Decolonize How? Experiences from a Master's Course in Digital Media at a South African University

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Abstract: Three decades after the end of apartheid, curricula at South African universities still reflect their colonial and Eurocentric origins. Starting with the student protests of 2015, calls for decolonizing the curriculum have become progressively louder. In scholarly literature and academic discussions (both formal and informal), much attention is paid to what is or should be taught and who can or should teach it. Interventions tend to focus on the inclusion of works by African authors in the syllabus and on the emergence of a cohort of African lecturers who can relate to the life experience and cultural background of the majority of students. Relatively little attention is paid to how the curriculum is delivered and to what end. By applying a decolonial theoretical lens, the present paper seeks to interrogate broader issues of the relationship between teaching philosophy and practice, hidden curriculum, and institutional transformation. I draw on over a decade of experience as a lecturer and later coordinator of a master's program at a South African University. The program has been reworked in recent years to promote the formation of African decolonial scholars in media and communication studies. While the ethnic and linguistic composition of the class changed over the years, the program *consistently attracts students from all over Southern Africa who bring a wealth of diverse cultural, life, and disciplinary experiences. I experimented with a wide range of pedagogical strategies to draw on such wealth by linking theory to the students' lived reality and enabling ample choice of topics and readings so that each student could pursue their interests. Coordination inspired by flexibility, empathy, and cherishing autonomy proved invaluable during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shift from full-time coursework and thesis to a mixed full and part-time full thesis model.*
Keywords: Critical pedagogy, Decoloniality, Curriculum development, Media Studies, South Africa.

In recent years, South African higher education institutions experienced student protests calling for decolonization. This article aims to reflect on my experiences developing and teaching a master's course with an increasingly digital focus. Over several years, my colleagues and I significantly transformed our program's curriculum based on previous student feedback and aligned it with a research project on decoloniality. As an area of teaching, digital media presents particular challenges but also lends itself to experimentation and innovation. In this article, I reflect on curriculum changes in response to student feedback, institutional transformation, and scholarly debate. As a Digital Media scholar rooted in the Western critical tradition and transitioning to a decolonial

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orientation, I see my teaching role as creating the context for a new generation of digital media scholars from the Global South to learn and for African decolonial knowledge to emerge. I am faced with challenges corresponding to Grundy's (1967) distinction between curriculum as product, process, and praxis complemented by a decolonial perspective underpinning curriculum as context.

Background

From the Soweto riots against the oppressive policies of Bantu Education to recent protests demanding free higher education for all, the education of members of marginalized communities in South Africa has always been a contentious issue. The exclusion and failure of many marginalized students result from a lack of transformation, Euro-centric curricula at the tertiary level (Heleta, 2016), and an educational system that underperforms due to a lack of resources and opportunities. Compared to their peers in other countries, Grade Four pupils in South Africa perform poorly in basic literacy and numeracy tests, let alone 21st-century ICT skills. A relatively old teacher body struggles to adjust to the learner-centred approach advocated by policies and scholarly research. At university, an aging cohort of leading academics (often old, white, and male) is at odds with an increasingly diverse student body in terms of race, gender, language, and socio-economic background. A symbolic struggle seems to emerge as a result.

On the one hand, academics may entrench the historical advantage of students who share their background. This is often done subconsciously through teaching and assessment practices that mirror the ones they experienced, thus reproducing systemic bias (see Borg et al., 2002). On the other hand, a growing number of students may experience this as a form of continued oppression. In recent years, such a struggle has resulted in student protests calling for the decolonization of higher education (Rodney-Gumede & Chasi, 2016). Academic spaces, often characterized by rigid structures and high expectations, are simultaneously sites of immense possibility for resistance and transformation. Emphasizing resistance and joy as intertwined reshapes understanding of how individuals navigate these environments. Integrating radical self-love as an academic and revolutionary tool further challenges conventional norm, offering a holistic and sustainable engagement framework.

These are times of profound change for higher education in South Africa. As noted by Vorster and Quinn (2017), the discourse of transformation, often referred to since 1994, is yielding to more radical ones. Student protests in recent years highlighted the limitations of past interventions in providing epistemological access for all and the need to problematize the theories underpinning such interventions. As an increasing number of students from marginalised socio-economic and educational backgrounds enter university, youth graduate unemployment increases due to limited demand, skills mismatch, and lack of experience (Mseleku, 2022). As a result, their expectations of improving their own and their family's material conditions turn into hopelessness for many. Higher education institutions in South Africa are thus called to become "African universities" rather than simply "Universities in Africa" (Hendricks, 2018). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) contextualizes and historicizes such a call by foregrounding the contributions of African intellectuals to the decolonization of knowledge and power and exploring how epistemology frames ontology.

