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Creating Conditions of Possibility for Postgraduate Student Engagement With Critical Literacy Through Collaborative Redesign

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ABSTRACT

Doing and teaching critical literacies (CL) is complex, unpredictable work. In this article, we explore an unexpected turning point, and "teachable moment", with postgraduate students in a South African university. We focus on a redesign task created to scaffold postgraduate students' developing understanding of critical literacy theory and research into contextually applicable praxis. However, the cohort which this study is based on struggled to master key concepts and make the move toward praxis. At this juncture, of struggle and problem-solving, we (lecturers, researchers, tutors, and students) encountered collaboration as a turning point in doing redesign as a critical-creative-affective practice. A critical analysis of lecturer/tutor reflective vignettes of pedagogy and space, students' collaborative, multimodal redesigns of a university advertisement, and semi-structured focus groups with students reveals the "conditions of possibility" enabled by collaborative redesign. We present a multivoiced case study and discuss three main findings: (1) collaboration, negotiation, and discussion as critical-creative-affective practices in redesign, (2) the role of safe space(s) for promoting students' grappling with CL as praxis, and (3) students' discursive-material design of (hyper)inclusivity. Overall, we argue that a key contribution of this article is a nuanced understanding of the role of collaboration and dialogue in CL pedagogy, extending conceptualizations of dialogue/dialogic in critical literacies. That is, there is a need for dialogue as both critical-creative-affective exploration with text and meaning-making that is contingent on the nature of classroom space. We conclude with educational implications which are highly specific practices, tools and principles embedded in the case study that can be (re)imagined and adapted for a range of (literacy) contexts, while the detail and depth of the case study provides a vivid account of what this means in practice.

Brendan: *We wanted to dismantle this [advert], and we wanted to get rid of a racialized Eurocentric university and bring something that sort of focuses on a more inclusive community.*

Raha: *And next thing I knew we were tearing up the old thing.*

Julius: *Out with the old, in with the new.*

(Extract from focus group discussion)

1 | Introduction

This is an article about an unexpected turning point, and "teachable moment", that emerged in a postgraduate education

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module, *Language and Literacy, Theories and Practices* (*LLTP*), in a South African university. It builds on previous qualitative research on critical literacies, imagination, and the affective turn (Mendelowitz and Govender 2024) where the focus was on individual students' redesigns. In this article we, the authors, focus on the collaborative redesign of an advertisement done by students in groups during class time in the LLTP module as it signified a turning point in teaching and doing critical literacies. In this cohort, most students struggled to master the key concepts of critical literacy and redesign, particularly in ways that bridged theoretical discussion with contextually relevant practice. It was at this juncture, of struggle and problem-solving, that the students and lecturers involved in this module sought to find a way forward. The turn to collaboration offered a solution as well as helped to surface the complexities of critical literacy praxis, the limits of representation when negotiating issues of power and identity, and the unpredictability of critical-creative-affective literacies in action.

In trying to make sense of the "teachable moment", we focus on the pedagogical moves made by lecturers and students that, together, created conditions of possibility for (creative and affective) engagement with critical literacy. We theorize and explore the role of collaboration in redesign as praxis. Put another way, we theorize how practices of collaboration enabled new ways of knowing by considering "what are the effects of collaborative redesign with postgraduate education students in the context of *doing* and *teaching* critical literacies?"

We respond to this question through the presentation and analysis of three data sets: (i) lecturer-written reflections on the collaborative redesign task that students completed and presented in class, (ii) student reflections that were shared in two sets of focus groups, and (iii) the two redesigned advertisements produced by the students.

We therefore tell this story from a multivoiced perspective of lecturers and students, which sometimes overlap and at other times differ. But the one issue that has a high level of consensus is the view that the collaborative redesign was a significant turning point in the course. The student' focus group comments above illustrate the collaborative redesign process in action.

2 | Literature Review/Theoretical Framework

2.1 | Doing Critical Literacies, Teaching Critical Literacies

In this study, doing and teaching critical literacies are interlocked. On one hand, the authors who taught the course in which the study is located sought to *implement* critical literacies in their own curriculum design and pedagogical choices. On the other hand, the students attended the course to learn *about* critical literacies at postgraduate level. Despite critical literacies often being conceptualized as a praxis, the entanglements of theory and practice can also make it difficult to discern what it means to "do" critical literacies in very pragmatic terms. Teachers and other educational practitioners, however, might hold such pragmatics in high regard given their need to learn and apply pedagogies to their own contexts. Furthermore, critical literacy theory often posits itself as an orientation to teaching and learning that actively defies any singular definition (Comber 1993, 2006; Vasquez et al. 2019). Again, while this points toward the necessity for critical literacy pedagogies to be contextually and culturally situated (i.e., invented in context), this can—and often does—serve as an additional barrier for educators seeking to learn more about its practices. Within this dynamic, we therefore draw together the *principles* and *practices* of critical literacies for higher education students. Indeed, our data considers how critical literacy as "being" (Vasquez et al. 2019) enables constant action-reflection (Freire 1970) that then promotes dynamic, contextually relevant responsiveness to students' changing needs as an ongoing, cyclical social practice. That is, the *being* of critical literacies is fundamental to its *doing*, and visa versa.

We therefore draw together Paul's (2021) pedagogical framework for critical literacy instruction and the revised redesign cycle of Mendelowitz and Govender (2024). Together, these models demonstrate how redesign as a critical-creative-affective practice is located in the enactment of pedagogical choices that critical literacy practitioners make for and with students. Paul's (2021, 948) critical literacy pedagogy scale outlines seven interdependent pedagogical moves: (1) relevant, (2) reflexive, (3) deconstructive, (4) dialogic, (5) empowering, (6) transformative, and (7) intersectional. Six of these moves emerged from critical pedagogy theories (including critical literacies, culturally responsive pedagogies, and so on). These were then validated by drawing on quantitative data generated with teachers in the United States (US). The seventh move (intersectional) emerged from Paul's data but correlates with the shifts in poststructuralist critical theories. However, while Paul's (2021) model offers a valuable scaffold for critical literacy pedagogy, its scope is limited by its lack of engagement with the role of imagination and the affective turn in (higher) education.

To attend to this gap, with a focus on redesign as one "transformative" and "empowering" (Paul 2021) practice, we extend Paul's framework through Mendelowitz and Govender's (2024) revised redesign model. This model builds on the work of Janks (2002, 2010) and Ahmed (2015) and proposes that.

> Redesign is an imaginative practice that depends on critical-creative-affective (re)actions to the contact zone: from confronting (or being confronted by) objects that activate the flow of affect and affective responses to reading and researching how meaning moves and is constructed at the point of contact, to (re)orientating oneself toward or away from certain affective (re)actions as part of analyzing the object(s) (S. Ahmed 2006, 2014), to exploring and experimenting with a range of semiotic resources to convey (radically) alternative positions and constructions.
>
> (Mendelowitz and Govender 2024, 3).

This iterative process is punctuated by powerful moments of feeling (or being affected more broadly). As such, those experiences of dis/empowerment and/or desire when encountering (S. Ahmed 2014) a text are fundamental to how discursive-material possibilities might be reimagined and reconfigured. Indeed, those moments of contact with powerful discourses often serve as a catalyst for critical inquiry, reflection, and social action.

