

## 'Making a life': Academics and their Roles in Teaching, Research and Community Involvement

This is the sixth brief in the Centre for Teaching and Learning or CTL's 'Making a life' series, where we explore the attitudes and experiences of academics at Stellenbosch University, with regard to their roles in teaching, research and what is generally called 'community involvement'. The series was approached as a set of interviews with individual academics, which took the form of reflective conversations between a CTL researcher and the individual academic. Academics approached for the interviews were not sampled, but drawn from different departments and different disciplines, and tended to be those who had had some involvement with CTL. At times we have incorporated other texts into the brief, to enrich the sense of the activities academics engage in, in 'making a life'.

In this brief **Elmarie Costandius, of the Department of Visual Arts** is interviewed by Dr Catherine Kell, a researcher commissioned by the CTL.



*"...at that moment that you give students the project of discussing stereotyping, you are immediately in the position where you have to start thinking very carefully yourself about what you say, how you do things. And suddenly you are in a situation where you realize you have just stereotyped!"*

Elmarie Costandius is a lecturer in Visual Communication Design in the Visual Arts Department. The starting point for the discussion was how academics see the relation between the roles they can play in teaching, research and community engagement. As a way into this Elmarie explained how she came into her role as an academic:

EC: At Pretoria University I did Information Design as my undergraduate degree. I then moved to Amsterdam where I did my Masters in Fine Art. For seven years I was away studying and working overseas. Then I did part-time teaching at UCT and Stellenbosch. Now I am here at Stellenbosch, it's my sixth year. I did another Masters in Education and now I'm busy with my PhD in Education, in Curriculum Studies. But I think what really got me to learn was traveling. This is what changed my views and what has brought me into the kind of work that I do in my teaching, my research and now in the work I do in community engagement in Khayamandi and Lynedoch. I truly believe in the value of reflection.

I feel I grew up not understanding what was really happening here. When you are younger your world is what you see and what you experience, what your surroundings give you. But when traveling - it is then that you can look at South Africa from another perspective. You start to reflect and to realize, 'goodness me what have I been thinking?' I think I've also been helped by working closely with an NGO interacting with the community. Those types of things mean you are able to make shifts, be exposed to different types of thinking and different situations where you have to reflect on 'how do I do things?' So you open that space for other ways of thinking. Now that mostly happens when you are exposed, not when you are sitting in the library reading.

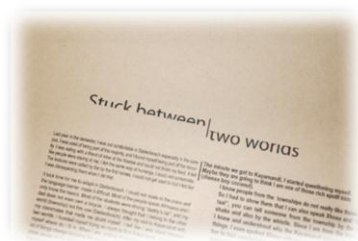
CK: What was the actual stimulus to getting involved in Khayamandi?

EC: I'd always wanted to do community interaction. Maybe I can tell you how it started with the NGOs. We were at some kind of dinner and I was sitting next to a woman and I asked her where she lived. She said 'I live in Khayamandi'. I said 'goodness but you are a white woman and you are living in Khayamandi!' Then I really wanted to talk to her and she said 'why don't you contact the NGO there?' So I contacted them and started to work with the NGO. We started right at the beginning with incorporating the art project but not in the way we do it now. It took maybe seven,

eight years. Changing attitudes and perceptions are not quick processes. I still cannot say now that I have arrived!

So, the whole art project in Khayamandi involves an exposure to situations that you are not normally in, where you are out of your comfort zone. I think that's the best place for reflection, that's where Dewey argues a conversation can start. It's all very much based on the work of the philosopher, Martha Nussbaum's work on educating for citizenship.

CK: That sounds incredibly exciting. Can you first explain what the Khayamandi project actually involves?



EC: What happened was I took a project where our students were teaching grade 11 learners art classes, as part of what was known as their "community involvement". I did interviews with the 3<sup>rd</sup> years, asking how did you find it and what was your experience? A lot of the things they said they were learning were actually perpetuating dichotomies that people like Steve Biko and Bhattacharyya have written about - the knowledgeable/needy, the giver/receiver - those types of

almost unconscious hierarchies. I also learnt that some people feel that they should do this type of thing because of their religious backgrounds, because they think they should do it, as Christians.