Alongside transformation and decolonization, Vorster and Quinn (2017) identify two additional discourses concerning the current and envisaged changes in higher education in South Africa. The discourse of alienation recognizes the disconnect between academic knowledge and life experience for most South African students. The discourse of inclusive epistemological access emphasizes the link between higher education's cognitive and axiological purpose in promoting "distributive justic" (Wheelahan, 2007) by enabling broad access to powerful knowledge. The decolonial turn discussed by Vorster and Quinn (2017)

requires academics to ask themselves more critical questions about the influence of colonialism and apartheid on higher education in South Africa.

Theories and scholars from the Global North largely shape understandings of digital media in Africa. Mutsvairo (2018) criticizes the colonial orientation of media studies in Anglophone Africa, including South Africa, as linked to the cultural studies tradition established in the UK. Alongside the differences between the more technicist and centralized models in Francophone and Lusophone countries, the British colonial heritage also accounts for the South African model's mainly qualitative tradition, small-size departments, and individualistic academic culture. Furthermore, Mutsvairo (2018) laments the absence of mechanisms for media and communication studies and indigenous research methodologies. Chasi (2018) advocates a smash-and-grab approach to teaching and researching Media Studies to overcome the tension between academic dependency and decolonial liberation. In other words, African universities should not be ashamed of taking what they need from the Western-dominated academic tradition and adapting it to their needs and context. Mabweazara (2015) also recognizes the need for African authors to reconceptualize the digital Media phenomenon while drawing on a diverse global body of knowledge.

Media Studies curricula in South African universities are profoundly influenced by the colonial encounter and the subsequent institutionalized racial segregation known as apartheid. Coloniality of knowledge, that is, the epistemological dominance of the West as a continuation of colonial power relationships (see Krabble, 2009), manifests itself across all fields. Heleta (2016) calls for a radical transformation of higher education in general and of the curriculum in particular, placing Africa and South Africa at the center, while Rodeny-Gumede and Chasi (2016) identify curriculum as one of the key areas of concern in terms of decolonization. With specific reference to Media and Communication Studies, scholars in the field recognise the urgency of the transformation debate, and vibrant discussion is catalyzed by the South African Communication Association (SACOMM). Reid (2018) notes the emergence of countermyths concerning decolonization as oversimplifications that exclude contestation or nuance. She advocates revising teaching practices in Media and Communication Studies beyond addressing past racial inequalities to encompass a radical epistemological shift. African social scientists face the challenge of decolonizing from within a "colonial cage" (Nyoni, 2019). This is what Mathews (2018) calls a "colonial library," that is, the body of scholarly knowledge about Africa which, if it cannot be escaped, can and should be resisted. Furthermore, Bosch (2018) notes that de–Westernisation efforts in Media Studies lag behind cognate disciplines.

Knowledge, Emancipation, and Curriculum

Academic knowledge is inextricably linked to power. Brown et al. (1989) argue that meaningful learning can only take place if it is embedded in the social and physical context within which it is used. Situated learning maintains that "knowledge is not a static symbolic representation, 'stored' in the brain of an individual, it is situated, being a product of the activity, context, and culture in which it is developed and used" (Tretiakov et al., 2003, p.32). The main implication is that learning activities need to explicitly and deliberately link new knowledge presented in class with the knowledge students bring from home. The goal is not to replace the latter with the former but rather to enable an ecology of knowledge (de Sousa Santos, 2012) to emerge in the classroom.

Academic spaces often reinforce individualism, but a richer, more inclusive form of knowledge emerges through collaboration, shared learning, and collective action. Case studies of community-driven projects, such as student-led research collectives or faculty-student mentorship initiatives, showcase how these spaces become sites of resistance and joy. In the past, I spear-headed both large and small collaborative events during which volunteer students helped translate software interfaces into African languages (Dalvit et al., 2008). These provided

opportunities to learn and to contribute to a common goal in a gregarious and often exuberant environment.   Higher education in South Africa provides a particularly poignant example of the intimate link between language and identity (Ndimande, 2004; Ngcobo, 2014). Radical self-love goes beyond self-care; it is a conscious act of reclaiming identity and well-being in spaces that often marginalize. Although I am a White person born and bred in Europe, I learned the majority African language in the area where I currently work. As a deliberate strategy of connection with an affirmation of local heritage and culture, I take every opportunity to speak it in class. Employing idioms citing proverbs or even just responding to native speakers in their own mother tongue often elicits surprise, appreciation, and laughter. Unlike some White colleagues at other universities (Jawitz, 2016), I make extensive use of humour as an instrument to teach and to connect (Frizelle, 2020; Pretorius et al., 2020). As an example, I created a document with ten tips on common mistakes in academic writing (see Appendix A), for the benefit of my students. In a context where productivity and pressure dominate, joy becomes a radical act. Sharing personal narratives where moments of laughter, celebration, and creative expression marked turning points can underscore joy as a source of strength.

