The questions and discussions around “decolonisation” in the higher education curricula have been trending in recent months. The discussions around this topic, particularly in a South African context are often emotionally constrained. More often than not the mantra of “Colonialism Must Fall” appears to infiltrate this discourse, and often very few actually understand what this stands for. The topic has extended to decolonising education, but experts are still not speaking in a collective voice. In the interim, the topic is entering the classrooms. The purpose of this study is to understand and appreciate the responsiveness and effect of decolonized education on Fashion design students after they apply new knowledge to a practical task. Using an Autoethnography and a cross sectional analysis, this study analyses the understanding and awareness of students studying fashion design against their own previously defined descriptions of decolonized education. The participants engaged in lectures on District Six, a cosmopolitan neighbourhood in the heart of Cape Town where residence was forcefully removed during the apartheid era because of the racial group areas act, and now a campus of the largest University in Cape Town. The results of the study show that there is a clear misconception amongst students on the term decolonized education. The task of expressing themselves through a creative reflection shows how the participants focus less on the emotional argument when creatively engaged. The study definitively answers the relation between theoretical knowledge discussions and applied knowledge and how it differs.

Keywords: Decolonized education, higher education, design.

1 INTRODUCTION

Questions and discussions around “decolonisation” in the higher education curricula have been trending over the past few years. The discussions around this topic, particularly in a South African context are often emotionally constrained. The mantra of “Colonialism Must Fall” appears to infiltrate this discourse, and often very few actually understand what this stands for. Students have called for the end of European world views’ in higher education and requested the incorporation of other South African, African and global ‘perspectives, experiences [and] epistemologies’ as the central tenets of the curriculum, teaching, learning and research in the country [1].

The topic has extended to decolonising education, but experts are still not speaking in a collective voice. In the interim, the topic is entering the classrooms. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand and appreciate the responsiveness and effect of decolonized education on Fashion design students after they apply new knowledge to a practical task. Using a cross sectional analysis, and reflective writing, this study analyses the understanding and awareness of decolonization amongst students studying Fashion design against their own previously defined descriptions of decolonized education. The aim was to identify how the engagement with creative work influences the students while dealing with political and emotional sensitive information.

The District Six campus of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology is built on historical grounds that were part of District Six community. This study was designed to engage the students with background stories of previous (evicted) residents of the area. The university building stretch across previous streets and living areas of the District Six community. The student cohort in the design class come from many different ethnic groups from across Africa and further afield. With these students being the new inhabitants of the District Six space, I was interested to identify the different ways the students grapple with the new knowledge that they acquired about the space they engage with on a daily base. Two presenters from different age groups were invited to share their memories and experiences of the time they were evicted from District Six. One presenter was slightly older and outlined the difficult times and the hardships that were felt by the experience. The presentation was emotional and still showed the pain and resentment of the event. The second presenter was a young boy at the time of the forced removal and he portrayed a different memory. He was more progressive about his experiences and memories of the time. As children they found the experience experimental.
He even recalled that the kids joined in with the demolishing of the buildings at the time. He recalls a kind of excitement amongst the children on the idea of change.

Both presenters engaged the students through storytelling and display of photo of their memories. The old photos and pictures that the presenters share was shared amongst the students in class and they could engage in a question and answering session afterwards.

2 METHODOLOGY

Throughout the presentation students were asked to identify themselves with any aspect of the presentation and start documenting their thoughts. Various methods were applied to assess the experiences and engagement of the student during these sessions. This a was a qualitative research study that applied firstly an autoethnography approach. This way I used self-reflection and writing to explore anecdotal and personal experience and connect this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings of the students [2].

Students had to submit a narrative reflection of their feelings and position after having given the presentations some thought. The students then used the information from their narrative reflections as inspiration to apply to a creative embroidery piece of work. Hand work and embroidery stitches were the main focus of the curriculum but were connecting the curriculum work to a story that can be placed in the realm of decolonisation. In applying decolonizing education in this way, I tried to promote the understanding that what is ‘central’ is not unchanging; I motivated learners to consider other potential centres to the experience. I also necessitated previous perceptions and experiences that may have benefitted from having been central to student thoughts, to allow make room for the engagement into marginal spaces too. In this way there is the opportunities for knowledge and ideas that may have been relegated to the periphery to migrate to a legitimate space at the centre. In this way each student had the opportunity to allow their voice to surface. This understanding of decolonizing does not reduce the educational space. It is – contrary to what the prefix ‘de-’ might suggest – not simply a removal of everything Western.

Secondly a cross-sectional study was conducted with the information and data shared by the students at the time of the study. This process was observational in nature and not causal or relational in methodology. I did not use this method to determine the cause of the student’s reactions and application to the presentations but merely recorded the data. This method was used to make inferences about possible relationships and to gather preliminary data to support further research.

