

My living-educational-theory of Place-Based Learning as a means to move towards a more socially just pedagogy in teacher education

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Abstract

I researched my practice as a lecturer in a teacher education college in Zimbabwe as I was concerned that my teaching was not assisting students to realise their potential for independent thinking and knowledge creation and preparing them with appropriate skills and knowledge for life and work in the 21st-century. I believe both aspects of education are essential in teacher preparation. There are injustices in the way the curriculum is enacted. I therefore focussed this research on improving learning to integrate social justice values into my practice and how to liberate my students and myself from traditional didactic pedagogy. I opted for Place-Based Learning as a teaching strategy since it has been shown to promote student engagement, critical thinking, innovation and reflexivity by embedding the learning in the social reality of the students. I collected and analysed data in the form of interviews, reflective diaries, and student assignments to enhance my learning to improve my practice and as evidence to support my knowledge claims that I had enabled students to become producers rather than just consumers of knowledge; fostered inclusion; and enabled transformative learning, all of which heightened student awareness of the need to make their future teaching more socially relevant and just. I conclude by proposing guidelines for professional practitioners in any educational context using Place-Based Learning to facilitate learning intended to promote students' inclusion, democratic knowledge generation, and active participation.

Keywords: **Experiential learning; Equitable learning environment; Socially just practices; Transformative learning; Living Educational Theory Research**

In this paper Florence Sebele reports on her research. However the university requires the supervisors' names to be linked to any publication from a PhD to recognise their intellectual property in terms of assisting the student to conceptualise and design the study, as well as considerable help with writing the article. Her supervisors were Lesley Wood and Adri du Toit.

Introduction

I (Florence Sebele) am a lecturer in a teacher education college in Zimbabwe. In this paper I present details of my research into my educational practice to create my living-educational-theory of Place-Based Learning. I therefore use the personal pronoun throughout this paper. However, my university requires the supervisors' names to be linked to any publication from a PhD to recognise their intellectual property in terms of assisting the student to conceptualise and design the study, as well as considerable help with writing the article. My supervisors were Prof. Lesley Wood and Dr Adri du Toit.

As a lecturer in a teacher education college in Zimbabwe, I was concerned that my teaching was not assisting students to realise their potential for independent thinking and knowledge creation. Neither was it preparing students with appropriate skills and knowledge for life and work in the 21st-century, and particularly the development of a sense of social justice. This aspect of education is essential in teacher preparation, given the serious injustices within Zimbabwean society, and so I determined to learn how to integrate social justice values into my practice.

The post-colonial era in Zimbabwe had the potential to usher in radical changes in education, but unfortunately, real transformation has not materialised (Mazani, 2015). During the colonial period, to prevent disruption to hegemonic thinking, student teachers were provided with pre-prepared scheme books, akin to scripted lesson plans, that prescribed content to be taught, methods to be used by the teacher, activities to be done by learners as well as questions to be asked by the teacher and answers expected from learners (Trevaskis, 1967). The system suffered from "narration sickness", with students only receiving, filing and storing the 'stories' – a perfect example of the "banking system" (Freire, 2006, p.1) of education where teacher knowledge is transferred to students without critical analysis. This inclination still lingers despite changes in Zimbabwean teacher education policies that aim at developing in young people a broad range of skills, including creativity, complex problem solving, collaboration, critical thinking and the ability to successfully engage with information and communication technology (Global Partnership for Education, 2020).

The banking system practice continues to disempower students in an era where transversal competencies and skills are vital (Belchior-Rocha et al., 2022). To serve the best interests of the student teachers, I needed to examine my teaching practices to see how I could ensure I was embodying transformative values. According to Zhang and Zhang (2020), a teacher should not be the sole source of information; students and teachers should co-construct knowledge through discussion and dialogue. This implies that students are drivers of knowledge creation, while teacher educators facilitate and scaffold the learning process.

I was aware that my teaching was not very inclusive of the diversity of age, educational backgrounds and prior learning experiences of my students. While admission policies accommodate such diversity and are cognisant of the aims and goals of SDG4 (Quality Education for All) (United Nations, 2017), my teaching did not appear to foster inclusion and equity. I felt pressured to complete a crowded curriculum in a few weeks, leaving no time for individual student support or getting to know the specific problems my students face in their lives, which might impact their ability to study. Yet, I thought that if I were to engage in dialogue with students it might create a more productive learning

environment and foster students' feelings of worth, in line with findings by Alexander (2020) and Wang and Zhang (2019). These students may then be more motivated to engage in learning for their own personal and professional development (Vargas, 2017). I wanted my teaching to be encouraging, enabling, and empowering for mature adult learners, rather than further marginalising my students by treating them as objects that must learn specific knowledge to pass examinations (Andrews *et al.*, 2019).