Failure to consider students' existing representations of the world results in an immaterial shared understanding of what is evident, leaving rhetoric as the sole foundation of truth. Within this scenario, students may either recur to the memorization of empty formulae, which they regurgitate to mimic their teachers (Gee, 1990) or claim authority due to their direct experience of oppression (hooks, 1994). In the South African context, excluding essentialism may result in students delegitimizing authors or lecturers based on race. Mathews (2018) notes that while overtly contesting such a position may result in further silencing marginalized voices in the classroom, a more adequate response is affirming members of marginalized groups as knowledge producers. Harding (1993) points out that not all knowledge is equally valid and stresses the need to critically interrogate the social origin of different knowledges. Reflecting on the implications of Harding's work for her teaching practice, Mathews (2018) recognises the need to go beyond *what* is taught and place an equal emphasis on *who* produced such content and on *how* it is taught and learned.

Understanding learning within the framework of a humanizing pedagogy (see Darder, 2017; Del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Fataar, 2016) entails placing the student as a whole person at the center of the teaching and learning process. Teaching strategies range from recognising mutual vulnerabilities (Zinn et al., 2009) to employing reflection and metaphors (Zinn et al., 2016). Zembylas (2018) argues that humanizing pedagogy may benefit from the work of decolonial scholars and reflects on what it means to decolonize pedagogies in higher education in South Africa. The author notes that Darder's work has been criticized for its rigid distinction between oppressors and oppressed without clearly defining who these actors may be or properly conceptualizing the nature of oppression (particularly in a post-colonial context). For humanizing pedagogy to serve a decolonial purpose, various critical theoretical frameworks need to inform classroom practices deliberately aiming to develop social relationships that resist coloniality. In this respect, Yasin (2023) emphasizes fostering student autonomy as an integral part of decolonizing pedagogy.

Students are not empty vessels into which lecturers pour knowledge. A heutagogical approach foregrounds the importance of students to "learn how to learn" by reflecting on what they learn as well as how they learn it (Blaschke, 2012). Heutagogy is often considered a "net-centric" framework, particularly suited to digital-age teaching and learning (Anderson, 2010; Wheeler, 2015). With the aim to develop a heutagogical model for mobile social media integration within the Journalism curriculum at the university, Cochrane et al. (2013) identifies six critical success factors: (1) the integration of the technology into the course and assessment, (2) lecturer modeling of the pedagogical use of the tools, (3) creation of a supportive learning community, (4) appropriate choice of mobile devices and applications, (5) technological and pedagogical support, and (6) creation of a sustained interaction that facilitates the development of

ontological shifts, both for the lecturers and the students. I feel these six points resonate with my beliefs about learning, as discussed above, and the nature of the disciplines I teach/have taught. A transition toward the heutagogical end of the pedagogy-andragogy-heutagogy continuum (see Luckin et al., 2007) entails placing relatively less emphasis on content and foregrounding both the process and context of learning. It also requires a teacher to reassess his or her role and responsibility in the learning process. In the transition between undergraduate and postgraduate, when students start becoming active producers of knowledge in their discipline, fostering independence and autonomy should be not only a goal but an integral part of the learning process.

The Course

The present article consists of a reflective case study. Since 2018, I have taught a compulsory module in critical media studies as part of a master's program in journalism and media studies. The development of this module was informed by extensive consultation within the school spearheaded by external funding. It resulted in re-orienting our postgraduate offerings to focus on digitality, decoloniality, and belonging. The module complemented the Critical Social Theory module taught by a colleague, which I took over and redesigned in 2021. The new combined module is called Critical Media Studies and Social Theory and constitutes a substantial portion (30 NQF credits or 33%) of the coursework component of the master's program. In designing the course, I drew extensively on the experience of a digital media module I offered from 2012 to 2015. I also built on the experience of two digitally focused electives offered in 2018 and 2019. This gave the course a decidedly digital focus. Master's students come from South Africa and different countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and bring different disciplinary expertise and levels of academic and digital literacy. The master's program attracted approximately a dozen students in 2018 and 2019, partly thanks to funding through the aforementioned program. The number of enrolments subsequently dropped to between three and five per year. While some years had small cohorts in the past, the recent drop might be attributed to a combination of lack of funding, deteriorating infrastructure, and remoteness of the town where the university is located, which made it particularly unattractive during the COVID-19 pandemic and its immediate aftermath.

Without aspiring to be fully decolonized, the module sought to be decolonizing in two respects. Firstly, each successive year represented a step in the decolonization process. A comment by Student#2, that is, "not yet decolonized to the level I would want to learn from and move from, but a good attempt was made," needs to be understood in the context of such progression. Secondly, teaching and learning activities set the context for students and the lecturer to self-decolonize and progressively de-link from Eurocentric knowledge and practices. As noted by Mathews (2018), this entails focusing not only on what is taught and learned but also on *how* and *why,* requiring students to play an active and critical role. Lessons took the form of seminar discussions. Teaching and learning activities were designed so that students taught each other through presentations and discussions. My role was mainly that of a facilitator, defining the context, coordinating activities, asking probing questions, and providing clarifications. Comments about the seminar format and my role as a teacher have been consistently positive from the beginning. A 2018 email by the Head of school, who collected feedback from students on all compulsory modules, states that:

> In our general discussion at the end of today's session, some students said that the course they had completed with you was fantastic and that they felt that through their presentation of work at the seminars, they had grown in confidence as future academics. One student said it was the best university course she had ever done.

