will not contribute to the ideal of respect or will be distractive in a discourse where those with differences want to interact respectfully to reach a consensus.

The exclusion of emotion agrees with the sentiment that emotionality is inferior and a person who shows emotion, is referred to as irrational (Jaggar 1996). The reason over emotion debate is also rooted in the academic opposition of Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida against the rationalism of the Enlightenment (Benhabib 1990). Values as such were seen as connected with emotional responses and reason had to be uncontaminated or abstracted from value, if it were to provide trustworthy insight into reality. The validity of logic was thought independent of human attitudes and preferences, and the reason was taken to be objective and universal (Sartre, as cited in Barrett 1994).

The idea that consensus should be the aim of discourse between people with differences is problematic in the sense that differences and diversity are underplayed and denied as everyone has to agree to the existence of one objective reality. In following this exclusive model of viewing one reality as legitimate, no acknowledgement is given to the existence of multiple realities in a diverse society.

### **The communicative model**

The communicative model differs from the deliberative model both in the prerequisites concerning the form of discourse, the aim of discourse and the positioning towards the role which subjective experiences play. Young's communicative model of discursive democracy expands the rational engagement model as the basis of reasoning towards an inclusive engagement which acknowledges the role of subjectivity and the expression of emotions. This democratic model of discourse expands the rational concept of reason by allowing emotional aspects to discourse, as it is embedded in the humaneness of people. The rational model holds that reason is void of emotion, but rational arguments can be presented with emotional conviction and personal narratives, which are seen to be emotional and subjective, can present cohesive arguments and evidence. The two concepts are therefore not exclusive, but work together towards understanding: emotions are just as much part of cognition as rational argumentation.

The acknowledgement of emotion in discourse implies an appreciation of all forms of

discourse or communication, which represents diverse representations and interpretations of a multi-layered society. The aim of discourse in the communicative model is not for people to reach consensus, but rather to tend to the views of their opponents, which include the recount of their experiences of specific situations. Young proposes that actual dialogue is the best way to test moral and political norms. Actual dialogue presents and tests real needs, interests and perspectives, contrasted to ideal speech and its objective standpoints. She proposes that the respect between opponents is only possible when they are willing to understand the differences between them. Young holds that one can only have a moral judgement when the specific historical and social context of the other is known. One should only be able to argue normatively when the other has explained his/her social and political situations (1990, 5).

### **Understanding differences through enlarged thought**

The communicative model focuses on the appreciation and understanding of others through attending to the narratives or the telling of life stories. Although these narratives mainly serve as interpretations of specific experiences, the communicative model would allow as many narratives possible. These narratives represent the multi-dimensionality of diversity in society. The value of life stories is that they address the shared humaneness of people, diminishes the contrasting opinions they have and have the impact that people can place themselves in the positions of others – to attain “enlarged thought”, a cognitive and emotional position which Thorseth (2008) supports.

To understand demands attention to the “difference between privileged and oppressed groups which forms part of the political and social landscape” (Young 2000). Young (1996) appreciates differences in her inclusive approach, which testifies to a caring and humane attitude and leads to the emancipation of the self and others. These affective positions also inform the theoretical point of departure in the analysis of the discursive interaction on the forum.

### **Technological constraints to understanding others**

Online environments pose a problem to participants to communicate clearly with the only option of text as a medium of communication. When the dominating form of discursive structure is the rational presentation of arguments, participants tend not to describe and explain why they hold certain opinions. The only knowledge one gains from a participant is by following the text they create. In this sense, the forum can be seen as a space where the participants are disembodied. This absence of personal context in the forum itself contributes to the exclusion of participants as misunderstanding and moral judgement might follow when

the person is not presented in embodied form. A face-to-face, embodied encounter, would restrain a moral judgement and bring a better understanding of the other.

An understanding of social-political contexts in an online environment is also compromised by the architectural or technological characteristics of the medium. A characteristic of the NU's online forum, in contrast to multimedia blogs and synchronous video communication, is that the participants can make their opinions known only by way of asynchronous textual communication.