My past practice which was anchored on didactic teaching in which the learner plays a comparatively passive role, was in direct contrast to my educational commitment to a socially just praxis, where theory emerges from critical reflection on lived experiences (Allen & Henderson, 2022). A socially just pedagogy would require me to create space for students to share their knowledge and experiences so that together they generate new knowledge (Osman & Hornsby, 2018). Interaction needs to be inclusive, dialogical and democratic, resulting in the curriculum being enacted as natural, emergent, and living (Whitehead, 2020). All students should be acknowledged as knowers, that is, being able to contribute to the co-construction of knowledge. If education is to enable people to control their own discourses, as suggested by McNiff and Whitehead (2006, p.4), then it "must be informed by a model of democracy that promotes participative and inclusional values."

Another problem of didactic teaching is that learning takes place in isolation from real life, leading to an inevitable theory-practice gap (Churchward & Willis, 2019). If subject matter is isolated from real-life contexts, the aim of learning becomes instrumental rather than developmental, and knowledge is absorbed to be later reiterated in exams so that course requirements are met (Bakalaki, 2021). This clearly follows the 'banking system' for education, which is detrimental to the type of learning I envision to sensitise our student teachers to a more socially just society. Instead, epistemological access is enhanced if students view teaching as a co-operative task and have a self-understanding of the practice in which they are trying to become participants (Morrow, 1994). If students are subjected to inequality or discrimination, they cannot experience education as "enriching, rearing and developmental" (Dewey, 1966, p. 10).

My intent in developing this living-educational-theory was to learn how to adapt my teaching to involve students in a conscious act of acquiring and creating knowledge from real-life contexts to learn skills and knowledge that would help them to contribute to a more just society through their teaching and their influence on those in their social formations (Whitehead, 2008). I chose Place-Based Learning as a method to provide students with an opportunity to find out how they could make their own teaching more inclusive, culturally responsive and relevant to community needs. Boyer's (2016) model of scholarship influenced me to adopt Place-Based Learning as a teaching model as it enables students to discover, integrate and apply their knowledge. I framed my enquiry around the question, how could I embody more socially just pedagogy through Place-Based Learning?

First, I discuss the concepts of Place-Based Learning and Critical Learning Theory, followed by a justification of my theoretical framework and explain my living-educational-theory methodology before discussing the findings. In the last section, I draw conclusions on how Place-Based Learning could be employed to advance a socially just pedagogy in teacher education.

Place-Based Learning

This study adopts Place-Based Learning as an emergent educational concept in line with John Dewey's (1987) ideas that education cannot carry value if it is separated from experience and that learning occurs because of the interaction between the student and the environment. The early conceptualisation of Place-Based Learning emerged from environmental education because the prominent feature of Place-Based Learning is teaching about and for the environment (Weber, 2021). The current study aims to expand the theoretical knowledge of how Place-Based Learning can be of use in a teacher education context. Sobel (2004) highlights that Place-Based Learning is an approach used broadly to teach concepts in subjects across the curriculum and specifically mentions its applicability in language arts, mathematics, social studies, and environmental education, but nothing has been written about its application in textile technology (TT), the subject that I teach, in the context of higher education.

A new development in higher education in Zimbabwe is anchored in innovation utilising locally available materials (Tagwira, 2018). As a TT teacher educator, I endeavoured to modify my practice to provide a real-life context for enacting the curriculum. I adopted Place-Based Learning with the understanding that it is a pedagogy that is experiential, grounded in the local setting, drawing on local knowledge and experience, and that it makes learning more relevant, useful and contextualised (Sobel, 2004). In addition, I wanted to ensure that my students and I use locally available materials as required by higher education in Zimbabwe.