We tapped into class diversity as a resource to enrich seminar discussions, as noted by Student#1, who commented that "we got to teach each other and not rely on one source being the lecturer. Also, learning from classmates was helpful because they explained things differently." In an attempt to address Student#3's remark, "Presentation from students is great in that it assists in interacting with the material; however, more structure and guidance is needed." I provided clearer guidelines and endeavored to play a more active role as a facilitator. Comments in later years suggest that, despite the shift to remote teaching and learning, making activities more time-consuming, the issue of structure was addressed, as noted by Student#4, who wrote that "it was very time-consuming and sometimes draining, but everything was well structured so there was a flow to presentations.". Other students remarked how seminars benefitted from class diversity, e.g., "hearing other people share their own ideas, point of views and knowledge was one of the highlights of the course." (Student#4), "This was the most engaging course I have experienced during Covid. The discussion, break-aways, and group presentations/discussions enabled us to understand each other's positionalities, areas of expertise, and personal interests." "Prof really encouraged everyone to participate, which made the course fun and interesting because we were all learning from each other through the discussions and engagement, etc." (Student#5).

The methodology employed in this study is inherently shaped by my positionality, particularly in my relationship with the students and the subjects under investigation. This research is influenced by my dual role as an educator within a predominantly Eurocentric system and my desire to foster a more inclusive, decolonial approach to media and communication studies. My relationship with my students—whose voices often reflect marginalized perspectives—reminds me that knowledge creation cannot be neutral. In privileging Global Majority voices, I am not simply giving space to these perspectives; I am intentionally reimagining what it means to 'know' in a way that disrupts existing power structures. Throughout this process, I have had to reckon with the tensions between supporting the students' autonomy while recognizing the limitations imposed by my own positioning as both a product and critic of the dominant academic system. By prioritizing relational narratives, the methodology acknowledges knowledge production as an act of collaboration and care. For instance, Ubuntu, the African concept of shared humanity, reminds us that knowledge creation is an act of care and connection, reflecting the interconnectedness of all being.

In the rest of the article, a narrative structure outlines the various stages of curriculum development, teaching strategies, and student feedback. The course changed significantly over the years. Some activities evolved, new ones were introduced, and old ones were discontinued. This makes it difficult to provide a systematic, coherent, and chronological account of what I did or tried to do in different course iterations. As a general rule, I followed a progression from engagement with key concepts and readings to more hands-on work by students (e.g., through presentations and/or investigation) to critical engagement with knowledge production. This matches the structure of the three sections below, where I discuss nine individual activities. Let me reiterate that not all such activities take place every given year and that the numbering is simply meant to provide a general indication of their order in the course.

Situating the Syllabus

The first session introduced students to the course, its rationale, philosophy, and assessment tasks. The first-class activity presented an opportunity for students to get to know each other by engaging with different parts of reading and summarising them for others. The reading (Moor, 2007) was then critiqued to clarify the course's specific focus. First, the reading is located within the administrative tradition of Media and Communication Studies (see Rodney-Gumede, 2018). This means it concerns empirical data, best practices, and lessons learned rather than critical reflections on power relationships. Secondly, it is rather dated

regarding the examples used and the way of thinking about digital media. For example, a simplistic view of the Internet as a democratizing tool (see Jenkins, 2006; Shirky, 2008; Papacharissi, 2011) would appear naive today, while work by critical and decolonial scholars focusing on unequal power relationships informs the debate at the international (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Dean, 2019; Fuchs, 2019; Zuboff, 2015) and the South African (Bosch, 2020; Chiumbu & Radebe, 2020; Duncan, 2018; Mare, 2020) levels. The reading brings a Eurocentric perspective consistent with the positionality of the author as a North American marketing strategist. By critically contextualizing the text and its author (see Mathews, 2018), students started understanding themselves as "critical media scholars in the Global South," an often-repeated phrase that captured the course's focus. The last step, in particular, can be considered an example of a first step towards delinking (Mignolo, 2007), that is, denouncing the supposed universality of a Eurocentric and neoliberal epistemology.