I realised then that I have to do a lot more because the learning that I'm talking about, that takes place in that uncomfortable space - this community involvement is not that - it's not simply that 'I teach someone else'. It needs to move from 'serve and help' to 'reciprocity and exchange'. To do this it needs to be a real conversation, and take up issues like power and stereotyping. So it's important that they look at their situation, try to analyse it and reflect on 'helping' behaviour, for instance. If you are thinking of community interaction like charity or philanthropic type of work, it's too easy. The learning that comes out of such interaction is very limited. But learning in the way of changing perceptions, changing attitudes, if that's what I would like to have, then it's critical learning. It's also about reflecting on what is happening in South Africa.

So I decided to change the community interaction approach. I made it so that the topics of the projects became social issues and structured it so that the hierarchies of giving/receiving and knowledgeable/needy became a little bit different. For instance, now they have to work in action research projects with the community, that is, the learners who they were teaching before, and then they have to work with them as partners. They then reflect on what they get out of these conversations and this is used in their design layout for their projects. It often involves mapping Khayamandi, but not strictly geographical mapping. The students and community members are encouraged to explore the social, personal, historical aspects of life in their documentation of the area in conversation together with the Khayamandi learners and in walk-about through the area. So this has now become part of the Critical Citizenship Module, which is an important component of first to third year students' practical design education.

CK: So they have to represent something about the community through the community's own lens, but reflecting on their own ways of seeing?

EC: Yes, because I have realized if it's something we work with personally then we can get over our own stereotyping, attitudes about hierarchies and so on. And if the students work with themselves, exploring their own ways of thinking, then I can get their attention - instead of taking something that's distant. Because they work at a personal level, emotional reactions to the projects are stronger and some students show resistance to personal learning and reflection.

Another aspect that I have found valuable is that when they are working, say, for instance, with their own stereotyping and it's not working with their design lay-outs, then they need to find a metaphor in an artistic way. It's more indirect, it's not now they can work with this issue by just cutting, pasting, putting things together in a way. They have to find a metaphor so that they can work through it at a different level. In that way art can work well as a medium for working through sensitive issues.

CK: So you're finding very different ways to get the students to connect and reflect, at a very deep and personal level?

EC: Yes, so I then extended this idea, of using art as a medium, and I used it in the Extended Programme for Social Sciences and Arts (the EDP). I suggested doing tutorials using artistic ways of working through things. I think to me that worked really well, it doesn't have to be only for designers or artists. I think that can also be valuable in other fields. Art-Based Research (ABR) is, for instance, a way of using art as an alternative or supportive way to collect data.

CK: So you're using the visual in a course where students are not normally exposed to that way of working. Can you talk more about how you get them to grapple with 'sensitive issues' as you call it?



EC: In the beginning I was having conversations with the students on very sensitive issues. I believe I was also afraid to talk about racism because I was afraid of what students will do and how it will end up. One has to be so careful of not hurting feelings and 'othering' students in these

conversations. I gave the students a chapter about racial prejudice by De la Rey and Duncan and a student from Botswana came to me saying that after she read that she is now a lot more suspicious of what lecturers and fellow class mates say and how they treat her. This reading, according to her, did more harm than good in her class situation. There is a lot more for me as a lecturer to learn in this regard. As the student remarked, "critical thinking can sometimes be hurtful."

I think we ignore that we have gone through a very difficult traumatic past. Now we think that everyone can just come in and just be able to design - that there will be wonderful learning and wonderful community involvement! But what about working with yourself? I mean your own emotions are affecting your learning in so many ways. What happened in your past affects how you are going to be able to design. So I am trying to focus on the person and on that emotional growth or exploration, and these together affect your learning. Illeris refers to the dimensions of learning that include the cognitive, social and also the emotive, and they are all present in the process of learning. This means considering the being in learning, as Barnett terms it, as a thinking, feeling and acting person, as Jarvis puts it.

CK: Tell me how you actually set up this engagement between the students and the learners in Khayamandi. How it is that the students encounter the real lives of the learners, not just the 'learner as blank cipher'?