Implementing Place-Based Learning does not mean simply letting students go out to the community to do some work. For deeper learning outcomes to occur, implementation of Place-Based Learning needs to be guided by certain principles. These principles include using the community as the classroom (Smith, 2017; Wurdinger & Allison, 2017), using a real-life context for learning (Smith, 2002) experientially (Kolb, 1984), using a problem-solving process (Freire, 2020), encouraging student interaction with each other, as well as the content (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010), and reflection on action (Schön, 1992).

The principle of using the community as a classroom means that the community provides the context for learning, student work focuses on community needs and interests, and community members serve as resources and partners in every aspect of teaching and learning (Sobel, 2002). This approach incorporates some social justice ideas in that all students have access to similar resources (see Figure 2) in the learning and teaching process, thus promoting equality and inclusion. TT is a resource-intensive subject, but focusing on the local setting improves equity as the gap is narrowed between TT students who have the economic means to access learning resources and those that do not. Place-Based Learning is a pedagogical stance that treats all as equal in the learning-teaching process and dismantles obstacles that prevent students from participating on par with others (Osman & Hornsby, 2017). Griffin (2017) says focusing on the local equalises voices and flattens the hierarchy resulting in a more socially just learning environment (Griffin, 2017). This enables me to better embody my value of equity.

Another fundamental principle in Place-Based Learning is connecting students to the real-life context (Smith, 2017). Doing so allows students to generate knowledge that is

relevant to their current socio-economic needs and demands of society (Khuzwayo & Booii, 2021). Subject knowledge gained by students confined to a classroom environment is linear and founded on unilateralism (Shah, 2022). The transformative potential in teacher education is clear when Place-Based Learning empowers student teachers to become innovative towards societal development through transformative science and technology, as well as through knowledge application that delivers goods and services (Tagwira, 2018) in a real-life context.

A third principle is problem-solving. This approach “impart[s] to students a sense of their own agency and collective capacity to alter their neighbourhoods or communities for the better” (Smith, 2007, p. 192) through deep thinking and reflection (Greenstein & Russo, 2019). Place-Based Learning’s contribution to a socially just pedagogy is that it does not only provide content knowledge to the students in a meaningful way, but it also makes students aware of how such knowledge is constructed, transferred, and applied in a variety of (real-life) contexts to understand and overcome social injustices (Greenstein & Russo, 2019). To solve problems, students must work together with each other and the community, continually reflecting in and on action (Schön, 1983). These latter principles make Critical Learning Theory an obvious choice to draw on to improve my research into my practice to improve it.

Critical Learning Theory

Because I aim to promote social justice, equity, and positive societal change through my teaching, I drew on Critical Learning Theory as a framework to guide my thinking. This theory enables the exploration of power relations, social inequalities and hegemony, and aims to raise critical consciousness (Abrahams, 2004). All these concepts are especially vital when working with students and community members outside the confines of the classroom. Critical Learning Theory is also used to frame my living-educational-theory owing to the need for critical reflection, which I was not doing in the past due to a “hurry along” curriculum (Dadds, 2001, p. 49) that is linear and overloaded with formal assessments. This type of didactic curriculum allowed me to foster dominant ideologies and practices, rendering my students powerless and voiceless to challenge the selected learning and teaching procedures, or to contribute to the construction of knowledge. Such practices hinder the development of competencies such as critical consciousness and analysis, which are becoming increasingly important for succeeding in the 21st century (Bailey & Mentz, 2015).

Implementing Place-Based Learning anchored in the principles of the Critical Learning Theory, I aimed to liberate and transform students’ learning experiences as they reflected on their learning experiences to identify where they could improve (see image 4). Reflection in and on action, as Smith (2001, 2011) reviewing Schön’s legacy describes, results in students developing a more comprehensive understanding of re-purposing textiles, an emerging issue in the textile industry. Advocates of critical pedagogy support this philosophy of education and are of the view that education must emancipate and empower students as well as the societies in which they live (Freire, 1970).

Problem-solving is at the centre of Critical Learning Theory, as it is in Place-Based Learning. Critical learning theory appreciates that effective learning is hands-on, with

students actively involved in the learning-teaching process and motivated by the desire to innovate something better for the future (Brook, 2021). When I applied this principle in the current study, it provided students with an opportunity to confirm that they have the capacity to learn on their own and create better solutions for problems they identified in their own real-life contexts. During Place-Based Learning, I observed that students had opportunities to grow in power and take control over their own learning. Rather than passively receiving information, students became part of the process of gaining meaning and understanding (Smith, 2002). This expanded engagement brings multiple perspectives and voices into the learning process, enriching the analysis and generating more comprehensive solutions. My application of this theory through seeking collaboration for my students with community members resulted in increased academic achievement and strengthened ties between communities and institutions as students' commitment to the community increased through active engagement. Next, I explain the methodology of the study.