The data were capture based on the experiences and reflections of the student at the specific point in time of the presentations. The group of participants varied in characteristics and demographics; such as age, gender, education, geographical locations, and ethnicity. A cross sectional study has the potential for being bias [3]. As such the possibilities of non-responses that could have affecting the cross-sectional studies were eliminated by integrating the study as part of a class project. In this way students all attended the presentations and handed in the reflective narrative story and the embroidery piece.

3 RESULTS

3.1 New awareness

Students in the study indicated that they had no real understanding of the history of the space they enter every day, namely District Six. For them this was just the building of the university and they never given though to the fact that this is land that has deep emotional, historical and political history. They further showed a connection and growth in the following four areas.

3.1.1 Emotional awareness

Students showed a strong engagement with the two different presenters’ stories. Some students connected strongly with the pain and hardship expressed by the older presenter and after discussions at home they came back with even further detail of the difficult time their parents when through. One student used the theme of Love are inspiration to the embroidery (Fig. 1). This was deducted from the fact that her mother is Caucasian and her father a coloured man and that they were removed from a “whites only” area and had to go live in a “non-white” area at the time.
Other students exhibited her connection to the presentations through the display of a telephone. This choice stem from the fact that the community of District Six were scattered all over the Cape Town area and communication became very difficult due to the distance and lack of phone connections at the time.

The emotional awareness was not all very sad and negative. Many students opted to exhibit the joy of new made children swings amongst demolished buildings (Fig. 2), or the images of the numerous churches that was not demolished and are still part of the space today.

The fact that students could express their connections though a creative outcome made the empathy amongst class mate very visible. They refer to the memories of the forgotten community (Fig 3.) and the fact that this same space is now the site of their university and the place where they get their education.
The students showed new understanding for one another and even asked more about each other’s backgrounds, believes and what is deemed important for them. This process has never happened before in any previous practical class and the creative application of the decolonisation premise allowed for this process to take place.

This study presented itself as a spring board to further investigate decolonisation and the influence and awareness of students in the future. This study contributed some of the feelings and emotions that present themselves in the reactions and expressions of the participating students. These glues can serve as a useful tool to guide further experimental studies.

3.1.2 Historical awareness

The embroidery project required students to sit and be quiet with the information for a while. A time of reflection and self-discovery was expressed during this time. They thought about their own backgrounds, wondered about their friends and class mate’s heritage and could start formulating questions and discussion points. This created opportunity for deeper discussion with one another about their lives.

A strong deliberation throughout the work done by the students was the new-found historical views and gained knowledge. Students expressed the fact that they feel more aware of the space they come to for class every day. They can recognise the historical connections and that hearing and understanding the stories of the people that were removed from the area give them a better understanding of the wider community they live and function in. The students also mentioned that they engaged in further discussion amongst one another on where they come from and what experience they had even after the class activity has ended.

The students displayed a new awareness and attentiveness on the topic of decolonised education. They further shown an improved understanding of “the other” and reported and change in perspective.

3.1.3 Political awareness

Students were briefed on the relevance of the project and that the focus was on the celebration of the land of District Six. They were specially asked to look for the personal connection they could make with the stories and spaces that they faced as part of the project. The participating students live in South Africa, a country with 11 official languages and many different ethnic groups. As such, political awareness is elevated and the exposure to the story of District Six, and the forceful removal of many people has heightened this consciousness even more. During the study there was a possibility that if not managed correctly, this project could have allowed for further emotional and political tensions. Once more, the outcome of the interaction between students presented itself as positive. The presentation of political history through the embroidery made the practice acceptable for all.

3.1.4 Making it personal

The most conclusive outcome from the study was that the students who participated in this study understood decolonised education in vast different way from one another. Depending on their own background and dogmatic orientation they perceived the incorporating of “local” and “familiar” knowledge not as relevant for decolonizing education.

The students enjoyed the fact that they could relate the new knowledge and awareness about South African history through applying this in a practical way and through this process get to know the and appreciate the values and believes of their peers. During the project students expressed the fact that they had make the new-found information their “own” and that they could associated to it through a creative outcome.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that the demand for decolonising education, is essentially a demand for critical literacy, where knowledge is presented as a social construct that is closely linked with norms and values. This would necessitate that the focus of educational activities should not be on what young people think, but on how they think. The data of this study confirms the argument of Davids [5] who argued that the case study of the urban forced removals as central to his argument for a decolonising pedagogy. He further argues that, notwithstanding the dominance of negative memories of such removals, a productive, decolonised version of forced removals can make a positive contribution to social cohesion.
Therefor the drive for a decolonised education ought not to centre so much on what is or is not worth learning, but on understanding and appreciate how learners are being positioned by the educational environment with respect to what is being learned. In this project the learning and appreciation of the land of District Six came through the practical application and the embroidery project.

The intention behind this project was to engage with decolonising education and not to remove prior knowledge. I rather focussed on the learning experiences of the participants and how they have changed or adapted their awareness of being part of the bigger South Africa. I used the process of embroidery to facilitated the application of decolonising education so that it can develop worldviews, a shifting of our positions in relation to knowledge. It ought to challenge the notion that any single worldview can be considered the ‘normal’ one

REFERENCES