Given the lack of context in textual participation and also potentially limited by their capability to express themselves adequately by way of text, the interactions in the forum can lead to the misunderstanding of a person's intent.

### **The case study**

The NU's online forum, named "Have your say" was established by management on the intranet. The creation of the forum had the intent to invite academics to discuss issues which they judged to be of importance.

A specific discussion on the forum about racism which had a lifetime of 12 days caught my attention as I experienced it as emotionally loaded. Bettina starts the thread by quoting from posters which students made, inciting each other towards a demonstration. Bettina's indignant reaction to the students' posters provokes strong reactions from the other participants towards her. The responses of Stephen, Amanda, Eva, Susan, Pieter and Tsepiso (pseudonyms) form part of the analysis. These people's responses are relevant to the answering of the research question, as they show elements in agreement in both models of democratic discourse.

### **GENERATING, COLLECTING AND ANALYSING DATA**

Two forms of data creation were crucial for the study. The text which the discussants created in the selected forum discussion forms part of the secondary data. The primary set of data consists of the hour-long transcribed interviews with Bettina, Stephen, Pieter and Susan.

Before the interviews, I shared the forum text with Bettina, Stephen, Pieter and Susan. By doing that, I wanted them to think about their motives to involve themselves in the discussion. During the interview, the participants had to respond to the following questions

- i) why they participated in general and specifically in this forum discussion,
- ii) how they experienced other participations and the responses to their participations
- iii) whether they experienced shifts in their opinions
- iv) why they preferred to continue or terminate their participations

The analysis of the interview transcripts was informed by the prior analysis of the forum text according to descriptive analysis, as informed by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014), where semantic units were coded. The categories which became apparent were i) motivation, ii) perception iii) interaction and iv) termination/continuance. An example of coding and categorisation of the text is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Text analysis: Coding and categorisation

Text	Code	Category
... particularly the way in which I began my online career on the BBS, I think in some ways it was sort of slightly more a sophisticated form of trolling, really, it was at first then I pop up and say this prayer stuff is terrible. (Interview with Stephen)	RCI – resistance to the character of the institution	Motivation
Firstly because I felt that the liberals always have the most say (Interview with Bettina)	CLO – counter leftist opinions	Motivation
How extremely ridiculous is the expectation that I have to make all the sacrifices so that their idiotic ideas can be continued about values, education and Africa (Forum text of Bettina)	SID – students' ideas disregarded FOD – focus on own discomfort	Perception
I will later explain later where this comes from, but I just want to say that if I am right it will just prove my point that the logic of certain groups leaves much to be desired (Forum text Bettina)	SLQ – students' logic questioned	Perception
I am tired of living apologetically as I am white and my ancestors arrived here 300 years ago and brought civilisation here. (Forum text of Bettina)	RBC – reaction to black consciousness	Perception
If I was presented with this on an ongoing basis in a class i (sic) was attending in order to improve my situation, I would be at the front of the march, and I would be very angry. (Forum text of Stephen)	SBS – sympathy with black students	Perception
Bettina is racism dressed as reason (Forum text of Stephen)	AMP – assume a moralistic position	Interaction
I believe in your good intentions and your commentary is also much more worth than the silent majority (Forum text of Pieter)	ECC – expression of care and compliments	Interaction
You know what, at this stage there aren't active chat lines which are new and fresh, it is the same old anti-apartheid, liberal moaning about this, moaning about that, moaning about students, moaning about Afrikaans, moaning about religion, moaning about philosophy, moaning, moaning, moaning, it is all we hear from their side, and, uhm, I have had my say, I have said it clearly, for those who have heard, heard it, for those who did not hear, they did not hear ... but really it is like a record which gets stuck. (Interview text of Bettina)	FFF – find forum frustrating	Termination

The categories resorted to the causal, strategic and consequential conditions according to the grounded theory paradigm of Strauss and Corbin (1990) which inform the central phenomenon, namely the potential emancipation of participants in the forum. The contextual condition of the paradigm describes the socio-political contexts both of those who participate in the forum and those whom participants refer to (in this case the discussion is about African students). Within the categories, an interpretive approach allowed divisions which answered to the degree of the empowering potential in the form of engagement as noted in the communicative model in

comparison to the deliberative model.