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Our approach therefore brings Paul's (2021) framework and the revised redesign model by Mendelowitz and Govender (2024) together. This hybrid framing recognizes the value of structured pedagogical moves alongside the need for contextually grounded, affectively engaged, and socially transformative redesign practices.

2.2 | Collaboration in Learning Spaces

In this article, we envision collaboration as the meeting points of difference embodied within educational spaces. Pedagogically, and specifically from a critical-affective standpoint, such meeting points are "encounters" (S. Ahmed 2014) of and with difference that require ongoing action, reflection, and negotiation, informed by a social justice agenda. This resonates well with a critical literacy pedagogy, which involves "interrogating multiple viewpoints" (Lewison et al. 2002, p. 382).

As an affective practice, collaboration might ideally lead to ways of working across differences and toward fostering solidarity. That is, in encountering each other, students and lecturers might work through (in)commensurable differences to (re)imagine productive ways forward—or, in this case, the redesign of existing relations of power instantiated in the texts being analyzed. However, there are also possibilities for tension, conflict, resistance, and fear (particularly fear of speaking up or speaking out, for instance). Even these might contribute toward redesign in productive or disruptive ways.

The conditions for collaboration are therefore relational to the pedagogies employed within a particular space—affecting that space and being affected by that space (Baepler and Walker 2014; Graetz and Goliber 2002; 1994; Haines and Takerei 2019; Kitchen et al. 2019). That is, "learning is always *situated* and *embodied*, not just in material space but also in individual, social, cultural, economic and political contexts. Space can only be viewed in relation to its occupation, that is, as *socio-spatial practice*" (original emphasis: Boddington and Boys 2011, p. 6). McNeil and Borg (2018, p. 235) explain that four dimensions emerge when looking across the literature on the space-pedagogy nexus:

A: *Approach*—Overarching approach of the teacher or teaching team.

B: *Design*—Planning decisions for learning and teaching.

C: *Practice*—Tactics and strategies in the classroom.

S: *Space*—Socio-political and physical-temporal context.

While "approach" is defined by the teacher's own theoretical disposition and agenda, "design" works across two levels: (1) "First order design decisions: extent of structure intended highly structured-emergent; roles of teachers and students", and (2) "Second order design decisions: activity types [...]; decisions about space (layout, how to use, adaptations)" (McNeil and Borg 2018, p. 235). "Practice" then refers to broader educational and classroom management practices which enable the enactment of those design choices and the organization of the teaching-learning space as it occurs in the moment. Finally, "space" takes into consideration those complex contextual dimensions across the material (tangible resources and physical space), institutional (learning outcomes and policies), spatial–temporal (place and time, sequencing patterns), and so on. It also takes into account the fluid and unpredictable possibilities when different bodies (students and teachers), objects (texts, artifacts, and technologies), and worldly orientations encounter each other within that space and moment (and how these flow across time).

We argue that these dimensions are fundamentally critical (permeated with moving relations of power), creative (requiring ongoing reflection, experimentation, and (re)imagination of knowledge and action), and affective (bound to emotions and relationships). In exploring one iteration of a module, focusing on a collaborative redesign task, we illustrate the complexity and importance of this teaching-learning work when it is driven by a social justice agenda and an ethic of care toward student cohorts. That is, what are the effects of collaborative redesign in the context of *doing* and *teaching* critical literacies?

3 | Course Overview and Context

The collaborative redesign task we focus on is situated in the *Language and Literacy, Theories and Practices (LLTP)* honors module at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. The module introduces students to key theoretical debates in the field of literacy and language studies with the intention to encourage them to examine key concepts in relation to their own classroom practices across a range of South African contexts. The course has come to foreground affective, personal and dialogic engagement with academic content.

While the module introduced students to various aspects of literacy studies, CL formed a significant component. The 2023 exam equivalent (i.e., final assessment) required students to apply their knowledge and understanding of CL praxis through the deconstruction and redesign of a text/advertisement. In previous years, the preparatory, in-class redesign task required students to practice redesigning a text individually and present this to their peers. This task, initially conceptualized by Hilary Janks in her capacity as guest lecturer, served as a scaffold for teaching students about CL and preparing them for their final assessment, and has since became a permanent feature of the module.

This redesign task requires students to analyze and redesign the University of Johannesburg (UJ 2008) advertisement (Figure 1), by employing key critical literacy concepts. The UJ advert was selected as it had elicited particular interest in the 2022 cohort and relates explicitly to the politics of representation and higher education in South Africa. As a scaffold for supporting students' CL learning and understanding of the exam equivalent, the task required students to use their redesigned advert to discuss the key issues instantiated in the UJ advert and how their redesign choices attempted to transform relevant relations of power and identity in more equitable ways. Hence, the advertisement was not discussed from a marketing perspective but in relation to the politics of representation. Importantly, the original task and its design itself required redesigning in relation to the needs of the 2023

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FIGURE 1 | Original UJ advert (2008).

cohort of students. This is explored in more detail as part of collaborative redesign later in the article.

4 | Methodology

Altogether, there were 28 students registered for the *LLTP 2023* module. Most of the students were recent graduates of a Bachelor of Education, and many were already working as teachers. From this total, 16 students attended the redesign class and divided themselves into three groups for the task. All three groups were invited to participate in online semi-structured focus groups (arranged by their respective in-class groups). Altogether, 6 students consented to participate:

- Group 1 included 3 students (Brendan, Julius, Raha),
- Group 2 included 2 students (Tehani, Denika), and
- Group 3 only included 1 student (Mike).

Given the imbalance in data and representation, data from Group 3 has been excluded here. This paper therefore focuses on the responses of students from two of the three groups that participated in the collaborative redesign session and presents this as a case

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study. The participants occupy complex social positions across gender and race and identify as follows: the Group 1 focus group included Brendan, a White male, Julius, an Asian male, and Raha, an Indian female. The Group 2 focus group included Tehani, a Black female, and Denika, a Colored female. This study was granted ethical approval from the Wits School of Education. Pseudonyms were used for all the students referred to in this article.

Laura and Belinda were the lead lecturers on the course, while Fatima was a tutor on selective sessions, and all three facilitated the collaborative redesign task in class. Navan was a regular guest lecturer on the CL section of the course over the past few years, with a focus on redesign. Laura, Belinda, and Fatima produced reflective vignettes to capture their experiences of (1) the events and interactions that led to the collaborative redesign task, and (2) their experiences with and observations of students during the redesign task in class. Navan conducted the semi-structured focus groups with student groups (above) to capture their experiences of and perspectives on the collaborative redesign task and the events/conditions that enabled it. Although the vignettes were generative in exposing the pedagogical moves that Laura and Belinda made in response to students' needs and requests, gaining data from student perspectives became imperative for deeper understanding of the collaborative process and students' redesigns.