The second activity entailed covering three different schools of thought by engaging with ideas proposed by seminal authors, as well as their adaptations and critiques. During what we called "critical news discussion (Dalvit, 2014)", repeated at the start of each session, each student identified a news article online and discussed it in class, where it was collectively analyzed and linked with prescribed academic readings and personal experiences. Student#7 described this activity as "taking a theory and linking it with a real-life issue," attesting to a developed ability to relate theoretical knowledge to a range of contexts for professional practice. This ensured that students kept abreast of recent developments while class diversity, often implicitly considered a challenge, could be tapped into as a valuable resource. In particular, students drew on their linguistic and cultural repertoire to link the discussion to their lived experiences and diverse backgrounds. For example, an isiXhosa-speaking student would use the word *amanyundululu* to refer to the sharing of pornographic videos online, sparking a discussion on linguistic nuances and cultural differences when dealing with private and/or disgusting content. This activity countered what Bhabha (1988) terms the self-defeating assumption that theory is necessarily Eurocentric and a preserve of the cultural elite.

In the most recent iterations of the course, we started with de Sousa Santos's Southern Epistemologies and then engaged with Castell's ideas of power in the Network Society and Habermas' concept of the Public Sphere. Students commented positively on the inclusion of the latter two, which most of them were familiar with (e.g., Student#6 commented that "I really enjoyed the topics surrounding the digital public sphere as well as the conception of power within an online space. I think it is the most relevant theoretical course I have done to date." and Student#7 wrote that "The theory that impressed me the most was Habermas' (2005) theory of communication although I've done it before in undergrad, diving into it deeply really actually helped me understood what he was talking about." The same student also felt they learned how theories relate to each other. Students commented on the work by decolonial scholars like de Sousa Santos, which was included in the syllabus more recently. For example, Student#7 wrote, "I learned a great deal about decolonial theory, which can be furthered by media and scholars, and how this can translate into practice and reality." The comment on translating theory into practice and reality can be explained by a deliberate and explicit attempt to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and the students' lived experience, identified as a key challenge in both critical and decolonial literature.

The third activity focused on engaging with two recent and relevant books. Until 2021, the first book was a collection titled "Mapping Digital Divides in Africa," edited by Mutsvairo and Ragnedda (2019). This was later replaced by "Social Media and Everyday Life in South Africa" by Bosch (2020) in an attempt to keep the syllabus as current and local as possible. Each student selected one chapter, summarised it, and prepared a short oral presentation for the class. By mirroring our very first-class activity with but working on a longer and more academically challenging text, the class covered substantial portions of a book collaboratively and in-depth. Building on this first experience, students prepared to give an impromptu presentation

on a randomly allocated chapter from the second book, that is, a compendium of work by prominent Sub-Saharan scholars edited by Mutsvairo (2018). The book's first part provides some reflections on academia in general and media studies in particular from a decidedly decolonial perspective.

For many students, this was the first encounter with decolonial scholarship in their discipline, including a direct response by Miyo and Mutsvairo (2018) to Spivak's seminal text "Can the subaltern speak?". Other parts include chapters on different aspects (e.g., political economy, surveillance, etc.), different geographical areas (e.g., Lusophone or Francophone Africa), and different topics (e.g., terrorism, feminism, etc.). To make the task more manageable and to give students some control over what is covered in the course, students could narrow the selection by eliminating some of the chapters with motivation. Oral presentations might be perceived as stressful, subjective, and time-consuming (see Hazen, 2020). At the same time, this form of assessment presents some advantages, such as improving oral and presentation skills and enabling more nuanced responses through probing by the examiner.

Teaching in Order to Learn

The practice of students teaching students as a way to further their own learning has been extensively discussed in scholarly literature (Halley et al., 2013; Naeger et al., 2013). In earlier versions of the course, in the fourth activity, students chose a topic and presented it in class. They were required to draw on prescribed as well as independently sourced readings. Topics fell within the specified content domain of the course (e.g., use of mobile phones to monitor elections, social media censorship in a given country, etc.), including aspects of their own experience in relation to digital technology. This represented an attempt at foregrounding alternative voices as a recognized decolonial strategy (see Krabbe 2009). As noted by G. Brown (2001), from the point of view of the student, assessment is the curriculum. Moreover, assessment plays a key role in determining the hidden curriculum, that isthat is, the set of values and worldviews successful students need to subscribe to. As part of a decolonial effort, students were involved in assessing their peers' performance and contributing to determining the assessment criteria and rubric. This provided an opportunity to openly discuss and reflect on the nature of power relationships within the class and academia.

In recent iterations of the fourth activity, master's students prepared a presentation on digital capitalism or digital colonialism for their honor's counterparts. Students engaged with prescribed readings and found additional ones independently to develop a 20-minute presentation. Digital Capitalism and Colonialism were generally concepts students had not come across before, as noted by Student#5, who commented that "I specifically enjoyed the sections on data capitalism and colonialism as they are topics that I had no prior understanding of.". The learning activity included a trial presentation with just the presenter and me to identify possible gaps or misunderstandings. Master's students commented positively, e.g., "I was happy with incorporating us with the media study class that was really useful, especially because some of the theories that the honors were studying were linked to what we were studying, which was really nice." – (Student#5). A colleague who observed the combined honors and masters lesson collected positive feedback from the honor's students, one of whom said, "It was good, mostly because it demonstrates the kind/level of knowledge I can expect from master's if I were to go that route." Inspiring junior students to pursue further post-graduate studies was part of the rationale for this activity, alongside fostering a scholarship for teaching and preparing master graduates for a potential university lecturing job.