## FINDINGS

In the section which follows, the text of the participants, along with the texts of the interviews, are further discussed and followed by an evaluative reflection on how the texts show elements of the deliberative (rational) or communicative forms of discursive engagements. I use the way participants refer to each other in naming them: the colonial, the liberal and the mediator. The participants whose texts resemble the elements of the deliberative form of engagement are first discussed, followed by participations which are similar to the communicative form of engagement.

## DISCUSSIONS ECHOING THE DELIBERATIVE FORM OF ENGAGEMENT

### **Bettina, the colonial and Stephen, the liberal**

Bettina opens the discussion and she titles it “Racism, the other side”. At the beginning of the thread, she quotes the content of posters and pamphlets of Black Consciousness Movements on the campus. The students who made the posters were reacting against perceived notions of discrimination against black students during lectures and in the curriculum. The protests were allegedly motivated when a white lecturer made comments which the students viewed as racist. The posters are quoted below:

“This university is ours because it is Africa and Africa is our land, we do not appreciate fools that still uphold and embrace the values of apartheid or white supremacy maybe in Holland.

We are made to believe that they are stupid because they are black and they are not products of Hoerskool. The same person we are arguing about came in a ship in 1652 very late 18:00. He will never make us feel offended by our past and our blackness because black is beautiful he can utter such nonsense black will still be beautiful. Therefore on 13 May at 11:00 we are marching against this stupid man. Fighting students battles against academic terrorism.”

*Causal conditions: Motivation.* Bettina refers to the fact that her motivation to participate was to counter the voices of the liberals, who dominated the forum. Her discussion which follows the quotations of the students’ pamphlets has the objective to counter their sentiments.

*Strategic conditions: Interaction showing resistance.* Bettina interprets the intention of the Black Consciousness Movement by voicing their message as “everything white is bad, everything black is good.” In reaction to be identified as “bad”, she describes her pride in the civilisation and achievements which the white Westerners, her ancestors brought to Africa.



*Strategic conditions: Interaction portraying difference.* Bettina reacts to the pride expressed by the students in their slogan “black is beautiful”, and corresponding to the students’ pride in their heritage, she sees herself as someone who is a proud white Western lecturer. She praises academic standards which she describes are deficient in the attitude and capabilities of the African students but which she adheres to. Bettina accentuates the difference between herself and the students by using contrasts, such as “I” and “them”, “those people”. She positions herself by allying with the achievements of Western science, against what she perceives as “African backwardness”.

*Strategic conditions: Indifference to emotions and particular experiences of students* Bettina portrays herself very strongly as different from the black students. She is not able to sympathise with the students’ distress, fear and insecurity. She only reacts to the sentiments of the students superficially – when they are proud to be black, she is proud to be white, if they disregard western knowledge, she takes pride in being a white western scientist. Being unable to place herself in their shoes, Bettina does not find it necessary to seek the reasons for the students’ sentiments.

Bettina fails to see that the feelings which she experiences, are also expressed in the students’ posters. She also feels disempowerment and indignance, which she expresses in an anarchist, extremist and hateful way, characteristics which she contributes to the students.

Describing the actions of the students as irrational, causes Bettina to distance herself from them, as they only inspire fear and insecurity. The inability of Bettina to understand the students’ affective positions is a characteristic of people who operate in the deliberative model. The communicative model of Young (1990) mediates traits of interest and appreciation for the emotions and the socio-political positions of others. The lack of interest and compassion explains the moral distancing which is inherent in the rational model.

*Interaction showing an authoritative attitude.* Bettina refers to the students’ ideas as lacking logic. She also indicates her criticism of the students’ use of faulty grammar and vocabulary in the text of the quoted posters. She assumes a position of authority when proving the students’ low academic standards: “He will never make us feel offended by our past and our blackness because black is beautiful he can utter such nonsense black will still be beautiful **(language???????)**.” (The interjection in bold type is that of Bettina).