This article therefore presents a composite critical analysis of the three main data sets: (1) facilitators' (lecturers and tutor) reflective vignettes, (2) students' contributions to semi-structured focus groups, and (3) students' redesigns of the UJ advert. Collectively, these are presented as a multi-voiced case study (Creswell 2003) that offers multiple, simultaneous perspectives and affects as they surfaced in motion during the redesign session. The case study approach allows us to tell a detailed story of this teachable moment, conduct a close and critical analysis of the interconnected data sets, and provide a nuanced account of pedagogy that readers might (re)imagine and adapt for their own contexts.

Our process of analysis therefore involved a close reading of each of the vignettes by Belinda, Laura and Fatima, the Group 1 and 2 focus group transcripts, and the corresponding redesigns. Recurring themes surfaced strongly in both groups, including (1) collaboration, negotiation, and discussion as critical-creative-affective practices in redesign, (2) the role of safe space(s) for promoting students' grappling with CL as praxis, and (3) students' discursive-material design of (hyper)inclusivity (see also Govender 2019). Indeed, following Kitchen et al. (2019, p. 95), we find that "collaboration creates 'new ways of seeing the taken for granted"' and opens up "new possibilities for the development of understanding" (Loughran 2004, p. 21).

These themes began to crystalize (Charmaz 2006; Ellingson 2009; Saldaña 2013) as Laura and Belinda mapped the data against Paul's (2021) constructs of Critical Literacy Pedagogy (CLP). While Paul's construct was a valuable analytic tool for thinking about the practical operationalizing of CL (which we often refer to as 'moves' or 'pedagogical moves'), there were gaps. Hence, we have woven critical affect and imagination into the analysis by applying our revised model of redesign (Mendelowitz and Govender 2024). We also draw on literature on the spatial and collaborative dimensions of CL. Layering critical, creative, and affective lenses to the data—alongside our own collaborative mode of analysis—enabled us (all the authors) to identify and trace the key themes as they cohered, condensed, and crystalized into substantive findings (Saldaña 2013).

Finally, this is a study about vertical and horizontal collaboration—our collaboration as lecturers and researchers, student collaborations with each other, and our collaboration and negotiation with students. As a result, we report on multiple perspectives conveyed through multiple voices. This is therefore not a neatly packaged paper—at times, different styles and voices are evident. This is part of enacting and analyzing the collaborative process as critical-creative-affective, a key focus of this study.

5 | Case Study Analysis and Discussion

Our analysis is presented as a multivoiced narrative. Hence, the first category, The Turning Point, sketches the events that led to the "teachable moment," followed by teachers' reflections on the collaborative redesign. The analytic categories that follow are drawn from Paul's framework for CL pedagogy, and extended by incorporating the model for redesign as a critical-creative-affective practice (Mendelowitz and Govender 2024).

- The turning point
- Teachers' reflections on the collaborative redesign
- Collaborative process (Groups 1 & 2)
- Dialogue and reflexivity (Group 2)
- Relevance and intersectionality (Groups 1 & 2)
- Deconstruction, transformation and empowerment (Group 1)

5.1 | The Turning Point

In 2023, the redesign task was due to follow the first two critical literacy sessions which were an introduction to CL theory and practice, and we expected students to engage with it enthusiastically, as had happened in previous years. Belinda writes:

> We're speeding/crawling/plodding/fumbling along to the last week of block 3. We're halfway through the Literacies and Languages Theory and Practices honours course. It's going but something is not gelling. At the end of each session, we have a sense of not being fully satisfied. Something is not quite working, we're not sure what.

This feeling of "not being fully satisfied" is perhaps not altogether unusual in education—there may be moments of uncertainty, long or short, about how much learning is actually taking

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place. This feeling, however, comes to a head when "I [Belinda] get a message from Brendan saying he wants to make a time to chat on behalf of the class". This interaction required us to rethink the redesign task. Belinda explains:

> Brendan informs me that the class is just not getting it! They feel totally lost and they don't understand the key concepts. They need much more scaffolding and support. Anxiety about assignment. Covid cohort. Discussion about balancing support and students taking responsibility.
>
> My mind kicks into problem solving mode.
>
> "How about an extension on the assignment and a couple of consolidation sessions, including a dedicated assignment preparation session?"
>
> Brendan responds very positively to this. "Thanks so much for listening... really appreciate it."
>
> And then there's a silence and a pause.
>
> "um, there is one more thing...".
>
> Brendan explains that the students are very anxious about the redesign presentation coming up. And they were wondering if they could rather do it collaboratively in class.
>
> Laura and I weighed up the concern that it might be an easy way out for students (not doing the preparation individually at home and then presenting individually). But ultimately decided, given the nature of the course and the assignment, and their anxiety about being on the spot, it was worth a try as it could build their skills and understanding for the exam equivalent.
>
> We start feeling a sense of relief because their concerns are out in the open and enabled us to address the issues more effectively.
>
> (Belinda's reflection, December 2023).

Brendan's request, on behalf of the class, to reconfigure the redesign task into a collaborative one serves as the initial catalyst for this inquiry, but also for the subsequent interactions and re/actions in teaching, learning, meaning-making, and (re)designing that took place. That this was instigated by students is also significant and emerges in students' focus group responses as a certain feeling of safety to ask for change, support, and alternative provision—from each other as well as their lecturers and tutors on the module. At the same time, any sense of safety runs parallel to those tensions that come with learning difficult concepts and practices, demonstrated by Belinda's unease and students' sense of anxiety. That is, the affective encounters with existing teaching and learning materials coalesced into a turning point both in relation to the "conditions of possibility" (i.e., changes in the teaching and learning "space" (McNeil and Borg 2018)) and critical literacy praxis (i.e., the move toward collaboration in redesign).

5.2 | Teachers' Reflections on the Collaborative Redesign

The redesigned adverts of Groups 1 and 2 are shown in Figures 2 and 3 below. Fatima and Laura's vignettes below provide insight into the interaction and engagement concerning each groups' redesigns. Fatima reflected on Group 1's redesign process as follows:

> The redesign process was creative and conceptually profound, using visual elements of 'trash' which was illustrated by torn pieces of the original advert and a dustbin to challenge conventional notions of education and identity which they were 'throwing away'. The trash can was a metaphor for their slogan "Out with the old..." as the original text was being torn and thrown away, while their new design was located on top of the 'trash'. What stood out was their deliberate use of black silhouettes, symbolizing a departure from fixed identities toward embracing a fluid, interconnected understanding of human experiences and knowledge which strengthened the message of their redesign. The shift from hyper-inclusivity to a nuanced portrayal of interconnectedness and equality was a refreshing change, challenging the traditional boundaries of academic discourse. Their work challenged representations of higher education and signaled a redefinition of what it means to learn and collaborate in contemporary academia.
>
> (Fatima's reflection, December 2023).