My methodology

In the course of my research I developed my living-educational-theory methodology (Whitehead, 1989) as I engaged in two research cycles of action and reflection. The purpose of Cycle 1 was to help me to develop into an inclusive, democratic, and participatory practitioner by living out my values of love, care, respect and equity.

The intent of Cycle 2 was to seek feedback on the influence my evolving living-educational-theory was having on my students and their learning. My learning in the first cycle helped me to decide how to proceed in the second cycle. The cycles were not implemented in a linear fashion, as my learning continued throughout. Therefore, in this report, there is an overlap as I explain my educational influence on the learning of my students to improve my educational practice, but with more focus on Cycle 2. In Cycle 2, I wanted to highlight to my students the importance of values of inclusion, democracy and participation. I created opportunities for students to engage in self-directed learning while I scaffolded learning where needed.

To validate my claims of knowledge development and co-construction, feedback from my students was required. I provided them with an invitation, informing them about the study and asking for permission to use their assignments, artefacts and personal reflections as data. An independent person explained to the students their rights to voluntary consent, privacy, and withdrawal of their material from the study at any stage. Out of the 27 female TT students in my class twenty-five consented to my request. Many of these students were married, which brought with it various other demands in terms of several students also being a wife, mother, and manager of their family system. I created my own living-educational-theory by generating data over ten months in a well-organised and purposeful manner (McNiff, 2016) using focus group interviews conducted by an independent person, students' reflective diaries, and assignments, as well as transcriptions of classroom and community-based discussions. The intent of focus group interviews was to validate my claims to knowledge and my claims of student learning. Students' assignments were used to determine the extent to which their skills were enhanced because of my use of Place-Based Learning, and if students' performance was an appropriate indicator of attaining the learning outcomes for the course. Students' assignments were also a source of valuable information to measure my improvement against the students' performance. I structured

the assignment in such a way that it evaluated several competencies, such as critical thinking skills, creativity, entrepreneurial capacity, and content creation, as indicated below:

Working in a group, your task is to collaborate with identified community members to design and implement a community project that would treat textile waste as precious resources and promote them to a higher value to prevent further 'down-cycling'. Present your work in the form of a design folio outlining generation of possible solutions, justification of the selected solution, designing, producing, testing and evaluation among other stages.

I used thematic data analysis because it is a relatively easy, less time-consuming, and flexible approach (Peel, 2020). To show that the claims to knowledge creation were not only my opinion, I engaged a critical friend and a validation group from the outset whose role was to review my work with the intention to improve on it (McNiff, 2014). The following is an example of how this critical input helped me to reflect on my practice. A critical friend who read my write-up on students' conceptualisation of Place-Based Learning, said in an email:

20/9/19: How are you going to handle the situation you talked about where some students have totally the wrong concept about the Place-Based Learning projects? You talk about students who think it's all about using leftover material from garment construction. Are you going to deal with this at the level of the whole group or in the various project groups or at individual level? How will you identify why this misunderstanding arose so as to improve your lectures going forward with your second group. What led to this misunderstanding? You need to formulate a mechanism to identify the root cause so that it feeds back to your delivery of your lectures. This is part of self-evaluation. (MNC)

Reflecting on this email, I realised that in the questions raised by my critical friend lay the possibility of improved practice and this enhanced my ability to reflect on how to improve the way I introduced the concept Place-Based Learning to students. I learnt that I needed to incorporate more time for inquiry, critical reflection, and critical thinking. Next, I discuss how my teaching practices were transformed.

How did I bring about change?

Table 1 outlines the actions I undertook to improve student learning by enacting a more socially just pedagogy. The table shows how I adapted or changed my prior practice and how the new approach impacted on the students' learning outcomes.