EC: We have what we call learning partners. So we pair them, one student from Stellenbosch and one learner from Khayamandi. The local NGO comes in here, it's called Vision K, and it aims to improve the chances of high school students taking up tertiary education opportunities. One project involved learning life skills in Khayamandi, so the students would basically walk with their learning partner around Khayamandi and question: what kind of skills do you need to survive here? If the student now needed to go and stay or live in Khayamandi, what kind of skills would they need? I am taking this idea from the work of Martha Nussbaum, that you put yourself in the shoes of that learning partner. So for the first time, for the Khayamandi learners, it wasn't someone that just came in and taught them, but was interested in their culture and how they live their lives!

CK: So the students just immerse themselves in the place together with the partner?

EC: Yes, but first they have what we call 'themed discussions', where they explore, for example, issues like globalization, risk, family, local knowledge. In one project we used Anthony Giddens' *Runaway World: How globalisation is reshaping our lives* as a base for these. Then they do the walkabouts and mappings which draw on experiential learning theories. In the case of surviving in Khayamandi, they typically explored things like you need to make eye contact, you have to know people typically. So the students go back and connect it with communalism, the whole idea that you have to know the people there to survive. The students then write a short essay that they use at the end in their design. They connect it with critical theories and articles that they are given to

read, like Foucault, Biko, Freire, Gramsci and so on. So we're trying to draw on Nussbaum and Apple's point that you need a contextualized understanding of discourse and its enmeshment with power relations.

I'm also interested in the idea of symmetry. I realised the hierarchy between the students and the learners is not symmetrical and that it's a problem that the learners are younger. It's something we have already tried to address with other students where we try more peer learning approaches. Asymmetrical relations in community interactions in general could be problematic if community members are younger or less educated. But even if the learners are younger and still in school it does not mean that the students cannot learn important lessons from them. A learner wrote in his reflection that he feels that he can teach the students many things because "they [the students] are not exposed to many things."

CK: Can you explain Nussbaum's three aspects of educating for citizenship?

EC: Yes, these are what informed the curriculum development. Her description of good citizenship includes the ability to criticise your own traditions, mutual respect for other opinions, thinking as a citizen of the world and not only locally, and imagining yourself in the shoes of others<sup>1</sup>. This is what she calls the "narrative imagination".

CK: How do your colleagues respond to this approach?

EC: Critical citizenship connects with social transformation and to equity, democracy. If it means bringing these things in practically, it can be quite threatening. We can be very critical in what we teach, but not critical in a practical sense. Bringing these issues to the surface is not easy. One lecturer argued that if you are a lecturer at university you are already a critical thinker and critical citizen. I reminded her that HF Verwoerd was also a lecturer at this university and apartheid was born and bred on campus.

CK: It's all about position and identity?



EC: We are trying to be conscious about not perpetuating things, but you still do it. I also have that fear about how much I need to reflect, myself. I realize, in talking about stereotyping, how much I stereotype in my class. I do it and I realise I'm doing it in that moment, it's an uncomfortable moment! I expect students to reflect on their stereotyping and then it gets close, it gets very close to yourself, and then you realize what kind of a position you are in. So I see this also as a process for my own learning, because it's very easy to stand back and say the students must go through

that process but I am not going through it. So that's part of the motivation for doing it. I think people sometimes feel it gets a bit too close.

CK: So do you get some resistance from students?

EC: Sometimes you do. I had strong resistance from a small group of students last year. That made me realise that I am working with a group that is so diverse, from strong resistance to full participation. This I think is a good reflection of our South African society. I think sometimes it's just not an easy process, it's uncomfortable and sometimes you think I don't want to do this anymore because it's...

CK: Too hard? Simply too hard?

EC: 'Why can't I just teach them how to design?' And then I do my job by bringing in these other emotions! Sometimes when you read their reflections you just think 'oh goodness they have taken it so seriously - emotionally they went through a lot!'

I did a project with students where the design process was used as a medium to deal with issues in one's life. Part of this 'designing as healing' aspect involved choosing a distressing moment and they worked with clay in order to work with that moment. They had to build something from that distressing moment and then exchange it with their learning partners. But they said 'no they don't want to'. So they decided, 'okay, we are going to structure the project so we don't have to share

it, we just keep it to ourselves'. But in the written reflections there were students who said they realize now they never worked through that, something that happened say years ago. And some students say 'I am still not through it, even this project wasn't enough!' Of course, we offered them the option to talk to the psychologist, as it was quite an emotional project.