Reflecting on Group 2 who were working in the same room at the same time, Laura writes:

> The question of "How do we rethink education?" was central to Group 2's discussions about their redesign poster. Scattered across the table were little pieces of paper featuring a lightbulb icon. The students huddled over these as they discussed what it meant to rethink education and the kinds of questions that would reflect this. "What is the purpose of a university?" "Who does it serve?" "Isn't it about cultivating curiosity?" "Who are knowledge makers" and "How do we make education truly inclusive?". These were some of the questions that students debated as they discussed which images and text to include in their poster. They spoke about the complexities of representing all possible genders,

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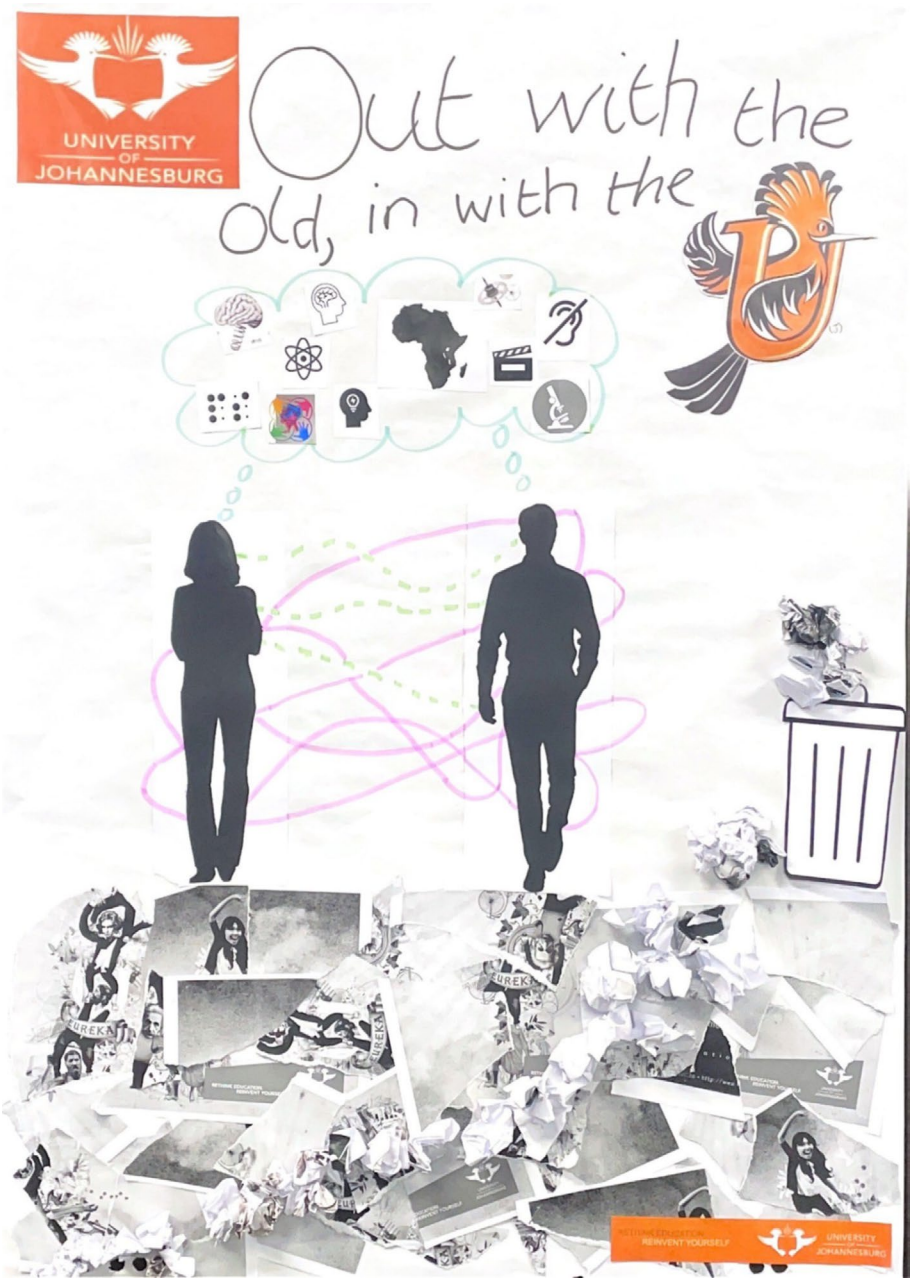


FIGURE 2 | Group 1 redesign.

> races and knowledge systems, and how difficult, if not impossible, it is to be fully inclusive.
>
> (Laura's reflection, December 2023).

Across both groups' redesigns, the discursive-material nature of critical literacies is demonstrated. Acts of tearing and huddling over bits of paper that break apart or bring together different signs and symbols involve processes of thinking through and negotiating a variety of possible meanings. Decision-making is tricky because there are many eyes on many pieces of paper, but also because students are limited to the materials at hand. Tearing, selecting, (re)arranging, speaking, questioning, drawing, writing, removing, and more require creativity and play with materials, signs, and symbols in order to speak back to the normative meanings reproduced by the "original" UJ advert and the affect of that initial encounter.

In the sections that follow, we unpack students' focus group responses in terms of their reflections on the course and the role of the collaborative redesign task in facilitating their shift from theory and critique to enactment and internalization of CL praxis.

5.3 | Collaborative Process (Groups 1 and 2)

The students' reflections in the focus groups illustrated our view of collaboration as meeting points of difference within the course space. Their encounters of and with difference were productive, and this was enabled by a strong affective component. Both groups highlighted the importance of working together over an extended period and how this built trust and an unthreatening space to negotiate and share ideas.

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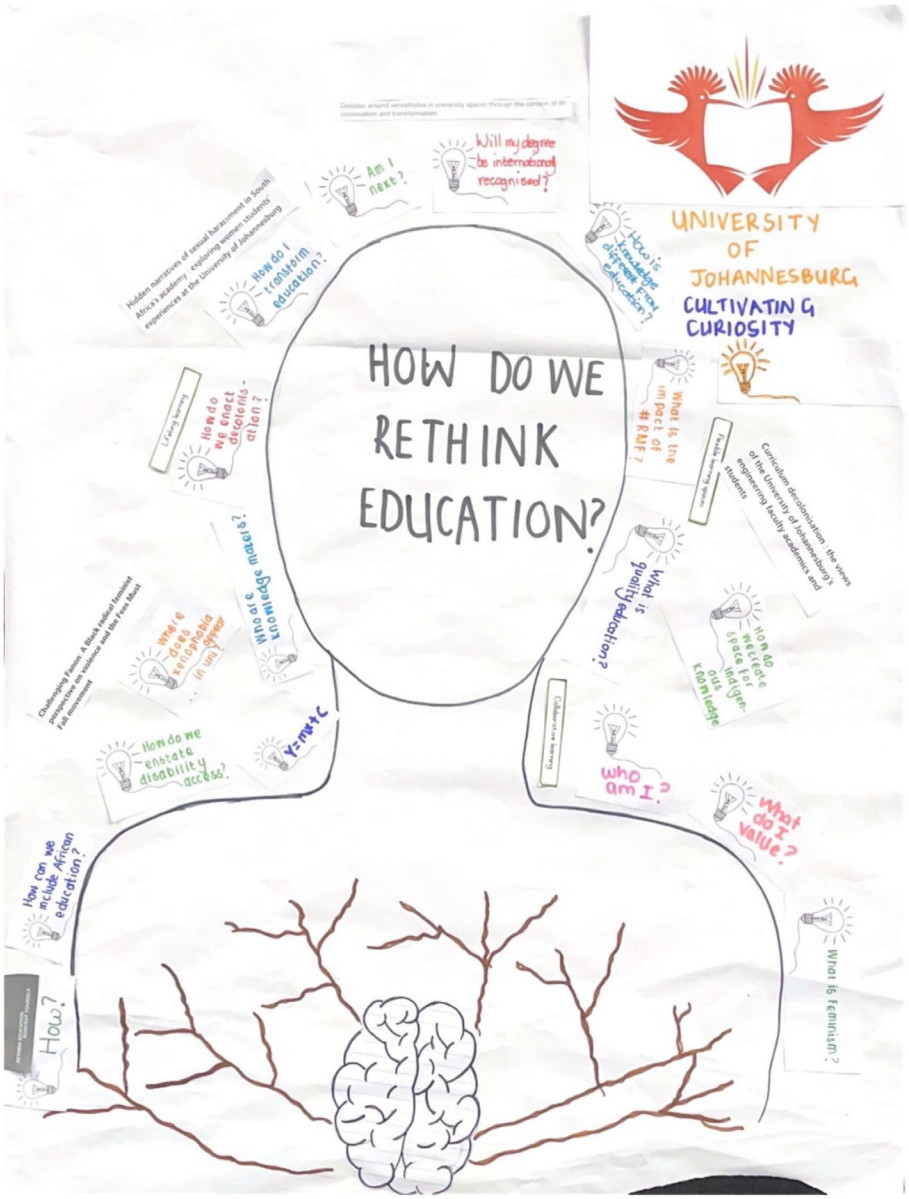