Table 1. Pedagogical changes made to my practice and student learning outcomes

My previous teaching approach	Changes made through Place-Based Learning	Results / Outcomes
I taught in a didactic manner, transmitting knowledge	I fostered self-directed learning through dialogue and collaborative learning	Students acquired 21st-century skills needed for life and work
I did not relate my teaching to the local context	Using a real-life context as a teaching environment through Experiential learning Reflection-in-and-on action Collaborative learning	Transformation of students' pedagogical content knowledge due to equalised access to resources
I had not internalised the need to develop personal and professional values in the teaching and learning process	Embodied values of care, love, respect and equity in the learning-teaching process by creating a mutual trusting relationship with my students and viewing them not as objects but as people	Transformation of students' attitudes and values

Theme 1: Students developed skills needed for 21st-century life and work

Twenty-first-century skills embrace a deep set of attributes, knowledge, skills, habits, and attitudes necessary to thrive in the world of work (Caena & Redecker, 2019). One of my intentions was to provide a learning environment where students could develop these skills through self-directed learning. Self-directed learning is an instructional method where students take the plunge into their learning and decide what content, strategy and resources to use. This strategy does not only recognise an individual effort but also refers to a collective undertaking where students work in collaborative groups to assist one another (Johnson & Johnson, 2019). I encouraged collaborative learning (See image 1) with the understanding that when students work together on a task that requires problem-solving, their anxiety and stress level is lowered, and they exhibit higher academic achievement (Johnson *et al.*, 2014).



Image 1. Students engaged in collaborative learning

The dilemma for the students was moving from a system that required them to uncritically absorb information, content, skills, facts, and concepts all within a short period. One student noted in her reflective journal that:

At first my weakness was that it was hard for me to think critically. Within a short period of time, I was in line and I even gave more ideas. (SSI)

Engaging in an inclusive, democratic, and participatory method led to broader thinking as students learned, practised, and mastered critical thinking skills. Cardinal to critical thinking is openness to different perspectives and the ability to critique one's thinking (Mentz & Bailey, 2019). The following student's comment from a focus group interview suggests that collaboration developed students' ability to acknowledge, consider and appreciate other peoples' opinions as Lackéus (2016) also found:

I learnt that it is strength to come to terms with others and accepting their opinions. I did appreciate that all that I say can [not] be right. (BBA)

Students learned to dialogue, not just to defend their ideas, but also to question them to determine what is relevant and what is not. Mezirow (2000) refers to such kind of thinking as "trying on different points of view" (p. 20). I realised that the students were now clear on the importance of respecting all views and allowing each other's voices to be heard, even those voices they disagreed with. Mastering this social skill in the 21st-century is critical as it leads students to reflect on the learning situation and become lifelong learners (Teare, 2019). It is also evident that a dialogic approach not only increases students' capacity to think critically and respect each other's views but also inspires students to use critical thinking skills to solve problems creatively, an increasingly frequent discussion in today's academic circles. One student in focus group interviews noted that:

In Place-Based Learning there is room for gaining knowledge, creativity, [and] innovation ... through interacting with others. It was a [revelation]. I learnt that things I regarded as useless in life can create employment and help in having an average and normal life. (CMU)

This quote implies that students learnt not only to focus on work-specific skills, but to adopt a broader perception of innovation and creativity. Such findings seem to concur with the view that 21-st century skills such as innovation and creativity are difficult to teach in a traditional didactic approach (Wesley *et al.*, 2018). Students arrived at what it means to be creative and original by engaging in experiential and collaborative learning with community members (image 2).



Image 2. Collaborative learning within community

As part of the new development thrust in higher education that is anchored on utilising locally available resources, students were required to visit nearby communities to learn outside the classroom environment (therefore in a real-life context) how to deal with textile waste (see Figure 3). This was also a way of ensuring that all students have access to similar resources in learning and thus moving towards a socially just education as well as enabling me to live up to my values of equity and respect for students' capacity to direct their learning. I observed that what is of paramount importance is to create space for a community of inquiry where originality, creativity, and innovation can emerge organically. I have learned that the best way to hear the students' voices and see their competencies in a design-oriented discipline like TT is to give them real-world problem-solving tasks in collaborative teams. My experiences in this study have made me realise that students know substantially more than imagined, and occasionally they have better possible solutions than I could have imagined.



Image 3. Co-construction of knowledge through discussion and dialogue with community members using recycled materials

I must point out that I became a core learner in the teaching-learning process as I learnt from the students. The students and I were, therefore, co-creators of knowledge in the process. By denying students an open space and voice in the past, I had suppressed my personal and professional growth in the field of TT.