The purpose of curriculum development choices needs to be discussed in conjunction with considerations of the society in which they are situated. Mamdani (2016) interrogates the very concept of the university in Africa and its place in society. In the fifth activity, I experimented with integrating teaching, research, and community engagement to break down barriers

between academia and its surrounding community. In 2015, students interviewed members of marginalized groups (e.g., gender, disability, socio-economic background, etc.) on their use of mobile phones to understand empowerment/disempowerment through technology. In later years, a selected group of students in the course facilitated workshops on using mobile phones as creative tools for members of marginalized rural and peri-urban communities. Such workshops included the creation and editing of short mobile videos as well as the use of off-the-shelf solutions to develop simple mobile applications. For some students, these represented their first meaningful interaction with marginalized rural or peri-urban community members as knowledge experts. In contrast, for others, it validated the voice of people with whom they share a socio-economic background. Seen through the lens of Abu-Lughod's (2008) ethnographies of the particular, these experiences provided the opportunity to problematize the power relationships between researchers/teachers on the one hand and participants on the other.

In conducting these service-learning activities, we took several steps to ensure that our work adhered to ethical standards, particularly in addressing the power dynamics, community impact, reciprocity, and consent associated with research in marginalized communities. One of the key challenges we faced was navigating the power imbalance between the researcher and the participants, as historical colonial structures often place researchers in a position of power while communities, particularly those from indigenous and marginalized backgrounds, are left with limited agency. To address this, we adopted a participatory approach, ensuring that community members were actively involved in decision-making throughout the research process, from conceptualization to data interpretation. We also considered the broader impact of our research on the communities involved. Our primary goal was to ensure that the research benefited participants beyond academic contribution. These learning activities fell under a larger project informed by the living lab approach (Khene et al., 2012). Compatible with the small scale of each component, we provided opportunities for community feedback and collaborated with participants to ensure that the research outcomes aligned with their social, cultural, and educational needs.

Students vs. Scholars

Participants in a master's program need to transition from being students to becoming scholars. Such transition entails fostering independent and student-directed learning. While this informs all experiences discussed above, it was made explicit through the seventh, eighth, and ninth learning activities geared towards developing a research proposal. Submission of such a document is part of the formal approval process for a master's student and includes evaluation at the departmental and faculty level. The seventh activity consisted of each student choosing a master's thesis, reading it cover to cover, and writing its "reverse-engineered" proposal, that isthat is, starting from the final product and working backwards. The submission had to adhere to the template the university's higher degrees committee used and was assessed according to criteria adapted from the proposal review form. Many students in the course had never read a full thesis. This activity aimed to expose students to a successful example of the kind of text they were expected to produce as part of their studies and encourage them to become familiar with the proposal format. The eighth activity was a presentation to staff and fellow postgraduate students on a potential research topic. Again, the goal was to prepare students for the next step in their master's, that is, conceptualizing their own research. After collecting feedback, students started working on the ninth activity, which substituted the exam, that is, writing a mock research proposal, adhering to the required template in every respect. The mock proposal served a summative assessment purpose for two modules that ran concurrently with the course, that is academic writing and research methodology. Furthermore, as an exam substitute, the mock proposal was externally moderated, so the student benefited from the assessment and feedback of an external examiner.

In the post-COVID-19 era, the coursework and thesis Master program (which for decades was one of the flagships of my department) failed to achieve two key objectives. First of all, it did not attract enough students to make it viable. This could be attributed to the ending of substantial funding linked to projects compounded by the relative remoteness and the decaying infrastructure of the town in which the university is situated. Secondly, even students who completed the coursework component successfully took a long time to complete their thesis or dropped out altogether. South African universities are under pressure to produce more postgraduate students (see Boughey et al., 2017). Such pressure is compounded by an unrealistic, unsustainable post-graduate funding model (Bradbury, 2023). In recent years, this resulted in greater emphasis on timeous completion and stricter adherence to the rules on graduating within the maximum allowed number of years (three in the case of a master's). As a way to ensure prospective students start on a strong footing, it was decided at the departmental level that the initial concept note, which accompanied master's applications, would be substituted by a full proposal. What used to be part of the outcome of the coursework component of our master's program thus became an entry requirement.