FIGURE 3 | Group 2 redesign.

What stood out in both focus groups was the students' focus on the group collaborative process and the course as a whole as a "safe space" and the participants' tendency to underplay contestation and conflict. To some extent, this resonates with the work of Goodburn and Ina (1994) who found that one of the groups in their study on collaboration, critical pedagogy and difference valued the building of friendship and community in the collaborative process more than the negotiation of difference.

Group 1 participants emphasized that because of the interactive nature of the course and the fact that they were accustomed to working together (they had formed a group early in the course) they were able to negotiate ideas for the redesign quite constructively as they had already developed a way of working together. To some extent, this contrasts with our observations of group dynamics, which entailed some uneven power dynamics in terms of decision makers in the group and those who seemed to follow orders.

> Drawing on the discussion, their redesign of the UJ advert happened spontaneously and at times, there was chaos while they cut, tore, wrote and shouted out ideas during the session. Three of the group members collaborated to make decisions, while the other two contributed by supporting and implementing the group's plans.
>
> (Fatima's field notes, 2023).

This is referred to in passing in the focus group (FG) interview, where Brendan reflects on his disagreement with a group member's feedback and how these differences prompted constructive challenges within the group. Perhaps this is inevitable in group processes. However, this conflict, echoed in Fatima's field notes, seemed to generate clarity for the group for how they wanted to proceed:

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> The focus of discussion was about representation around race and gender, and after much discussion, identity was a focal aspect for consideration in the redesign. One group member offered an initial take on the text, which prompted disagreement, argument, and debate that significantly shaped the direction of the redesign. The group decided to remove identifying factors all together by only using silhouettes in place of people
>
> (Fatima's field notes, 2023).

The collaborative redesign task served as a "lightbulb" moment for the students. The participants in Group 2 commented on the affordances of doing the redesign collaboratively, particularly as they had grown accustomed to working in groups throughout the course. They mentioned that the consistent "turn and talk" methodology employed in the course enabled them to share ideas and to do so without fear of judgment or criticism. Tehani's reflection below concerning the teaching methodology on the course highlights the importance of creating a safe, democratic space (McNeil and Borg 2018) where students can interrogate and value difference (Goodburn and Ina 1994) and feel that their perspectives are heard and respected. Tehani, for instance, reflects on this 'turn and talk' methodology, stating that

> [T]here was a consistent...fielding [of] your ideas with a smaller group and then you share it in a plenary. So I think that was a consistent thing that we were doing throughout the [components of the course] before even reaching critical literacy...we still felt the safety of sharing ideas. And even at the risk that there would be some level of disagreement it wouldn't feel like your full sense of self was being led out in public to be judged or whatever; it was like oh, that's a different perspective and we can still dig deeper and think about it a bit more. So you're not getting dismissed if you think differently.

In the group 2 focus group, participants mentioned that although they all had different backgrounds, they had a lot in common and 'shared similar ideas' which facilitated a smooth group discussion. Equally important, Tehani's comment above identifies the elements that made the space safe and enabling for their negotiation of difference. While she acknowledges that presenting a different perspective carried an element of risk (*she seems to be talking here on behalf of the group*), she argues that there were enough safety nets in place to make it worth the risk, and that each perspective would be heard and considered. To make sense of the dynamic discussed above, we adapt Thesen's (2014, p. 12) notion of a "warm and productive notion of risk". While Thesen uses this concept in the context of postgraduate writing, we think it applies equally well to academic dialogues that allow for the exploration of ideas among self and other, across difference.

Tehani emphasized the collaborative nature of the redesign task as being key to their making the necessary links between course concepts, which she likened to puzzle pieces. She commented that "It's very difficult to turn over the pieces and make sense of them individually but eventually when you start having them come together it makes the process a bit easier. I think it especially manifested when we did the critical literacy redesign." This shows that the pedagogical decision to make the design task a collaborate endeavor was key to helping this group make the necessary links in the course, and move from theory to praxis (Bishop 2014).

Despite some limitations (e.g., the underplaying of conflict by focus group participants) a close reading of the focus group transcript and the lecturer reflections do highlight the students' enactment of key elements of CL in the collaborative redesign process: relevance, reflexivity, deconstructive, dialogic, empowerment, transformation, and intersectionality (Paul 2021). From our perspective, it was definitely the moment on the course where the pedagogical space was altered (McNeil and Borg 2018) so that CL theory became praxis and became more meaningful for the students.

5.4 | Dialogue and Reflexivity (Group 2)

The participants in Group 2 were diverse not only in their backgrounds but also their worldviews. Tehani held strong views about the university as political space where knowledge production is contested, whereas Denika saw the politics of education as an inconvenience and disruption. This interaction was particularly generative in terms of differences coming to the fore and students reflecting critically on their positionalities, highlighting the potential affordances presented by different kinds of diversity in collaborative work. In Tehani's response below, she expresses her views on politics, power and agency in education. At the same time, her use of personal pronouns illustrates the role of affect in her perception of the relevance of these issues to her own life and how her engagement is linked to desire (Boler 1999), in terms of her wants, hopes (and possibly) dreams for universities as inclusive educational spaces (Mendelowitz and Govender 2024).

> I want to push forward an idea of universities as spaces where knowledge is created but the production of knowledge in a university space is not an apolitical practice, number one. It's not a peaceful practice, number two. So my own encounters of knowledge production, or maybe like what I was used to seeing, was that it happened through protest, it happened through conflict, it happened through people pushing that go against what's conventional. So that's how I was like, okay, if we want to redesign this advert for the university, that's how direction should go.

