

# Multilingualism: A Resource for Meaning-Making and Creating Ontological Access

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## Abstract

This article explores first-year Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) students' multilingual practices in a university course where students have access to professionally translated technical terminology of the subject field. The study examines whether multilingual technical terminology—embedded in a dialogic teaching model—can contribute to students' epistemological and ontological access to the disciplinary content, and whether it can contribute to knowledge construction in a discipline by incorporating students' oral contributions of their lived experiences into the curriculum content. In order to answer the research questions, qualitative data were collected by transcribing, analysing and interpreting students' multilingual oral contributions on key political science topics. The findings of the study confirm that students' vernacular literacies can play an important role in providing epistemological and ontological access for students at university, and can contribute to authentic transformation and decolonisation of higher education.

**Keywords:** epistemological access; ontological access; extended curriculum programmes; multilingual education; decolonisation; meaning-making; teaching political science



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## Introduction

There is a common perception that students must meet specific academic literacy requirements before they can enter higher education (Russell et al. 2009, 395). Educational institutions that are socially powerful tend to support dominant discourse practices, each with its own type of literacy. In contrast, vernacular literacies, found in people's everyday lives, are less "visible" and are generally regarded as "inappropriate" in educational institutions. What is important for meaning-making, however, is that students should be able to use their range of literacies in different educational contexts to achieve their academic potential (Barton and Tusting 2005, 8). This issue relates to the difference between formal access to higher education on the one hand, and epistemological and ontological access on the other hand. While epistemological access has been the focus in extended curriculum scholarship, an engagement with ontological access has been negligible. It is hard to imagine the decolonisation of the curriculum and the incorporation of indigenous knowledges into the curriculum without taking students' everyday realities, lived experiences and worldviews into consideration, that is, the ontological dimension of teaching and learning.

This article explores first-year Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP)<sup>1</sup> students' multilingual practices in a university course where they had access to professionally translated technical terminology of the subject field. It examines whether technical terminology embedded in a dialogic teaching model can contribute to students' epistemological and ontological access to the disciplinary content, and how this teaching model can contribute to knowledge construction in a discipline by incorporating students' oral contributions into the curriculum content.

## Formal, Epistemological and Ontological Access: The Need for Conceptual Clarity

In the promotion of scholarship in Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs), it is important to acknowledge that there are several factors affecting ECP students' academic and social adjustment at university.

It is well known that ECPs have been established in South Africa to create access for students who come from environments that have been disadvantaged by apartheid and are still facing the consequences of an unequal school system. Ndebele et al. (2013) presented evidence to show to what extent ECPs have contributed to enhancing student success in higher education. They recommended that the innovative teaching and learning practices of ECP lecturers should be emulated by mainstream lecturers.

Yet, when ECP students gain formal access to the university, they often encounter institutional cultures with entrenched administrative and academic practices that marginalise and stigmatise them from the outset. This institutional culture is reflected,

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<sup>1</sup> Also called "Extended Programmes" or "Extended Degree Programmes" at some universities.

inter alia, by exclusive welcoming practices, the drinking culture in residences, offensive names of buildings and symbols of oppression, unaffordable food, campus accommodation and prescribed textbooks. The bursaries that are supposed to cover these expenses are often paid out weeks after the academic year has commenced. The issue of the dominant institutional language can also lead to further marginalisation and alienation among students who have to adjust to the new university culture. Several studies have indicated that the effect of these “non-academic” factors on students’ academic adjustment, retention and eventual graduation at university, should not be underestimated (Lea and Street 2006, 370; Nkhoma 2020).

While ECPs have been used by South African universities to reach their “transformation targets”, that is, to give students from disadvantaged communities formal access to higher education, we seldom see the cultural and linguistic diversity of students reflected in curriculum renewal, teaching philosophies, and research practices. There are, however, multiple studies that have explored the use of multilingualism in teaching and learning in higher education (for example, Kaschula, Maseko, and Wolff 2017; Madiba 2010; Makalela 2019; Ramani 2007).