Over the past decade, the demographic transformation has not been accompanied by the transformation of the curriculum in a decolonial sense. If anything, as Tsheola and Nembambula (2014) pointed out, a managerialist turn replaced much-needed transformational leadership and hampered rather than fostering decolonisation. During this period, the demographic characteristics of students in the master's program changed dramatically, which is in line with those of my university's student population and South Africa as a whole. Badat (2007) notes the progress made by South African Higher Education Institutions in increasing the numbers of Black and female students as well as international students, particularly from the Southern African region. However, he problematizes these figures by highlighting, for instance, a concentration of members of previously marginalized groups in programs in the Humanities rather than Science and Technology or Business and Economics. Paradoxically, post-graduate students in the latter two Faculties are faced with lighter or no requirements in terms of formal approval of a research proposal or the need to obtain ethics clearance. Necessary and useful as the relative processes may be, they inevitably place an extra burden on Humanities postgraduate students who are already disadvantaged in other respects (e.g., funding opportunities).

Future Implications

Despite the considerable efforts put into its development, the master's program in the envisaged format (coursework and thesis) became unsustainable and was discontinued. In 2023, the first year the coursework component was not offered, the intake of master's students doubled, and the Higher Degrees Committee approved all of their proposals within the first year of registration. In previous years, such a process had represented a considerable stumbling block. Furthermore, the full thesis model accommodates students who cannot be present on campus for economic, family, or other reasons. In terms of incentives (Muller, 2022), full thesis students attract substantially more subsidies than their coursework and thesis counterparts. As an alternative to the coursework and thesis option discussed here, the on- or off-campus full thesis model promises to be more flexible and increase completion rates.

In terms of lessons learned, while many students expressed appreciation for the participatory and inclusive aspects of the decolonial curriculum, a range of experiences emerged that reflected varying degrees of adjustment and challenge. For instance, students transitioning from more traditional academic systems expressed initial hesitancy when faced with the curriculum's emphasis on self-reflection, sharing personal experiences, multilingual storytelling, and flexible assessment methods. The incorporation of indigenous methodologies and creative practices, such as the use of poetry and multilingual storytelling, would be a novel experience for many. Recognizing that students, particularly those accustomed to traditional academic structures,

found the decolonial methodologies initially disorienting, similar courses should incorporate enhanced orientation sessions. These sessions should introduce students to the objectives and benefits of reflexive, creative, and multilingual storytelling, emphasizing how these methodologies contribute to deeper learning. Workshops that simulate examples of creative writing and indigenous methods could be held early in the course to build confidence and familiarity.

Building on the experiences shared in this manuscript, future research should focus on the longitudinal impacts of decolonial curriculum design. Studies that examine the long-term effects on students' academic success, career trajectories, and critical engagement with societal issues will help to validate and refine these pedagogical practices. Further research into how decolonial frameworks can be adapted across various disciplines beyond the humanities is crucial. There is a need for more interdisciplinary research that explores the integration of indigenous and alternative knowledge systems into fields like science, technology, and business education. In terms of practical applications, future course iterations should continue to refine methods for assessing reflexive and creative outputs, exploring how to capture the depth of emotional and intellectual engagement that decolonial education fosters. Another area for development is the expansion of multilingual storytelling, particularly exploring how language revitalization practices can be integrated into the academic context to further enrich the learning experience. Lastly, this research offers a foundation for a wider institutional decolonization agenda. To better support decolonial scholarship and pedagogy, universities must move beyond individual course reform and consider a comprehensive, systemic approach to transforming curricula, staff development programs, and institutional policies.

Conclusion

This paper reflects on the curriculum of a master's course at a South African university in view of the current emphasis on decolonization. The central argument is the need to shift from the current focus on *what* is being taught to an appreciation of the importance of *how* students engage with knowledge. Based on my experience, I advocate for reflection and proactive action in three areas. First of all, it is important to place the experience of postgraduate students at the center of the curriculum. In the course, students related academic readings and current news to their personal experiences and interrogated their own as well as their peers' social media practices. The goal was to strike a balance between drawing on the rich and extensive body of existing knowledge while making space for marginalized voices to emerge. These included the voices of scholars historically marginalized and muted within the academic sphere, as well as the students' own stories about themselves. Eurocentric knowledge can thus be re-interpreted and critically appropriated rather than being either internalized or wholly discarded.

Secondly, a postgraduate course should foster a community of practice around the co-creation, dissemination, and problematization of knowledge. In the course, critical engagement with scholarly readings, with each other and with members of marginalized groups outside academia, sought to foster the development of a future generation of young African Digital Media scholars who could contribute a contextualized, decolonized perspective to the field. Providing the context for such interactions modeled possible ways of sharing the type of narratives which characterize scholars of the Global South. A truly African University bears the responsibility for establishing links and connections among future thought leaders at the forefront of the decolonial turn. This goes far beyond a narrow focus on what each individual student learns.