*Contextual conditions.* The contextual conditions refer to the context created by the history of someone’s online participation and also to their broader social-historical context. The participants in the interviews have become familiarised with Bettina’s position on issues through the history of her participation in the forum. She also states that her position concerning racism is well known as she made it clear in previous participations: “As I have said before”.

She assumes that the reader already knows her position on the transformation of the OU (Old University, pseudonym) to its new status, with its accompanying themes such as race, standards, religion and language.

One can derive from her reference to her previous forum interactions that Bettina has a cataclysmic view of the transformation from the Old University to the New University. She perceives the transformation in the wake of Black Consciousness as a threat to her beliefs and truths. In the forum text, she refers to students' ideas of transformation as "idiotic ideas of what education is".

I tried to understand the context from which Bettina operated in our interview. During her previous position as a lecturer at another institution, Bettina perceived the students' actions of protest as irrational. She was also shocked by the destruction of buildings. Bettina's incomprehension of the repeated protests and dissatisfaction of the students, caused fear, desperation and also aggression.

One understands the sentiments of Bettina when placing her in the socio-historical context of South Africa's colonial and apartheid past. Her attitude towards the students represents the ideological cocoon in which colonial whiteness is often exalted. When one adheres uncritically to these sentiments, one is unable to have insight in the privileges which our colonial history brought to white people, and equally, an incapability in recognising the oppression of black people.

*Consequential conditions.* The responses of those who assume an opposing position meet the same reactionary status as Bettina's declarative opening of the discussion. Bettina also anticipates this reaction and her expectation to be accused of racism does later in the discussion become fulfilled.

Bettina found the forum's purpose to be exhausted as she and the other participants started to repeat themselves and therefore she terminated her participation.

### **Stephen, the liberal (and his followers)**

*Causal conditions: Motivation.* Stephen was motivated to participate in the forum primarily to show resistance against some traditions of the Old University.

*Strategic conditions: Way of interaction, perceptions.* In their forum texts, Stephen and Amanda categorise Bettina as being extremist, uninformed, racist, hateful and poisonous. This categorisation as an element of the rational model lends authority to their persuasion that they know her and have no doubt about their judgement. This rational strategy also excludes Bettina as Stephen and Amanda create a distance between themselves and her. They contribute the same sentiments to Bettina which she contributes to the protesting students. Stephen makes it

clear that he differs from Bettina concerning his world view and opinions. By describing her as “ungrateful and uncaring,” he prefers to be moralistic and assumes a similar attitude of rationalism which Bettina portrays in her descriptions of the students. He also criticises her deficiency in the formulation of arguments, supported by credible evidence. Stephen wants Bettina to prove that she can write academically:

Stephen: “Listing endless examples is not good enough, use them, make an argument, build something convincing by clearly explaining how it is that the evidence that you are presenting supports the assertion that you are trying to make. That is called reasoning, and it is the most important part of academic writing.”

The authoritative positions which Stephen assumes resemble elements of the rational model where he also describes Bettina as “woefully under-informed” and mislead in her “apparently authoritative statements”. Referring to his own insight in Bettina’s views as persistently fictitious, Stephen uses phrases like “it is clear” and “of course, as usual”. In his way of interaction, he further assumes a position of prescriptiveness over Bettina by using phrases such as “you should not”.

Stephen’s reaction to the narratives of Susan and Eva about interracial incidents outside the New University summons the rational model when he judges them as not convincing and as not enough evidence to prove an argument. In his effort to view all narratives as part of the argument-evidence strategy of the rational model, he does not recognise the humiliation and feelings of disempowerment in the women’s narratives, as the rational model does not acknowledge the role of emotions in reasoning:

“It is not possible to say, on the basis of the information contained in your description, whether or not these incidents were in any way racially motivated.”

Stephen is mindful of the emotional distress of the students’ experience in his response to Bettina, but as he does not present his own experiences in the forum, his participation remains rational and hypothetical:

“If I was presented with this on an ongoing basis in a class i (sic) was attending in order to improve my situation, I would be at the front of the march, and I would be very angry.”