The dialogic component creates suitable conditions for critical reflexivity (Paul 2021) as it enabled students to (re)consider their perspectives in relation to the voices and ideas of others (their group members). This is illustrated well by Denika's response which shows her ability to acknowledge her positionality and growing understanding of herself in relation to others and student protest in the university context.

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> I think [the collaborative redesign task] brought forth...the different protests that occur in different university spaces. Because that is something I wouldn't have thought of in terms of like this advert essentially. It wouldn't have crossed my mind to also bring up how important these various movements are and how much they have an impact on students' experience at university and how it can shape the way that they finish their studies and also like then progress further...and how they've become such an integral part of the university experience at different universities...But there was always protests on campus and I would never get myself involved and I would just see it as like...it's almost like an inconvenience. Like here are students protesting, yes, I understand it's important but now it's disrupting my education. But now of course coming out of that I can see how that does have an impact on the whole university experience.

This shift in perspective illustrates empathy that goes beyond mere tokenism; rather it's the kind of empathy that recognizes the struggles and desires of her fellow peers as well as wider sociopolitical issues of the time. Her response demonstrates the kind of reflexivity that involves challenging one's own assumptions (Boler 1999), suggesting a movement toward (affective) solidarity (Mendelowitz and Govender 2024; Liu and Shange 2018).

5.5 | Relevance and Intersectionality (Groups 1 and 2)

In Paul's conceptualization of relevance as an element of their model, they foreground culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) (Ladson-Billings 1995, 2014; Paris 2012). Ladson-Billings (1995) made compelling arguments to develop curriculum with relevance to students' lives and experiences as well as developing cultural consciousness and academic achievement. While Ladson-Billing's initial work focused on Black students in the United States, CRP has subsequently been applied across a range of contexts.

The issue of relevance was not discussed extensively or explicitly in the focus group, but it was threaded through the discussions in ways that resonate strongly with Ladson-Billings (1995, 2014) and Paris (2012); Paris and Alim (2017). Students made frequent references to the ways in which the course enabled them to make links between course content, their lived experiences and their interpretation of texts and how sharing ideas with each other ultimately made the texts more accessible (The words 'experiences' or 'experience' were used by participants 9 times in the Group 1 focus group). This included sharing linguistic and cultural practices, and negotiating across difference, resonating with Paris' argument for the importance of cultural dexterity and linguistic plurality in his model of CSP. However, not all the references to the focus on lived experience were viewed positively. Julius felt there was too much focus on subjective experience and not enough theoretical grounding. While we as lecturers foreground the connections between lived experiences and theoretical concepts, we acknowledge that this approach does not necessarily land well with every student. Toward the middle of the course, we realized that students needed more explicit flagging of the key concepts and the web of connections between texts (and perhaps that's partially what Julius is getting at). In other words, links to lived experiences are important as an opening to student engagement but not necessarily sufficient for full internalization of key concepts.

The issue of relevance is also one of the key underpinnings of CL. Vasquez et al. (2019) stress the importance of developing curriculum and classroom materials that resonate with students' lived experiences. Given the importance of text selection, the second aspect of relevance is about the choice of the UJ advertisement and how it resonated for the participants. This is a South African university, and students are familiar with it. The advert's aim is to recruit potential students and makes specific assumptions about its target audiences in its choice of representations. This advertisement struck a deep chord with students, both in 2022 and 2023 (see Mendelowitz and Govender 2024 for more detailed discussion). This is not explicitly discussed in the focus group, but their reflections on the collaborative process captures their engagement with the problematic issues generated by the advertisement.

Finally, another element of relevance is the applicability of the course to their teaching contexts, which at times seemed to prove quite elusive for students. While the course readings throughout the course consistently provide various educational case studies on each major theme, it was only halfway or for some toward the end of the course that participants started seeing its applicability to education.

> Navan: How have you learned critical literacy and kind of who do you see it being for?

> Julius: I can start. So, I see critical...okay, throughout the course at least I felt like most of the critical literacy was for you and your relationship with the world around you. And then towards the end it was like, oh, and then here's how it's applicable to education. It was more an introspective thing before briefly touching on how it can be used outside of that context. ... and how it can be used to change the problematic nature of texts. That only came much later.

> Brendan: I agree with J. ... Like I could have recited Janks', like the four steps or something like that. I could have easily done that, but I've never really sort of understood it internally up until we had this collaborative task, then it was more of a, Oh! I see what the problem is now. ... So, it sort of allowed me to...like it showed me different perspectives and how to apply them, and not just view things from my

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> own perspective. So, I would say that's sort of what I gained.

> Raha: So, I think that was my only issue with the course, was that it catered specifically for a specific age group when it came to how would you think about this in terms of education. But I mean, still very useful because we challenged our own views.

One of the striking themes that emerges from this part of the discussion is how the collaborative redesign process played a significant role in this move from theory to praxis, engaging a deeper, internalized understanding and application to education. For Julius, it was the move from deconstruction to realizing that he could contribute to change through redesign. While students spoke about the importance of exposure to different perspectives throughout the course (Lewison et al. 2002), the collaborative redesign strengthened this engagement with multiple perspectives, possibly because of the nature of the task—needing to deconstruct and reconstruct and negotiate decisions with peers in a short time span in order to produce and present a redesigned advert. All the decisions required engagement with key critical literacy questions, recursive moves between critique and redesign, between doing and knowing. Brendan captures this powerfully in his comment that he could recite all the four steps of Janks' (interdependence) model but had not internalized it until this moment.

For Raha, the connection to education was constrained by the mismatch between the course focus on the FET phase, while her focus is on the foundation phase. However, this is something that can be easily addressed in future courses by lecturers allowing foundation phase teachers to select alternative texts for analysis and provision of readings for foundation phase teachers (there is substantial research on CL for young children).

Students' discussion of the applicability to education overlaps with Group 2's focus group discussion about the challenges of implementing redesign with their learners. Denika reflects on the challenges she faced in attempting to recreate the redesign task in her own classroom and address the issue of gender norms in an advert.

> I found [teaching elements of visual literacy] challenging because now learners, because of their background, because of their positionality, they have their own ideas about specific things. Like the specific advert I was using, it spoke to gender norms, and a lot of my students disagreed with what I was trying to... what I was trying to convey to them about the advert, or what was problematic. And the conversation kind of steered toward a different direction, and then it became like a bit of an argument. And now that becomes challenging and daunting because now how do I start to break down their preconceived notions about gender norms?

Her experience illustrates how gender norms are understood and experienced differently based on individuals' intersecting identities. Intersectionality challenges the binary notion of oppressor and oppressed by acknowledging the "structural convergence among intersecting systems of power" (Hill Collins 2019, p. 26) across multiple levels, specifically personal, communal and institutional (Freire 1970). It refers to the interaction of various characteristics, such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, xenophobia, linguistic discrimination (Crenshaw 1989; Chun 2009; Hill Collins 2019), personal difference, and creativity (Mendelowitz 2017).