Sometimes there are powerful learning experiences. The other facilitator and I thought it would be wonderful to work with clay and relate it to the distressing moment. But some of the Khayamandi learners had a problem. As they started doing it they said 'if I work with something very personal in this way this is crossing a boundary', it is very traumatic they said, 'if I build something I offend my ancestors'. I suppose it involves transgressing lines between the secular and the sacred. We never thought of those types of things and we had to go through an incredible process of realizing what it is that we are actually busy with.

CK: So it was about deep cultural norms to do with representations of experiences?



EC: Yes, it's so important to have this kind of learning for ourselves. Next time we will think very carefully about what it means to build something three-dimensional. But then there were also students who said 'I don't need this 'healing''. I respect that they feel it's only for people who have suffered difficult circumstances. But I also I think it's getting away from the fact that the people who were 'advantaged' also need some kind of healing. That's a lot more complex. We like to keep it silent and suppress this emotion but there's definitely the assumption that the

'whites who were advantaged' do not need healing.

So I am dealing with all this in myself, thinking why I am doing this project, why I am putting so much effort in it? I am also dealing with my own things, it's a long process but it's absolutely necessary. For the first time since I started doing these projects, I now feel that my life and my teaching come together. It's not separate. So teaching design for me now makes a lot more sense.

CK: You mentioned that your approach was taken up in non-design courses like the EDP. Can you talk about how other lecturers could learn from what you've experienced in this process?

EC: I think it's necessary to go through a process of deep self-reflection, if I can call it that. If I had not done this project I would not have had the knowledge or sensitivity towards another culture. By starting with an uncomfortable situation you learn to become more student-centred. For example, with the concept of stereotyping, it's not something you can read about comfortably at home.

I belong to a critical citizenship research group where people from different departments come together to discuss incorporating critical citizenship into their own courses, from theology to chemistry, to ecology to philosophy. It's difficult to come up with a framework and I am really not putting mine as how it should be. But I do believe that conversation is much more effective than having the university say 'now you have to do community interaction'. In our first research project we interviewed students regarding their perceptions of citizenship and it came out that many students prefer seeing themselves as global citizens and not local citizens. That could be a way of avoiding local social responsibilities. Our group presents papers at conferences and in that way try to encourage other lecturers to also incorporate critical citizenship into their courses. We are hoping to have a conference bringing together people from Fort Hare and UFS that are doing amazing things.

CK: So the group takes the whole discourse of transformation and tries to embed it in what people are actually doing - a very different process than regulating it from the top.

EC: Yes, so often people will say they are going to do it because they have to, and then they don't do it. So I hope this is going to work. I worry about that with the 'Hope' project because we say we have all these projects but I ask 'how deep are we going, what are we achieving?' It is so easy to

simply do that to put a shine on it, to demonstrate what is being done. And I know universities have to do that, but it takes a long, long time, and I really believe that changing perceptions at Stellenbosch needs to be a very long process. It's very easy to basically take a two-week project and say I'm doing it; that just makes it safe.

CK: Yes, one can almost distance oneself by just ticking the 'community involvement' box.

EC: If you come to the person, it would be important to change perceptions, but there are a lot of individuals so the question is how to find ways to get to networks. If I can use my own art practice as an example, instead of doing a theatre piece or art in a gallery where you are reaching out to an elite few, you would try to do art at a bigger scale, perhaps as a festival, as a healing process. In this way it becomes part of society, part of a process of social transformation.

CK: So what does your own art practice involve at the moment?

EC: Look, I have exhibited in galleries for many years. To a point where you realize it's not achieving anything. So at the moment I'm setting up what we will do with a group in Lynedoch community next year to try to bring them more directly into art as a process. Then they will decide what they want to do, not have someone else saying we're going to have a festival about this. It would be more like an experiment to see how it could work before we take it further.

CK: OK, I can see what you mean about your life and your teaching coming together, and this also takes us back to Nussbaum's "narrative imagination".

EC: Yes, yes, imagining yourself in the shoes of others, in the art process itself, this can be very valuable because you have to imagine the whole process of developing yourself. A lot of writers or actors have the ability to put themselves in there and experience it. So you can feel that emotion, that moment of change where you really have the imagination of it.