It is interesting that even when Stephen and Bettina’s discursive interactions are rationalistic, they do assume emotional positions. Bettina is disdainful about the students’ situations, and this attitude resembles elements of the rational model, as she does not show interest in

understanding their specific situations. Stephen is as disdainful about Bettina's specific situation and the anxiety she must have experienced about student demonstrations, due to her previous experiences.

## DISCUSSIONS ECHOING THE COMMUNICATIVE FORM OF ENGAGEMENT

### Pieter, the mediator

*Way of interaction. Expression of care.* Two participants' interactions ascribe to the model of communicative engagement, as they show sympathy and refrain from being authoritative and judgemental. Pieter's interaction with Bettina contributes to a more constructive relationship than the others have with her. His caring address is a strategy which the communicative model mediates. He expresses doubt in Stephen's normative judgement of racism and interacts in a mitigating way with Bettina. This type of interaction has the potential to lead her to moments of insight in her attitude towards black students. Pieter tries to be more understanding by not taking a confronting or opposing stance, but by being more probing and more inquiring.

*Way of interaction: Complimenting.* Pieter is sympathetic in his response to Bettina, and he affirms his trust in her good intentions. He also appreciates the fact that she speaks out. Using words which have a favourable emotional appeal is a rhetorical device in the communicative model (Young 2000, 57–62) to lubricate the discourse where differences are apparent:

Pieter: "I believe in your good intentions and your commentary is also much more worth than the silent majority

Therefore I think, that people think you are a big racist, which might not really be true, as I said, I believe in your integrity. But your way of writing creates the wrong impression with people, perhaps a milder tone might perhaps help. Just a diplomatic advice."

Bettina: "Thank you Pieter. I do not have the gift of the gag and it might be the reason for the way I am writing."

This diplomatic intervention infuses the thread with a different nuance, which has been characterised by Stephen and Bettina's rational focus on exerting their superiority over each other. Pieter's remark, "I believe in your good intentions" is exemplary of the trust he has in Bettina and the intent not to vilify her creates a respectful relationship between them. Pieter does also not categorise her by describing her as "ungrateful and uncaring", the way Stephen does. He questions the consensus which her adversaries reach that she is a racist and doubts the sure form of knowledge which the others agree upon.

Young (1997) proposes a stance of moral humility instead of the normative superiority in the deliberative model. This is also the stance which Pieter adopts when he states his belief in Bettina's integrity, instead of the sure knowledge that she is morally inferior.

The feelings of doubt which the communicative model (Young 2000; 2001; 2003) recognises, is in contrast with the rational model's forms of certain knowledge and persuasion. It becomes clear that those strategies of discursive interaction which are more sympathetic and which allow for doubt in the dominating consensus of the group (e.g. that Bettina is a racist), have more potential to bring participants to some form of normative self-reflection than the rationalistic and moralistic forms of the rational model of discourse.

*Way of interaction: Practising enlarged thought.* In his reaction to Susan's narrative, Tsepiso sympathises with her and states that he does not understand why she had to undergo such a distressing experience as a person who is not at all deserving of racist treatment:

"I am sorry it happened to you Susan, because I know you I have worked with you, the funny is it happen on the people who are not racist or who are there to make a difference."

This sympathetic participation of Tsepiso shows the importance of being interested in, acknowledging the person and knowing the specific situation of someone. As Tsepiso knows Susan, he understands the trauma she experiences and he can practise enlarged thought by putting himself in her shoes.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article explains how the forum's discussions which have elements similar to the different models of discourse in the forum enable participants to develop an understanding and appreciation of the other. The dominance of the type of discursive model determines the inclusivity of the forum. The ability to develop a criticality of the own opinions and attitudes is effected by those who operate in the communicative model, but the effect of the rational model is estrangement and exclusion. I will explain this statement by referring to the reflections which Bettina and Stephen offered during their interviews.

Within the duration of their interaction on the forum, Bettina and Stephen did not reach an understanding of each other. The stronger they intend to be authoritative in arguing a contradicting opinion, the more their interaction frustrates them.