Wally Morrow’s (2009, 77) concept of “epistemological access” has been influential in ECP scholarship and transformation debates. He makes the valid point that formal access to the university should not be confused with epistemological access. Creating epistemological access requires institutions to address the realities of students’ different educational circumstances to compensate for the disparities in educational and socio-economic backgrounds. It also has major implications for innovative curriculum design, teaching and learning, in that lecturers must learn to guide students into a particular subject field without taking a certain academic standard for granted. Students must be taught how to become successful participants in an academic community of practice. Formal access therefore has epistemological implications.

As Lea and Street (2006, 368) point out, the basic assumption of the so-called “academic socialisation” approaches is that students need to be inducted into the disciplinary conventions of a subject field so that they can learn to think like that academic community. The argument is that students who familiarise themselves with the basic building blocks of a particular academic discipline will be able to reproduce its discourse. The development of writing then typically involves either implicit or explicit induction into the disciplinary conventions. The assumption is that through this induction process students will eventually assimilate or acculturate into the disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres.

The problem with this dominant practice in creating epistemological access is that there is little acknowledgment of students’ cultural and linguistic diversity. There is also no room for students’ questioning the basic assumptions, key scholars and canon of the discipline, which is a key component of decolonisation of the curriculum in the South African historical context. Walker (2020) points out that ECP scholarship on

epistemological access has focused too strongly on the induction of students into existing disciplinary knowledge and has not made adequate provision for their contribution to knowledge construction in a discipline.

While it may be helpful that students learn reading and writing skills, academic English, and the academic conventions of the various disciplines, critical scholars must be prepared to examine the unequal power relationships in dominant pedagogical practices that undermine students' meaning-making, social identity, agency and authority in the learning process. This relates to the ontological dimension that has been neglected in ECP scholarship thus far.

In conventional approaches to teaching and learning in higher education programmes, ontology has tended to be subordinated to epistemological concerns. Barnett (2005, 795) acknowledges the importance of epistemology, but calls for an "ontological turn" in teaching within higher education where being-in-the-world takes its rightful place next to knowing the world. Dall'Alba and Barnacle (2007) agree that knowing has traditionally been limited to an ideal realm of thoughts, ideas and concepts, but they argue "that knowing is always situated within a personal, social, historical and cultural setting, and thus transforms from the merely intellectual to something inhabited and enacted: a way of thinking, making and acting. Indeed, a way of being" (2007, 683). The implication of the "ontological turn" for teaching in higher education is that the focus is no longer only on knowledge transfer or acquisition, or what students know, but also on who they are becoming.

Long before the "ontological turn" in higher education, the ontological dimension was an integral part of Paulo Freire's notion of critical pedagogy, which envisions the personal transformation of the student as an active and participating member in the learning process. According to Giroux, the critical pedagogy movement was "an educational movement, guided by passion and principle to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action" (2010, B15). Freire's notion of "conscientisation", that is, the coming to personal critical consciousness, is a key component of his conceptualisation of critical pedagogy. Freire uses the term to refer to "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire 1970, 19). According to Freire, engaging in dialogue must be understood as part of the historical progress in becoming human beings, a moment where humans come together to reflect on their reality and to exchange ideas as to how to act critically to transform their reality. Freire points out that, while lecturers have academic knowledge of their subject area, in dialogic pedagogy the lecturer rediscovers the subject material by studying it along with the students (Shor 2012, 15). He contends that dialogue as a way of learning is ultimately a debate about epistemology, that is, what counts as knowledge. Critical pedagogy is thus a means of creating epistemological *and* ontological access for students who might otherwise be forced to uncritically assimilate into the various academic disciplines.

Education for critical consciousness is the main tenet of Freire's revolutionary pedagogy. Its starting point is the student's lived experiences (the ontological dimension), with the aim of raising consciousness and overcoming obstacles.