Theme 2: Transformation of students' pedagogical content knowledge

Pedagogical content knowledge is the integration of subject matter knowledge with pedagogical methods and strategies (Sofianidis & Kallery, 2021), which is key in teacher education. Past learning processes anchored in propositional logistics of pouring knowledge into the purportedly 'empty vessels' required that prospective teachers develop a profound knowledge of the subject content to be able to "impart alternative explanations of the same concepts or principles" (Shulman, 1986, p. 9) in their future practice. Therefore, what was particularly interesting in this second theme of my study, was the transition of students from being receivers of knowledge to producers of knowledge. In developing my living-educational-theory, I required students to develop subject knowledge by exploring sustainability issues in textiles, particularly re-purposing pre-consumer or post-consumer textile waste into a usable product. Data gathered in this study asserted that learning in a real-life context, coupled with subsequent communication and collaboration with other

students and knowledgeable community members, resulted in students recognising their role as knowledge producers. One student noted in her reflective diary:

We produced something that is 100% our own thinking. Most people could not take off their eyes from the tree. No Christmas tree that exists has the same design of the leaves as this one we produced as [this] community. (EML)

This means that in authentic learning environments, students learn to take increased responsibility to develop their own designs, rather than relying on the teacher's instruction and books, which is linked to innovation and creativity – both being important 21st-century skills. Importantly, findings from the current study support the work of Dillon and Dickie (2012) in asserting that learning in natural (real-life) environments and having valuable first-hand experiences result in subject content becoming more vivid and interesting for students. As students co-generated knowledge, the boundary of the TT subject content extended to become richer and more life relevant. Of essence in a real-life learning context is that teachers should not enforce ideas on what is to be done and in which manner but, rather, they should provide scaffolding where necessary. This creates an environment that promotes knowledge production by students.

I also needed to ascertain if students mastered the subject matter, and if they would be able to deliver it using similar pedagogical strategies in their own classrooms in future. It seems that they did as I received various student responses like the one below in students' reflective diaries:

Place-Based Learning is a better strategy to adopt because nowadays learning needs a hands-on teaching method in a different environment and our curriculum needs a teacher who can equip the learners with future life skills ... that they will not forget and use to improve the economy in the country. (NCH)

This suggests that prospective teachers may be more likely to use Place-Based Learning as a strategy in their own classrooms. Persaud (2018) hypothesised that understanding instructional strategies is critical for students pursuing a primary teacher education course as this enhances learning experiences and makes learning more fun and practical. Fostering transformative learning through critical reflection and dialoguing on the use of Place-Based Learning in the teaching of TT was a foundation for students to construct a personal teaching philosophy. Students experimented freely with the approach, and after some experimentation, they now had experiential knowledge to draw on, which enabled them to make informed decisions on adopting the strategy in their future practice. My significant learning in this theme was that students need to engage in a variety of real-life learning situations where they can decide on their own what action to take for a specific learning task (Van Zyl & Mentz, 2015). I learnt that no matter how inclusive and democratic the environment is, knowledge generation and understanding best occur in a real-life context. The next theme focuses on the transformation of students' attitudes and values.

Theme 3: Transformation of students' attitudes and values

Values underpin what an individual thinks when making judgments and attitudes develop as values transform (Haste, 2018). Advancing its work, the Organisation for

Economic Co-operation and Development (2019) considers attitudes critical in improving educational processes resulting in an inclusive, fair, and sustainable society. In my previous philosophy of teaching, I had not internalised the need for students to develop personal and professional values alongside skills and knowledge in the teaching-learning process. This implies that in my previous teaching practices, values had “remained abstract” and in the current study, I made a mindful decision to embody them. During my first lesson, I shared several aspects of my personal, educational, and teaching experiences. In narrating my personal and educational biography, as well as my teaching experiences to students, I highlighted how I had drifted away from living out my core values of love, care, respect, and equity in my teaching practices because of an educational system that had a prescriptive curriculum and ways of operation. I outlined to students how I loved, cared about, and respected them and how I was going to embody these values through developing a teaching-learning strategy that would enable them to reach their potential and not be ‘left behind’ - an educational principle that ensures equal access to education despite differences and diversities (UNESCO, 2015). My intention was to develop a cohesive relationship with them that would bind us together to foster an integrated and stable community of inquiry (Mekoa & Busari, 2018). The cheerful smiles, nodding of heads of students and clapping of hands in this [video clip](#) (Sebele, 2023a) made me feel accepted as someone who would make their learning experiences memorable and meaningful. According to Burns et al. (2018), a cohesive group fosters values of democracy, equality, freedom, respect, tolerance, trust and confidence, inter-dependency, dignity, and action. Notably different from the past is that students were better able to embody values that enabled them to relate well with others, such as inclusivity and multicultural tolerance. One student commented during focus group interviews:

We all speak different languages, Tonga, [Isi]Ndebele, [and] [Chi]Shona, but because we respected and tolerated one another during Place-Based Learning, and we had passion to learn, we ended up understanding one another. (PSI)

Findings affirm that intercultural competence is not automatically acquired but is learned, developed, and practised (UNESCO, 2015). Successful collaboration during Place-Based Learning resulted in students valuing cultural diversity and consequently developing an open attitude toward people of other cultures. Deringer (2016) has suggested that in recognising cultural diversity, an opportunity for social justice conversations emerges more frequently in the learning process and this is something that students in the current study learned to appreciate in the teaching-learning process. In collaboration, people make meaning together (Veldman & Kostons, 2019). I was equally convinced that in my new praxis, students should work in teams, and I therefore identified community members as partners in a “mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Driscoll, 2009, p. 6). I encouraged my students to work in teams of seven to eight, considering that larger teams provide a diversity of ideas (Johnson et al., 2013). However, some students disengaged in the large groups so in Cycle 2, I encouraged students to work in smaller teams of four. To ensure that students were fully engaged in collaborative learning, I asked them to keep a notebook that we referred to as a praxis notebook. In this notebook, students recorded and reflected in and on their interactive engagement with community members during Place-Based Learning (See image 4). In the praxis notebook, students explained what they had learnt, how they interacted

with their team members and what they thought needed improvement. This gave students an opportunity to manage their learning tasks without direction from me, and they began to develop their capacity for self-directed learning.



Image 4. Student engaged in self-reflection

Findings show that effective and caring collaboration enabled students to change their attitudes toward learning. Many of the students in Cycle 2 had been out of formal learning for some time and were, to some extent, nervous about re-engaging in learning after a long time. Collaborative teams provided students with an opportunity to reposition themselves as strong, confident, and keen to learn as one student commented in her reflective diary:

When I began college, panic embraced my whole body because in my mind a lot of things were running. Working as a team and getting along well gave me confidence and courage to go on. (ASI)

Taylor (2000) also highlighted that transformative learning is improved through continuous support from others. Eisner (2002) makes a fundamental observation that teaching is a caring exercise. From the findings of this study, I am convinced that students will go into future practice with a renewed conviction that there is a dire need to support and care for their future learners to succeed in learning. Such findings were critical because I interpreted them to mean that students had learned strategies to bring about inclusivity, one of the key educational values in the learning process. Reflecting on my own learning and professional development, I have come to a realisation that the teaching-learning process, in a broader sense, is pivotal to cultivating a caring society (Noddings, 2002). Merely introducing new education reforms and reviewing the TT curriculum now and then does not really help to improve students' educational experience, as there are many contributory factors for more profound learning experiences to occur (Noddings, 2002). Education, as viewed by Noddings (p. 282), is "a constellation of encounters, both planned and unplanned, that promote growth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding and appreciation." I have seen in this [video clip](#) (Sebele, 2023b) some of these pivotal encounters as I upheld values of love, care, respect, inclusiveness, and democracy in the teaching-learning process.

What I now know about using Place-Based Learning to promote socially just pedagogy

The learning context should not be anchored in propositional logistics of pouring knowledge into students as supposedly empty vessels. The current reforms in education speak to the utilisation of local resources for socioeconomic development and provision of an equitable space for students to experience deep learning. In my experience, teacher educators, are slow to adopt practices that support this mandate as lessons are often still conducted with students confined to a classroom environment. I was one of those educators and this is why I embarked on this study. Therefore, a pedagogical move from a traditional didactical style to a more inclusive, democratic, and participatory one is essential. In Place-Based Learning, students become active agents in their own learning while the teacher becomes a guide with the responsibility of creating a safe space for learning to occur.