The fact that Bettina's contribution remains reactionary shows that she does not reach insight in her limited position. Her contributions are also characteristic of the rational model as she presumes to know others by placing them in categories. Bettina can not become critical of

her opinions and she remains offensive. She remains captured in the apartheid ideology and is not able to see others. Bettina only conceded to the fact in her interview that she was not familiar with the subject field of anthropology and felt unsure when she argued with Stephen. Her position concerning the students did not change, and during the interview, she remained unsympathetic towards them. She could not enlarge her thought about those who were different from her.

During the interview Stephen expressed the realisation that he practised “hermeneutic bullying” with Bettina, and that he would assume another position to those he differed from in the future. This reflection of Stephen indicates an insight in an attitude which participants experienced as an expression of excessive power.

The forum itself is not able to ensure the development of a critical attitude in its participants. To ensure that the forum offers a space where participants can reflect critically, its dynamics should change.

The following recommendations can enable a space where diverse cultural groups can be included and critical self-reflection facilitated. By saying this, I support the idealist view of the potential of the forum as an enabling and safe space (Fernback 1997; Sproull and Kiesler 1991; Franks 2011).

- Some participants reflected during the interviews on their limited way of interaction with their opponents. They realised that their texts were flaming the conflict and alienating others. A moderator can invite participants to rethink their positions or opinions and thereby transform the forum from a space of only “Having your say” to a space where participants can do critical self-reflection.
- Although introspection or self-reflection brought some insight, exposure to other narratives would make the forum more inclusive. As Young (2000, 129) allows for narratives which “supplement argument by providing ways of speaking across differences in the absence of shared understandings” those narratives which reveal one-sided views, such as Bettina’s, are problematic. The solution would also be that a moderator or curator of the forum should invite a multiplicity of views to the forum. There is not a diversity of participants in the forum. In this discussion for example, there is only one black person. The majority speaks Afrikaans and English, while participations in Tswana are very scarce.
- Living in a post-apartheid society necessitates an affective education, as feelings of hatred and fear were brought by our social-historical context of racial division. Affective

education includes more than emotions and has to do with the way those we perceive as different are affecting us. Affective education also includes the way we affect those we perceive as different. The knowledge of these affections can empower both parties.

- The affective demands the search for relationships which are constructive and should not only be a reaction. A moderator has to be aware of the empowerment in the expression of affect. This moderator can help participants to identify and reconstruct their beliefs and positions. The moderator can also enable the participants to change themselves.
- In contrast to the essentialist reductive views of participants by themselves as “a white lecturer”, or as a descendent of Europeans “who brought civilisation”, and the rational categorisation of someone being “a racist”, the notion that people can change rather than being stagnant defines the forum as a potentially transformative space.
- Except for a curatorship which deals with the content and participants in the forum, the curatorship can extend to the technological aspects of the forum. As participations within a discussion thread are isolated from the intertextual history of someone’s participation, the reader can benefit from a search facility by which a discussant’s name is typed into the search space, and all the participations of that specific discussant can become visible. In that way, the reader becomes familiar with a participant’s opinions and the issues which have been discussed over some time.

Instead of the current forum being characterised by participants as a “toxic space”, an online forum can provide a healthy, safe and enabling space for universities to transform to places where diversity is understood and celebrated. South African academics can initiate a process to change corrosive beliefs of and attitudes towards others. The online environment can create this opportunity with a form of curatorship which is emancipatory, following a model of inclusive communicative engagement rather than rational exclusion.

Discourses should be held on multiple levels and platforms to create and sustain constant university transformation. As we construct and reproduce our social realities (Vannini 2009, 561), these realities can in the process of transformation be reconstructed and reevaluated through emancipatory discursive interaction.

It is crucial for universities to create spaces for open and critical discourses between employees/academics from diverse backgrounds. Providing open spaces for these discourses can form an educational intervention in which a university can enhance free speech and also create opportunities for a transformation towards critical and accountable participation. The absence of a discourse which includes diverse voices representing diverse realities inhibits

personal and institutional transformation. Without a constructive and open discourse, the university might forfeit the opportunity to create platforms which potentially offer transformative educational experiences.

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