According to Freire, university teaching "tends to form us at a distance from reality" (Shor and Freire 1987, 19); the concepts that we study at university can likewise "amputate us from the concrete reality" (1987, 19) to which they are supposed to refer. When concepts are abstracted from reality, they bear no relation to the concreteness of society. In situated pedagogy, the lecturer starts with the everyday, real-life experiences of the students; following this concrete starting point, the student then proceeds to critical consciousness. Freire claims that by listening to students' portrayals of their understanding of the world, it is epistemologically possible to guide them in the direction of a critical, scientific understanding of the world, noting that "science is super-imposing critical thought on what we observe in reality, after the starting point of common sense" (Shor and Freire 1987, 19–20). In short, in the dialogic classroom where students participate in discussions of the problems that they have raised themselves, the lecturer and students transform learning into a collaborative process that is in touch with reality (Shor and Freire 1987, 11).

## Ontology and Epistemology in Teaching Political Science

Since this study reports on an introductory ECP module on contemporary South African politics, it is important to consider views on the role of ontology and epistemology in teaching Political Science. Bates and Jenkins (2007, 56) believe teaching and learning ontology and epistemology are important in Political Science for developing students' ability to inquire. This can be achieved by raising ontological questions about the nature of social and political realities, as well as epistemological questions about knowledge and knowledge claims. They further note that the main aim of teaching and learning within Political Science should not be about reproducing ideas or facts without understanding them (the so-called "regurgitation of knowledge"), but it should make students aware of different ways of thinking and engaging with the subject content. Students should learn to reflexively engage with the content in order to discover relationships, linkages and key patterns in order to participate in critical analysis. Critical analysis refers to the ability to engage with, question and challenge alternative perspectives. It helps students to identify contradictions and inconsistencies in conventional knowledge, to critique conceptual claims, and to defend independent arguments.

An integral part of developing students' ability to inquire in Political Science is to create epistemological and ontological access to the key terminology of the discipline. Heywood (2000, 7) makes the following remarks about the role of key concepts in Political Science:

[C]oncept formation is an essential step in the process of reasoning. Concepts are the "tools" with which we think, criticise, argue, explain and analyse. Merely perceiving the

external world does not in itself give us knowledge about it. In order to make sense of the world we must in a sense impose meaning upon it, and we do this through the construction of concepts. Concepts, in that sense, are the building blocks of human knowledge.

The notion of concept formation opens up meaning-making possibilities for lecturers as well as students. This can expand the dominant linguistic conventions in that it enables alternative voices to participate in the process of concept formation, if provision is made for this possibility in the curriculum, learning material and teaching. In the case of a textbook glossary, students should be able to add relevant concepts from their cultural, political and linguistic communities. Through the knowledge production practices of the subject field, new terms can then be coined, and their definitions can be proposed and discussed. Ultimately, this can contribute to the process of building human knowledge.

This is the educational rationale behind the development of multilingual technical terminology in the broader “Introduction to the Humanities” EDP<sup>2</sup> support subject in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University.

## The Extended Degree Programme in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

In 1997, the South African government released the White Paper for the Transformation of Higher Education, which outlined a comprehensive set of initiatives for the transformation of higher education (DoE 1997). The White Paper noted the central role of higher education in the social, cultural and economic development of modern societies. The specific challenge in South Africa was to redress past inequalities and to transform the higher education system to respond to new realities and opportunities. In recognition of the central role of academic development in the transformation of higher education, Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs) were established as a mechanism to deal with systemic obstacles to equity and student success.

The EDP in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences aims to provide extensive academic support to educationally and historically disadvantaged students who are still under-represented in higher education. The majority of students in the EDP are first-generation students whose families are still dealing with the emotional and socio-economic consequences of apartheid. EDP students come from diverse linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds. They do their first academic year over two years, and follow certain compulsory support modules that are intended to prepare them better for their graduate studies. In their first EDP year, students take two subjects from the mainstream first-year offering of their particular degree programme, as well as the three compulsory academic development subjects, “Texts in the Humanities”, “Information Skills”, and

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<sup>2</sup> Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs) are known as Extended Degree Programmes (EDPs) at Stellenbosch University, and in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences where this study was done.