The findings make it clear that teaching practices can be made more socially just by providing student experiences that are democratic and participatory. The uniqueness of all students should be valued by providing an open space for them to grow personally and professionally to become lifelong learners, while encouraging them to value the knowledge and input of their peers. The outcome of such a move enabled me to improve how I helped students learn to be mediators of social justice in their own practice, as they should not only become effective pedagogues but also advocates for social justice. To attain this, my teaching practices must be inclusive, where I am not the all-knowing figure of authority, but where I create space for my students to share their knowledge and experiences, so that we generate new knowledge together. My interactions in the learning-teaching process should value and promote social values of inclusion, dialogue and democracy. The introduction of Place-Based Learning has helped me ensure that my teaching practices also promotes social justice.

Conclusions based on the findings suggest that a well-planned Place-Based Learning program can create an authentic learning environment that provides students with an opportunity to to unlock their potential. Students were able to re-evaluate their capabilities and limitations resulting in them becoming more aware of their learning needs, which enabled them to make adjustments and improvements accordingly. As I developed Place-Based Learning I found my students became aware of the need to learn from others with a growth mindset and concentrate more on how well they can reach the learning outcomes they self-directedly set. I found that providing an enabling environment for students to understand themselves better and adjust their thinking and way of doing thing was an important aspect of creating a more socially just practice. The experience of being able to implement a successful Place-Based Learning programme has given me the confidence to generate the following recommendations in the form of guidelines for the implementation of Place-Based Learning.

I would recommend that Place-Based Learning be introduced to a group of students who have just enrolled at the institution before becoming accustomed to classroom-based teaching. When students become used to being mere recipients of knowledge, they feel threatened and uncomfortable when they are required to take responsibility for their own learning. In Place-Based Learning, students understand that for greater learning, they need to do it themselves, using self-directed learning principles. The teacher's role during Place-

Based Learning should be that of a facilitator who provides scaffolding during the learning process.

Learning tasks should be based on open questions that necessitate an original and thoughtful response of team members in real-life contexts. The task should enable reciprocal interaction or constructive discourse, exploration, and inquiry, and reflection and problem-solving should be core. To develop the capacity for reflection, one should reflect both on and in action rather than just reflection-on-action. Students should reflect on their plans before going into the community, during community engagement as well as after the engagement to broaden their vision.

The claims I make in the preceding paragraphs might not appear innovative to my readers but what I know is that they have made an impact on the students and community members. I claim that I have improved my teaching practices and am now a better TT lecturer. For the past 28 years, I have been applying other researchers' theories that they developed in previous times and / or in different contexts to my teaching. This motivated me to engage in an inquiry into my own practices, to generate knowledge relevant to my context. My new learning has encouraged me to continue inner dialoguing and reflecting in and on action with my students. To support my claims of improvement as guided by Living Educational Theory, I need to provide evidence of how I have improved and the criteria on which I am basing the claims (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). An excerpt from my reflective diary shows how my thinking changed over the course of the study:

7/11/2019: I am beginning to realise my educational influence. The work I am seeing in communities is amazing without my input. I do not know, however, if I were to get to these sites and prioritise "know this" and "how", would students be producing such kind of work? It is awesome to have them share knowledge with me in confidence, and I see myself as one-in-relation-with-them.

In my living-educational-theory I have articulated what I expected to achieve in my teaching practices through the implementation of Place-Based Learning. I have created knowledge about my own teaching practices and involved my critical friend and validation team as required in Living Educational Theory. This was critical for the reliability and validity of the findings.

Conclusion

The overall findings indicate that I was able to create space for inclusivity, democracy, and participation in enacting the TT curriculum. I observed that providing students with experiences that are democratic and participatory allows them to grow personally and professionally to become lifelong learners. With the help of Place-Based Learning, I started living my ontological values of love, care, respect, and equity influencing my educational values of inclusivity, democracy, and participation to the extent that I now see myself as a "core learner" in the learning-teaching process, rather than being merely a transmitter of content. Reflecting on my new teaching philosophy, I no longer underestimate the scope and depth of students' capacity to self-direct their learning process, generate knowledge in their own context, and use it to transform themselves and their communities. I have also shown that in an inclusive and democratic space, students

who have been disengaged have the potential to gain confidence and become open to learning from each other and external partners. I am convinced that a self-inquiry approach to developing a living theory is essential if we want to make our teaching more socially just, and therefore would recommend that all teacher educators in Zimbabwe consider doing just this.

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