I mean when you are in the position of teaching someone else, you are already taking part in the knowledgeable/needy relation. But if you are putting yourself in the shoes of others you are in the position of asking how is it to be that person? In the Khayamandi project they are trying to understand people's situations. You can think it's poverty but the understanding is not necessarily there of what people have to deal with. For example, what the pairs have had to do is to take every hour of each day and write down what each student and learner has to do. And then they compare! What time people are getting up, what they are doing at six o'clock in the morning - getting up to go and fetch water. That type of thing is a powerful realization, because I think poverty and the difficulty of surviving can feel very distant. By putting this on paper and comparing, it makes it very realistic - it stays in front of you. In that way you can imagine yourself better in other people's shoes.

CK: So it seems that your teaching, your art practice, your research and the involvement all come together at a deep level in your 'take' on community involvement? I'm trying to understand how this actually happened in your life.

EC: Well, I said that traveling, being in new places, automatically forces you into thinking and reflecting on your situation. But in my teaching I was developing a new curriculum and I had to do a masters degree in education in order to do that. So bringing my teaching into the design part come together with that. When you start thinking about learning theories you suddenly start reflecting on yourself and what you are doing. I wrote my thesis very much on indigenous knowledge and how it comes into design, and now I'm working on my PhD which is on this work with Khayamandi.

I'm trying to read about complexity theory but bringing it into an engagement with creativity. For example, with a case study you are constantly trying to reduce everything you have identified to themes, but in doing that you lose so many nuances and the relations between things. So what I'm trying to argue is that with a creative process you can connect unusual things. So I'm trying to bring the creative process in as a way of reflecting on formal research.

CK: Yes, academic writing itself enshrines a very analytic, reductive kind of work.

EC: Exactly, I have managed to convince a student of mine to try this method and she is using all these small narratives and connecting them and then writing about those connections and

relations between things. So it's nice, even in curriculum studies, to think about this in a creative way.

CK: Normally in these interviews I've been asking people what it is that characterizes a good teacher, but I think in your case I want to ask you to tell me about a powerful learning experience for you, in your teaching.

EC: Maybe not one thing, but at that moment that you give the students the project of discussing stereotyping, you are immediately in the position where you have to start thinking very carefully yourself about what you say, how you do things. And suddenly you are in a situation where you realize you have just stereotyped – you may be busy thinking 'I am helping the students, I am putting in more hours, why am I doing this' – and then you suddenly think 'I am trying to address this but now I am doing it myself!' That is not an easy moment. But it's a powerful one.

I think many lecturers do see themselves as all-knowing. But for me, it is quite humbling when you are teaching and you go through this realization yourself. I think a lot about it.

CK: So the idea of the uncomfortable space is not only for the students but also for the lecturer? That seems to tie up nicely with your ideas about symmetry.

EC: Yes, yes, in the course itself we are unpacking ideas about hierarchies, power relations and stereotyping. So it all comes into question. I would prefer to be doing this teaching in more self-motivated projects where you can negotiate with the students and then you get more buy-in as well.

But with this uncomfortable space, if you are addressing things from the past it is going to be uncomfortable and emotional. But I believe if it's suppressed it's more dangerous and comes out in other ways. But I'd rather have that space where I don't always feel comfortable myself because I am white, I am an Afrikaner - you walk around with guilt feelings and so on, but I believe it's better to jump in to do it.

CK: So then I will ask what you think characterizes you as a good teacher?

EC: I want to say empathy. It is being considerate, considerate of other people's feelings, what they go through, and to imagine yourself in the shoes of the student.

I believe that showcasing projects from the 'Hope' project could be sometimes more about guilt and not about addressing change in a deep way. It's about wanting a quick solution because if it comes too close it means you have to do something yourself. So if you can say we have 150 projects in community interaction and aren't we doing fantastically, then that helps you to avoid asking are we perhaps perpetuating what we set out to change.

CK: I think what you have talked about here involves a very deep internalized process of understanding and transformation.

EC: Yes, I've spoken at seminars on community interaction. I've also spoken about the uncomfortable space and also about the safe space idea I mentioned earlier. But sometimes you can also just say 'that was a wonderful moment!' Last year after my presentation someone said to me "Elmarie, you are busy not with a pedagogy of hope but with a pedagogy of liberation!" That really did encourage me, and even though at times it's very hard, I believe this is an incredible and necessary journey.

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