“Introduction to the Humanities”. In their second EDP year, students take the rest of their mainstream subjects (mostly three) and continue with one EDP support subject, “Texts in the Humanities”.

In the first-year EDP support subject, “Introduction to the Humanities”, students are introduced to a variety of disciplines that are not only limited to the Humanities and Social Sciences. Since the module aims to broaden students’ worldview by exposing them to a wide variety of theories and thinkers (relating once again to the ontological dimension), guest lecturers from other faculties, such as Theology, Education and Natural Sciences, are purposefully invited to conscientise students that all knowledge is interrelated and that we cannot find solutions to society’s challenges if we operate in intellectual silos. The curriculum is designed with the explicit goal of including the intellectual contributions of cultural, religious and language groups that were excluded in the past. Students’ diversity and unequal educational backgrounds are also taken into account in the curriculum design, and in the teaching and learning practices.

### The 2017 Module on Contemporary South African Politics

The curriculum design in this module was informed by prior research (Jonker 2016) that was prompted by EDP students’ constant lower pass rates in their mainstream subjects. The prior research was conducted from 2012 to 2016 to establish scientifically if multilingual technical terminology can play any role in EDP students’ success and in their sense of belonging. Since I started teaching in the EDP in 2009, I had been using multilingual terminology intuitively since the majority of EDP students came from diverse linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds. It became a priority to me to research and justify my own pedagogical practice to ensure that my multilingual teaching model was scientifically sound and that it was worthwhile to invest in developing multilingual educational resources. In the research project that was concluded in 2016, the research findings confirmed that multilingual technical terminology—when integrated into the course content—played a key role in EDP students’ pass rates and in their sense of belonging.

The present study moves beyond the initial research, and focuses on the fourth-term module of 2017, titled “Contemporary South African Politics”, which forms part of the broader “Introduction to the Humanities” EDP support subject that students do in their first EDP year. The purpose of the present study is to establish the value of multilingual concepts in deepening understanding and encouraging engagement among EDP students from diverse cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds. The research questions seek to establish how EDP students used the multilingual concepts at their disposal for meaning-making in the module, and secondly, how their multilingual oral tutorials contributed to knowledge construction and enriching the curriculum content. With this approach, the aim was to establish whether these teaching practices contribute in any way to their ontological access.

Before the 2017 module could be presented, the multilingual technical terminology on contemporary South African politics that would serve as a research tool in this study had to be developed in English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa, the three official languages of the province within which the university is situated. When a new textbook was published specifically aimed at South African Political Science students, I checked with the Department of Political Science in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences to confirm if they would be prescribing the textbook for all first-year students in Political Science in future. Subsequently, I contacted the publisher to inquire if I could have the English glossary translated into Afrikaans and isiXhosa at my own cost. The publishers not only undertook to do the translations at their cost, but they also added a Zulu translation of the English glossary. So, when the module started in the fourth term of 2017, the key terminology of all the textbook chapters was available to EDP students in four South African languages.

Great care was taken not to portray the EDP as a deficit or remedial programme, but to acknowledge the cultural, linguistic and historical background of these students, their agency, as well as their potential intellectual contribution (which also relates to the ontological dimension). To build their agency, provision was made for students to research the subject matter and then to incorporate their own, very basic research into the inquiry-based curriculum.

Students had their first opportunity to inform the curriculum when they received a reading and questionnaire at the end of the third term that they had to complete before the module started in the fourth term. The title of the English reading was “The TRC and CODESA<sup>3</sup> Failed South Africa: It’s Time We Reflect on This” (Meintjies 2013). The holiday homework expected students to interview any family member on their experiences of apartheid and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings from 1996 to 1998. The family members were also asked whether their families thought that South Africa has dealt adequately with its apartheid past, why the author of the prescribed article felt that the government had failed people who suffered under apartheid, and whether it would have made a difference if “hearings were held on land issues, on the education system, on the migrant labour system and on the role of companies that collaborated with, and made money from, the apartheid security system”, as the author of the article suggested.

