

Exploring shame and pedagogies of discomfort in critical citizenship education

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Visual Communication Design students were asked to design an exhibition/event/sculpture/garden to memorialise the forced removals that took place on the site of the current Arts and Social Sciences Building of Stellenbosch University - the place known then as *Die Vlakte*. The aim of the project was to make students and lecturers aware of and allow them to reflect on the history of the building and the current consequences of that history as well as to investigate the reactions of students and community members in order to explore how a visual communication project prepared them or failed to prepare them for dealing with social injustice.



Map showing the area that was known as *Die Vlakte* - displayed on the the Arts and Social sciences building

Die Vlakte

During the 20th century *Die Vlakte* was home to a mixed but mostly coloured community in Stellenbosch. Over the weekend of 27 and 28 July 1940, clashes between students of Stellenbosch University and members of *Die Vlakte* led to violent fights that subsequently become known as The Battle of Andringa Street. More than 20 years later, on 25 September 1964, 3 700 members of the community were forcefully removed from their homes due to the declaration of *Die Vlakte* as a white group area. Many buildings on the current SU campus are built where *Die Vlakte* used to be. One of these buildings is the Arts and Social Sciences Building in Merriman Street. Over several decades the official history of Stellenbosch however failed to include any of the happenings surrounding the Battle of Andringa Street or the removals from *Die Vlakte*.



The removal took place under the Group Areas Act of 1950 and six schools, four churches, a mosque, a cinema and ten businesses were affected.

Methods

Within an interpretive approach, a case study research design was applied and inductive qualitative content analysis was used. The theoretical framework included critical citizenship education, social justice, pedagogy of discomfort, shame and white shame. Reflections from community members and students were the main source of data. Additionally, group interviews were conducted. Five community members and 26 students participated in the research project.

Quotes from students and community members

As a whole I have found this project to be very emotionally and physically draining.

There are not many people who want to talk about it because it is just too painful and people become angry when they have to think about it again.

I felt tragically privileged to have not had to go through what they did, based on something as futile as race. I felt ashamed...

We don't know the history, the real stories, the real impact and the pain that it caused.

Why do we want to memorialise these kinds of events? Why do we always tend to end up stuck in South Africa's past, over and over again?

What has it got to do with me?

I felt extremely self-conscious, especially because of the fact that I am white.

I believe that the struggles of the past continue to plague many members of the coloured Stellenbosch community, and that to a large extent will make them weary to forgive and forget.

I now acknowledge and realise the power of confronting and really dealing with an uncomfortable situation.

I find that this is because reconciliation is facilitated not only through apologising for wrongs of the past but also through a sincere admission of guilt that is not always easy to give...

There lies a great sense of hope for reconciliation and for truth in the notion that identities can be redefined, loss can be memorialised, healing can be facilitated through sincere connection and that this ideal, the one for which we hope.

Results

Shame has potential for bringing the self and other in contact with each other. However, the execution of 'pedagogies of discomfort' is more complex, and this desired connection between the 'self and other' is more elusive than the theory suggests. Students were sensitive to the project's potential for inducing shame, and many resorted to strategies of avoidance or showcased reluctance, as is expected of negative emotions.

Themes relating to affect, ignorance and disinterest, and desensitisation and indifference were revealed. Additionally growth and reconciliation, and forgiveness surfaced from the data.

Conclusion

Critical citizenship education may form part of pedagogies of discomfort, and shame may be used positively as we ask students to negotiate emotionally charged subjects through visual communication. Students are capable of identifying sources of discomfort and growing from them to perceive a local historic event in a more sensitive and inclusive way.