Danika's learners, and her own, engagement with and emotions toward the advert (Mendelowitz and Govender 2024) are determined by their cultural backgrounds, religious orientations, socio-economic statuses, and personal experiences with gender. The disagreement that ensued reflects the diverse perspectives in the classroom and how each learner's unique combination of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other social categories impact their understanding of and reactions to gender norms and the advert in question. This also points toward the affective dimension of intersectionality, demonstrating how teachers and learners alike might see those social issues that matter most to them in relation to the social lenses through which they view texts.

This highlights the challenges teachers, particularly novice teachers, experience in implementing CL and raises questions about how to challenge students' assumptions while respecting their intersectional identities and working productively with their resistance. It also raises questions about teachers' positionality in these kinds of conflictual situations (i.e., teachers don't want to be seen as imposing particular perspectives on students). This quandary has the potential to lead to pedagogical paralysis. In the section that follows, we unpack the role of textual deconstruction and the role that it can play in enabling students to challenge their own and each other's perspectives.

5.6 | Deconstruction, Transformation and Empowerment (Group 1)

It is difficult to separate the deconstruction and redesign process as they are interdependent. Hence, we move fluidly between them in the section that follows.

Before discussing the deconstruction process, it is useful to pinpoint the profile of the group members as this has an impact on the choices they ultimately made about their redesign. They regarded themselves as "really surprisingly diverse" and described themselves as comprising the following identities: one Chinese South African male, one white female, one white male, two Indian females.

The week before the collaborative redesign, we had a session to discuss and deconstruct the UJ advert. Students worked in their small groups. Lecturers moved around to listen in to different group discussions. Belinda vividly remembers a key moment with group 1:

> They are discussing the problematic racialised and gendered representation in the advert and how they might redesign it. At some point they come up with

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> the idea of replacing all the figures (famous white men and young woman at the top) with black figures. And then it slowly dawns on them that given the composition of their group, this would mean that they are not represented. Not one of them. And they change track. This moment is probably what began to move them in the direction of the silhouette, an open identity projection rather than specifying race and gender
>
> (Belinda's field notes, 2023).

This process of deconstruction continued at the beginning of the collaborative redesign process and included a critique of the heteronormative, sexist and racist, colonial representations of knowledge. And then, of course, they faced the problem of how to solve this problem without creating another new set of problematic representations and inclusions. At this stage, students usually slide into hyperinclusivity as discussed by Fatima in her lecturer reflection. We define hyperinclusivity as "an exaggerated and repetitive use of human rights and socially transformative discourses in order to create a representation of sameness that is almost utopian" (Govender 2019, p. 142). That is, despite the emphasis on positionality, intersectionality, and difference as productive resources for doing critical literacies in this space, the responsibility (and fear) that comes with critically conscious (re)design can seem daunting: how does one choose who to include and exclude?

Raha describes coming to class with an assortment of random images and importantly blank silhouettes in order to "take out gender, take out race, take out anything that could give you an indication as to who the person in the image is." In contrast to Group 2, who discussed their choices, options and ideas quite systematically, Group 1 arrived with an assortment of images and "a basic idea of a concept" (Julius, FG). The development of this concept seemed to take shape through quite a chaotic, spontaneous process.

> Navan: And what was that concept?
>
> Julius: Tearing down and then rebuilding again. Out with the old, in with the new. We looked at slogan on the original advert and then we just reviewed that differently.
>
> Navan: Okay, so do you think it's your reading of that slogan "Rethink Education, Reinvent yourself" that prompted that idea, which is the idea that you ran with then? The "out with the old, in with the new".
>
> Brendan: ...like we used whatever stationery we had available. And we literally just went through everything, and we decided, does this fit with what we want to say? J was very right, so we wanted to dismantle this, and we wanted to get rid of a racialised Eurocentric university and bring something that sort of focuses on a more inclusive community. Like it doesn't exclude anyone.
>
> Raha: And then I think when we sat down in class it was like, oh, this is what we have in front of us. I think that's where the idea sort of sprung. Just by looking at the images and then just talking.... And next thing I knew we were tearing up the old thing. It was a little bit chaotic but there was some consensus as to what we were going to do when we started the chaotic process.

These reflections highlight that a critical reading of the slogan in the original advert "Rethink Education, Reinvent yourself" was central to their subversion and redesign of the visual and written elements of the advert. This was replaced with "out with the old, in with the new" and once they agreed on this new slogan, they then enacted the slogan by spontaneously tearing up the original advert as an expression of their rejection of its representations. We are not sure if the students were necessarily empowered by this process of dismantling and redesigning, but there are indications in their reflections that they moved to a new level of engagement with CL once they realized that they could make changes to address a specific problem. At the same time, Raha articulates an awareness that each redesign raises new problems and issues, and that there will always be gaps.

Raha described her anger about the gender and race representations (in that order) in the original advert. The solution in her mind was to remove all these identity markers "so that regardless of who you are, you can identify with the advert." Brendan agreed with this approach and added that will result in "true equality" while Julius argued that there's a need for a shift in perspective and that "gender shouldn't be a limiting factor to knowledge and that it (knowledge) should be accessible to all. And that was one of the things that we did want to bring across." These thoughts and feelings were ultimately portrayed powerfully through the image of a black silhouette walking off into the distance over torn-up paper (Figure 2).

The comment by Raha (that the removal of identity markers makes the advert more inclusive), and the redesigned advertisements by both groups, raised interesting issues about hyperinclusivity. Both groups grappled with issues of representation and were conscious about the problems of hyperinclusivity, which had been a recurring feature of redesign by previous cohorts. They both ultimately chose to use silhouettes as a way of avoiding hyperinclusivity (in their minds) and dealing with the problematic gender and race representation in the original UJ advertisement. However, as with all CL redesign process, while these redesigns addressed some power relations, they created a new set of power relations. The use of silhouettes is a form of hyperinclusivity in its move toward sameness which "might seem to make all things equal, [yet] it also silences the very differences that make humanity" (Govender 2019, p. 144) so that it elides engagement with *difference and power*, which is a key element of critical redesign. Indeed, this group removed themselves from their redesign, which was different from previous cohorts where individuals expressed a "desire to be accurately represented in

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the texts and discourses of higher education" (Mendelowitz and Govender 2024, p. 6). Collaborative redesign changed these dynamics, influencing what was imaginable and perhaps making the responsibility for a more socially just representation more difficult to achieve.

While we loved the adverts that both groups produced, and thought they were so powerful in their rejection of the original representations of universities and knowledge constructions, we have mixed feelings about their argument for dispensing with identity categories altogether by replacing them with silhouettes. We are left with more questions than answers. Is this an easy way out? Or is it "a nuanced portrayal of interconnectedness and equality" (Fatima's reflection 2024)? Does it border on color-blindness discourse? Perhaps this presents another 'teachable moment' in the ongoing journey toward understanding CL as praxis.

However, while Govender (2019) argued that hyperinclusivity in the context of their work with undergraduates at times suggested a "masked resistance" to CL work, we argue that in the context of these two groups these choices seem to indicate "authentic attempts made by students to grapple with controversial diversities" while being inclusive of intersectional identities of group members (Govender 2019, p. 145).