When the module on contemporary South African politics started officially in the fourth term of 2017, students knew that the module valued real-life experiences and that their practical contributions would be relevant and meaningful to complement the theory. They also experienced practically that one of the module aims was to conscientise them about South Africa’s apartheid history and how that history still informs contemporary South African politics. In the first week of the module, the questionnaires were discussed and students encountered all the key elements of the critical analysis to which

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<sup>3</sup> The Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) was a negotiating forum that existed from 1991 to 1992 that was supposed to work out the constitutional details of democratic South Africa.



Bates and Jenkins (2007) referred (see discussion above) that are so important in teaching Political Science. Students engaged with, questioned and challenged alternative perspectives with their fellow students in the small-group tutorials in their mother languages. Since the two tutors understood isiXhosa, English and different varieties of Afrikaans, they were able to translate students' contributions when other students could not understand.

## The Multilingual Teaching Model Designed for the “Introduction to the Humanities”

The multilingual interactive teaching model that was used in the 2017 module had specifically been developed for the “Introduction to the Humanities” EDP support module to encourage students to develop their own voices and to apply the theory that they learn in the classroom to their own lived realities.

In the teaching model that is still used, students are expected to read at least one in-depth academic article or textbook chapter per week, over and above contemporary readings for enrichment that shed light on the topic under discussion. The trilingual technical terminology and definitions that appear in the textbook glossary are integrated into the PowerPoint slides for the lectures that are based on the textbook. This terminology is available before the module starts and is explicitly taught and tested in the first language support period every week by means of active learning activities.

In terms of Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom et al. 1956), the multilayered model of classifying thinking according to cognitive levels of complexity, the educational objective with the technical terminology is that students must remember and understand the concepts so well that they can apply them intuitively in new, more complex settings, such as lectures, tutorials and outside the classroom.

To achieve the educational objective with the technical terminology, a dialogic teaching model is used during two 50-minute lectures per week. Students are encouraged to do the weekly prescribed reading before they attend their first lecture of the week and to make oral contributions in English or their mother tongue. In contrast to the traditional transmission mode of teaching, dialogic teaching encourages students' active participation in class discussions of issues that are raised during the engagement between the lecturer and the students. Learning is thus transformed into a collaborative process that is in touch with students' realities (Shor and Freire 1987, 11). The active learning strategies aim to develop students' higher-order thinking skills and help them to apply the concepts that they learn during the language period.

During the one weekly small-group tutorial students actively engage with two postgraduate tutors who also attend the two weekly content lectures. Since multilingualism is used as a resource for meaning-making, tutors are appointed to accommodate the linguistic diversity in the tutorials. In general, one tutor can understand English and isiXhosa while the other can understand English and the

different varieties of Afrikaans. Students are encouraged to use their mother tongues during these discussions, and they are allowed to code-switch to make themselves understood. When students use isiXhosa during group discussions, the tutor or an isiXhosa group member reports the results of their discussion in English to the bigger tutorial group so that the whole tutorial group can benefit from their interpretation of the topic or from their real-life experiences. The main aim of the tutorials is to help students to apply the terminology in new situations, to discuss the pertinent issues that they encountered in the weekly readings and lectures and to see how different issues are interrelated.

Students are encouraged to send the lecturer and tutors any multilingual educational material or media articles that they consider relevant and valuable for the course content. This gives students multiple opportunities to inform the curriculum content in significant ways.