Thirdly, personal and intellectual autonomy is central to self-sovereignty, healing, and joy. As much as possible, students contributed to defining the issues they engaged with, their own outcomes, and even parts of the assessment. Building freedom and flexibility in the curriculum was a deliberate attempt to create a safe space to challenge, if not disregard, established colonial standards. Within a managerialist logic, quality is often equated with structure,

predictability and measurable outcomes rather than intellectual curiosity, independence and adaptability. As a person who moved from a relatively affluent part of Italy to a relatively poor area of South Africa and as somebody who became disabled as an adult, I feel that my positionality spans both privilege and marginalization. With respect to the latter, I am aware of my potential role as a proxy of Eurocentric and colonial hegemony. I attempted to address this risk by explicitly and deliberately reducing power dynamics between lecturers and students. Such "giving up and holding back" was both frustrating and liberating for me as a lecturer as well as for my students.

The experiences shared throughout this manuscript have broader implications for educators and institutions seeking to adopt decolonial frameworks in their curricula. One key takeaway is the importance of embracing a student-centered approach that prioritizes learners' lived experiences and diverse cultural backgrounds. Educators must recognize that the shift toward decolonial education is not merely an academic exercise but also an emotional and cultural journey for both students and faculty. A decolonized curriculum should include marginalized voices and empower students to critically engage with dominant knowledge systems, reinterpreting and transforming them from their own contexts. Institutions must support this process by fostering an environment of intellectual flexibility, where creativity and critical thinking are valued alongside traditional academic rigor. Structural changes, such as revising assessment practices and creating spaces for alternative knowledge systems, are necessary to ensure that the decolonial approach is sustainable and impactful in the long term. These efforts will require substantial support from leadership regarding funding, resources, and professional development of teaching staff.

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Notes on Contributor

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Appendix A: writing tips

At postgrad level, an overwhelming portion of your assessment focuses on written work. Whether at Honours, Master or PhD, you are expected to write a "book" in proper academic English. We can critically reflect on why but for the time being let us get down to business. There are a few common mistakes you might want to consider while reading other people's as well as your own writing:

1. In the English, a countable singular noun needs article. If this sentence sounds OK to you, we have problem with article use in English.
2. <u>Dalvit and Dugmore (2018) noted that references always speak in the present tense. They also highlights the importance of plural verbs following plural subjects.</u>
3. Therefore, avoid words like therefore, moreover, furthermore etc at the beginning of a sentence. They are almost always useless and in some cases misleading. They imply a logical link which is either clear (in which case you do not need the word) or is not there (in which case you should not use the word). Similarly, delete everything up to that. If it is clear that..., it is important to note that... or One must consider that... this should be clear from the way you present your content. If it is not clear, important, worth considering why saying it is?
4. "This" is clear to you while you write, but for the reader "this" at the beginning of a sentence is ambiguous most of the time. Also avoid pronouns like it and them and rather repeat the word they refer to.
5. If mistakes were made, we want to know who made them. Meanwhile, let us avoid the passive form like the plague.
6. Long and convoluted sentences are OK when you speak and may sound OK to you as you write them because they match a way of presenting an argument or telling a story which in other domains of your life, like for instance when you are talking to your friends or family, make perfect sense but as soon as you put them down on a page and a reader has to go through the whole sentence in order to understand what you are trying to say then it becomes almost impossible as by the end of the sentence when one finally hits a full stop that person has understood absolutely NOTHING. Keep sentences short. Use full stops instead of and, or, but etc.
7. One idea, one paragraph of between 15 and 25 lines. If the paragraph is too short, the idea is not developed enough. Start with a title sentence in your own words telling the reader what is the key message. Then use references, data or common knowledge to convince them that what YOU said is true. Academic writing is not a patchwork of what other people have said, so for each sentence with a reference you should write two in your own words, explaining what the citation means and how it relates to your topic. End the paragraph with a sentence linking what you said to the main discussion. This does not mean repeating what you already said, preempting your findings or telling us THAT there is a link. Explain   WHAT the link is.
8. Do not repeat the same thing in slightly different words or tell us something you said above but phrased differently. The reader assumes that every sentence presents new information. If the information has already been presented but sounded slightly different, you are sending the reader's brain into a loop. In case you are wondering, in academic writing this is NOT a good thing. Do not even try to think of fixing this through "spaghetti writing", that is as mentioned in subsection 2.8.45.6.9 ... If you are not willing

to sort out your own content to make the reader's life easier, imagine if he or she is going to bounce around your thesis or essay for you.

9. avoid contradictions and shooting yourself in the foot. This sounds pretty straight–for-ward until you find yourself writing that there is no research on the side on which ants fall when they die and therefore you are going to find out. If nobody has researched it before you, it means it is not worth it, unless you convince us otherwise. BTW, research shows that when ants die they always fall on the left, go figure....

10. And that's it. Imagine your favourite romantic movie ending with the two protagonists finally embracing after struggling through many adventures to find each other again, then turning to the camera and saying "Yeah, so we struggled, then we found each other and now we are OK. Good night.". Conclusions are extremely important, do not let your reader down at the most important point. This is the time to drive your message home based on your argument, findings etc. The readr will not do this for you. Do not present new knowledge, just use what you have already said to convince us of something. If you have nothing to say at this point.... well... ehm....