While the above analysis points to the discursive politics of representation in redesign, it is also significant that this group actively drew on their surrounding material resources to negotiate, select, and imprint meanings into their redesigns. That is, dialogue and decision-making were entangled with the tearing-up and crumpling of paper, moving and sticking objects to the page, drawing and writing—making them inseparable. In the increasingly critically literate interaction between students and texts in this space, both troubling and reimagining the university became possible.

6 | Concluding Thoughts

We were prompted to write this article to understand why the collaborative design process generated a turning point and teachable moment in the course, from lecturer and student perspectives. In particular, we wanted to understand what the effects of collaborative redesign would be on learning CL praxis—with particular attention to (i) how conditions of possibility were created for productive collaborative redesign, and vice versa, and (ii) the effects of collaborative redesign on doing and teaching CL and its contribution to students' moves from theory and critique toward enactment and internalization of CL praxis. These moves were evident particularly in the redesign session and exam performance, which inspired further research.

Affect played an important role in creating conditions of possibility for productive collaboration. The theme of the classroom being a safe space, and particularly where it enabled students to build trust in their small groups over the six-month duration of the course, was significant. This was not about the removal of risk but rather creating a space that enabled them to navigate "warm risk" (Thesen 2014, p. 12) and difference productively. This came through particularly in Tehani's response. An important insight that emerges is the value of work in the same small groups over an extended period in building a safe space and enabling conditions of possibility to make sense of the theoretical puzzle and to make links between the key CL concepts.

Dialogues across difference and reflexivity played a crucial role in enabling the students to make the move from theory to praxis. In order to make decisions about representations in the redesign of their texts, they needed to negotiate a range of ideas with the diverse members of their groups. This required critical reflexivity—challenging their assumptions and rethinking their ideas to reach consensus in a short space of time. Empathy and affective solidarity (Mendelowitz and Govender 2024; Liu and Shange 2018) also played a role in this process and contributed to the development of critical reflexivity. There were moments of shifts in empathy that coalesced with shifting perspectives, such as Danika's rethinking of herself in relation to others and protests in the university context.

Collaboration generated a much wider pool of ideas and intersectional identities to negotiate than an individual redesign does. That said, there were some inevitable power imbalances, and it is likely that some group members compromised their initial ideas more than others. (For examples see Group 1, Brandon and Fatima's reflection). Yet, even with some power imbalances, these moments of negotiation immersed students in being and doing CL and facilitated engagement with all its key elements in relation to self and other. Making decisions about representation is a key element of CL redesign and constitutes the transformative, empowering aspect of CL. The data analysis highlighted how collaboration complexified the process of redesign and decision-making about representation as the diverse/intersectional identities and multiple perspectives of group members needed to be considered. This is different to an open-ended, low-stakes dialogue. Students worked with tight time limits to produce a collaborative product which they then displayed and presented to the class.

Students engaged productively with issues of representation and produced thought-provoking redesigns that were more sophisticated than redesigns produced individually in previous years. However, there were limitations. Ironically, in their determination to avoid hyperinclusivity, they chose to dispense with identity categories (other than male/female in Group 1) in order to allow the viewer/reader to project themselves onto the silhouettes. The two advertisements thus write/speak back to the original advert by opening the door to any interested applicant. As with any CL redesign, new problems are generated, and in this case, the adverts constitute a form of hyperinclusivity by eliding difference. However, we do not view this form of hyperinclusivity as "masked resistance" (Govender 2019, p. 145) to CL but rather as their authentic attempts to use the available materials, within limited time, to grapple with diversity and representation issues within the constraints of the task. The affordances and limitations of collaborative redesign were evident in these discursive choices in that they heightened their sensitivity to inclusion issues in relation to the diverse identities of group members. This pushed them to look beyond individual perspectives and grapple with the constraints of their choices in context by working at the limits of discursive (re)design, considering the consequences of design choices, and having to confront the material

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complexities (such as who in/beyond this room gets to be represented) of discursive (re)design.

Overall, we argue that a key contribution of this article is a nuanced understanding of the role of collaboration and dialogue in CL pedagogy, extending Paul's (2021) conceptualization of dialogue/dialogic. That is, there is a need for dialogue as both critical-creative-affective exploration with text and meaning-making that is contingent on the nature of classroom space (McNeil and Borg 2018). Dialogue thus requires negotiation toward consensus, sometimes even compromise, and an ongoing critical awareness of the discursive-material consequences of (re)design choices in the creation of an end product.

6.1 | Implications for Education

This research has implications for teachers, teacher educators, and students (across all levels) by offering insight into CL pedagogy—that it is perpetually co-constructed through an iterative praxis of being-doing. This is a necessary caveat for CL as an orientation to teaching and learning that seeks to be consistently responsive to the needs of students, practically engaging, contextually and culturally situated, and experimental but underpinned by an ethic of care and social justice.

We imagine the curious and patient reader reaching the end of the article and wondering about its implication for their practice and context, the inevitable 'so what' questions. We argue that there are highly specific practices, tools and principles embedded in the case study that can be re-imagined and adapted for a range of (literacy) contexts, while the detail and depth of the case study provides a vivid account of what this looks like and means in practice. We do not offer a template, but a glimpse into CL praxis as it might be enacted—particularly in relation to the role of collaboration and redesign as critical-creative-affective work.

While we argue that CL as praxis can be elusive, hard to pin down and sometimes challenging for educators to implement, our article showcases its enactment in a more tangible way. Thus, our research findings suggest that the following principles and practices can be (re)imagined and (re)invented/adapted across a range of educational contexts (including primary schools, high schools and universities/teacher training):

- CL tasks done collaboratively can give students a wider range of exposure to diverse perspectives, dispositions, and feelings, shifting the source of CL pedagogy and praxis from the individual to relational.
- High stakes collaborative CL tasks with strategic constraints can enable the enactment, internalization, and interrogation of CL principles and theories in context, pushing students to learn CL through doing.
- A sustained collaborative work ethos needs to be developed with a particular group over time so that the space becomes productive and constructive (safe space) (i.e., creates conditions of possibility for collaborative redesign).

As a kind of vivid case study, our account of praxis is limited in its scope—it is only one cohort of students, in one module, completing one task. However, its significance lies in the detail—of CL in collaborative action, and analysis that offers critical insights into the pedagogical (and other) choices that get made when doing and teaching CL. Indeed, the educational implications and questions we offer in this paper may already be rippling into our students' practice. Consider, for example, Danika's reflections on the challenges of doing CL in her own teaching context, or the ah-ha moment students expressed in the focus group.

More work needs to be done in this area and we envisage that the kinds of issues discussed above will surface in conversation about the conditions of possibilities for deepening collaborative, dialogic CL work across a range of contexts, and that these conversations will include stories of pedagogical moves that worked, and others that were disappointing as well as innovative solutions.

We look forward to the conversations.

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Permission to reproduce material from other sources: Permission to reproduce Figure 1 (UJ advert, 2008) was obtained from the University of Johannesburg's Marketing and Brand Management office.

Ethics Statement

Ethics approval was obtained from the Wits School of Education's ethics committee. Protocol number: H21/08/19. In-text statement: "This study was granted ethical approval from the Wits School of Education."

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Due to the scale and qualitative nature of the study, data has not been made publicly available.

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