### Implementing the Multilingual Teaching Model in the 2017 Module

Before the first week's lectures in the 2017 module commenced, students were expected to do their first prescribed reading from a textbook chapter on transitional justice. During the first two lectures, they were introduced to six key multilingual concepts that were essential to understand or participate in a deeper discussion of the TRC process, its strengths and shortcomings. These included concepts such as transitional justice, retributive justice, restorative justice, truth commission, Ubuntu and reconciliation. Since all terms were available in English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa, it was easy to include them in the lecture slides so that all three language groups could see them during the lecture, as this trilingual slide (Figure 1) illustrates:

#### **Central concepts / *sentrale begrippe***

- **Truth commission: A body established with a specific mandate to investigate gross human rights violations.**
- *Waarheidskommissie: 'n Liggaam wat ingestel word met 'n spesifieke mandaat om growwe menseregteskendings te ondersoek.*
- *Ikomishoni yeNyaniso: Liqumrhu elasungulwa ngeenjongo ezizodwa zokuphanda ukunyahashwa kwamalungelo oluntu ngokumandla.*

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**Figure 1:** One trilingual slide defining the concept of truth commission

Where the definitions of terms were too long, the Afrikaans or isiXhosa translations were added to the English slide and these slides were then alternated during lectures so that all three language groups could benefit from the translations (Figure 2).

**Restorative justice**  
*Herstellende geregtigheid*

<p>A type of justice that seeks to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>(i) <b>restore</b> the broken <b>relationships</b> between, and the <b>humanity</b> of, victims and perpetrators of human rights violations. In this context,</li><li>(ii) the focus is on <b>forgiveness</b> and <b>healing through dialogue</b>, thus acknowledging that a wrong has been committed.</li><li>(iii) An <b>apology</b> is given and</li><li>(iv) some form of <b>reparation</b> is made.</li></ul>	<p><i>'n Soort geregtigheid wat daarop gemik is om:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><i>(i) die gebroke <b>verhoudings</b> tussen, en die menslikheid van, slagoffers en skenders van menseregte te <b>herstel</b>. In hierdie konteks is</i></li><li><i>(ii) die fokus op <b>vergifnis</b> en <b>herstel deur dialoog</b> om sodoende 'n onreg te <b>erken</b>.</i></li><li><i>(iii) 'n <b>Verskoning</b> word gegee en</i></li></ul>
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**Restorative justice**  
*Ukumiliselwa koBulungisa*

<p>A type of justice that seeks to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>(i) <b>restore</b> the <b>broken relationships</b> between, and the <b>humanity</b> of, victims and perpetrators of human rights violations. In this context,</li><li>(ii) the focus is on <b>forgiveness</b> and <b>healing through dialogue</b>, thus acknowledging that a wrong has been committed.</li><li>(iii) An <b>apology</b> is given and some form of <b>reparation</b> is made.</li></ul>	<p><i>Luhlobo lwezobulungisa olujonge <b>ukubuyisela</b> ubudlelane obubhangileyo kwanesidima sobuntu phakathi kwamaxhoba nabanyhashi bamalungelo oluntu. Ngokwale meko, into ekujoliswe kuyo <b>luxolelwano</b> nokuphelisa imbambano ngokuthethathethana, oko kukuthi ayiqonde ubani into egwenxa ethe yenzeka. Kwakuxolelwana kuya kwenziwa nembuyekezo.</i></p>
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**Figure 2:** Two alternating bilingual slides defining the concept of restorative justice

Given the increasing dominance of English in South African and international higher education, one might rightly ask why it makes sense to encourage EDP students to use their mother tongue to access and contribute to knowledge construction. But this issue is inextricably linked to the decolonisation of the university and how it finds expression

in the curriculum, learning material and teaching, as the following discussion will illustrate.

It was pertinent that a concept such as “Ubuntu” emerged so soon in the module, creating the educational space where “being-in-the-world” could take its rightful place next to “knowing the world” (Barnett 2005, 795). The focus in the classroom could then move from what students should know, to what they are becoming in the process of knowing. This is what the “ontological turn” for teaching means in higher education.

## Ubuntu

- **Ubuntu:** A world view rooted in a belief that everything is interconnected; the spiritual and living world and all living things in nature. The term is expressed in the saying ‘A person is a person through other people’.
- **Ubuntu:** ‘n wêreldsiening wat spruit uit die oortuiging dat alles onderling verbind is; die spirituele en lewende wêreld en alle lewende dinge in die natuur. Die term word in die gesegde, “’n persoon is ’n persoon deur ander mense” uitgedruk.
- **Ubuntu:** Uluvo loluntu lunenkolo yokuba yonke into inxibelelene; okomoya nendalo ephilayo kunye nazo zonke izidalwa eziphilayo. Eli gama lisuka kwintetho ethi, ‘umntu ngumntu ngabantu’.

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**Figure 3:** One trilingual slide defining the concept of Ubuntu

One can read volumes about the atrocities that were committed during apartheid and gain much theoretical knowledge about this period in South African history. But that will never give a rational explanation of South Africans’ choice for “restorative justice” instead of the “retributive justice” that characterised the Nuremberg trials after the Second World War.

The inclusion of the concept of Ubuntu in the TRC glossary (Figure 3) gave students from African traditional communities the opportunity to explain during the interactive lecture discussions how this worldview finds expression in their everyday lives, in their spirituality, human dignity, but also in their perspective on reconciliation and forgiveness. They were able to explain why their parents and community members would have chosen “restorative justice”, even though it would not make sense to people with a Western worldview.

It was interesting to observe how one module built on the next within the broader “Introduction to the Humanities” curriculum. All students were exposed to the second term module on “Religious Diversity in Society”, which was presented by a guest lecturer of the Faculty of Theology, Xolile Simon, whose research and teaching focus

on the sociology of religion. Simon, an isiXhosa mother-tongue speaker who speaks a variety of African languages, is also fluent in Afrikaans and English. He introduced students, inter alia, to African cosmology as a meaning system and the unique perspective on the concept of time in African Traditional Religion (Mbiti 1990, 14–28). As a multicultural scholar, he was able to engage actively with students from Christian, Muslim and African traditional religious backgrounds to “rediscover the course content” with them, embodying ontological access in the process. Students expressed appreciation for his preparedness to share his own experiences of vulnerability and inner contradictions of settling in an urban area while he still had to face the traditional expectations of his family living in a rural area. Many students from African traditional backgrounds identified with those contradictions during the class discussions.

As mentioned earlier, Dall’Alba and Barnacle note, “knowing is always situated within a personal, social, historical and cultural setting, and thus transforms from the merely intellectual to something inhabited and enacted: a way of thinking, making and acting. Indeed, a way of being” (2007, 683). Instead of teaching students facts and decontextualised content, this multicultural guest lecturer taught them a way of being in the world simply by being his authentic self.

Another opportunity was created for students to see the practical implications of the theoretical concepts that they learned in the textbook, and to deepen the discussion on the TRC and how the past still affects the present. As part of their engagement with older South Africans’ experiences of living under apartheid, the technical assistant on the floor—where students attended lectures every day—was invited to share his experiences with them. It was moving to hear this staff member’s life story and how his parents could not afford to let him study, even though he passed matric. It was also unsettling to hear about his earlier experiences of racism in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences where this module was presented. Students actively engaged with him during the class discussion and were interested to know how he dealt with his own disadvantage of the past, since there is still so much inequality in society today that has not been addressed in the new political dispensation. The staff member acknowledged this fact, but said that he focused on creating opportunities for his own children and family, and that he is not bitter about the past. In fact, he noticed that there are people who were disadvantaged in the past but are now in positions of power and who discriminate against him. He encouraged students to work for social justice in a constructive way. Students valued his preparedness to engage with them on such a sensitive topic. This brought a further dimension into the class discussion that was not covered by the formal curriculum.

In the next phase of the module, students had to identify their communities’ most pertinent socio-economic issues in tutorial discussions and essays, after which they had to evaluate whether these socio-economic issues were still consequences of the past. Subsequently, they were introduced to two different definitions of democracy (Figure 4) that would form the basis of their tutorial videos later in the module:



**Figure 4:** Two alternating bilingual slides explaining two different understandings of democracy

### Educational Rationale for Tutorial Videos

As mentioned earlier, the research questions in this study seek to establish how EDP students used the multilingual concepts at their disposal for meaning-making in the 2017 module, and secondly, how their multilingual oral discussions during lectures and in tutorials contributed to knowledge construction and enriching the curriculum content. To answer the research questions, it was important to collect qualitative data that could be closely examined to identify common themes for the data analysis.

For their second last tutorial assessment of the fourth term, students could choose either a written or an oral assessment. This flexibility was built into the assessment schedule to make provision for students' individual assessment preferences and unique talents.

Much prior preparation went into the tutorial videos that were developed by the Division for Telematic Services at Stellenbosch University. Funding had to be secured to pay for the project months before the fourth term started. It was also quite cumbersome to arrange video timeslots around the specific topics the 55 student participants chose for oral assessment.

The tutorial topics included the TRC, the different definitions of democracy, attitudes of the community, the value of the mother tongue to empower students, and racism.<sup>4</sup> In their written and oral tutorial assessments, students were encouraged to make a link between their communities' socio-economic issues and the different definitions of democracy.

In the first tutorial video (the only case study that will be discussed in more detail below), it was noteworthy that students were able to use the multilingual technical terminology about the TRC effortlessly. They responded to the following questions that arose in the weekly lectures and tutorial discussions:

- Do you feel that we have done enough in our country to work for national reconciliation after the TRC?
- What have been our biggest achievements that can still inspire us today and what must we still work on?
- Are politicians using the past as an excuse for bad service delivery and poor governance or are most of our problems today still consequences of the past?
- Have we managed to get rid of racism, sexism and xenophobia? If not, what should be done to deal effectively with the consequences of the past?

The following is an approximate transcription of students' spontaneous oral contributions in this specific video. The original 20-minute video can also be accessed on request.

### **Tutorial Video Topic: Dealing with the Consequences of the Past Today**

- Student 1 (E): We expect too much from government. The TRC has achieved a lot, but it did not address economic inequality, education and crime.

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of how the tutorial topic of racism was handled in the module, see Jonker (2020, 237–49).

- Student 2 (A): Die doel van die WVK was om skending van menseregte reg te stel sodat mense 'n gemeenskap kon vorm. Maar dit was geforseer. Mense kan nie geforseer word om te vergewe nie. (The purpose of the TRC was to redress human rights violations so that people could form a community. But it was forced upon people. People cannot be forced to forgive.)
- Student 3 (E): The focus of the TRC was on crimes against humanity and gross violations of human rights, not on socio-economic justice. I think ordinary citizens should have continued the unfinished work of the TRC, such as the unequal education system, the land issue, poor infrastructure, etc. We now know about substantive democracy, so we can insist on greater socio-economic equality. Uneducated people in my coloured suburb do not know about the TRC anymore. They just see the inequality and poor infrastructure.
- Student 1 (E): Some people have the attitude that if the government does nothing, we shall also not do anything. People now expect the government to solve all their problems, but the TRC dealt with injustices that had been there for decades. So it is not fair to expect the government to solve all the problems in such a short time.
- Student 3 (E): Ordinary people were in favour of retributive justice. They wanted perpetrators to be punished. They were not in favour of restorative justice. But it was as if it was expected of us. We did not have a reconciliation within ourselves. But the TRC and the government had the final say.
- Student 4 (E): I agree that restorative justice was forced onto ordinary people, which makes it difficult for them to reconcile with themselves and with others. Ordinary people do not feel that justice was done.
- Student 5 (E): The government chose restorative justice to enable a peaceful transition. We must remember that the country was very unstable at the time.
- Student 2 (A): Vergeldende geregtigheid sou beter wees vir Suid-Afrika. Lande soos Duitsland het vergeldende geregtigheid gebruik en nou is rassisme in die samelewing taboe. Dit het 'n grondige fondasie gelê. Ons sou baie beter af gewees het met vergeldende geregtigheid as dit kom by rassisme en seksisme. (Retributive justice would have been better for South Africa. Countries like Germany used retributive justice and now racism is taboo in that society. It laid a solid foundation. We would have been much better off with retributive justice when it comes to racism and sexism.)
- Student 6 (E): Most of our problems today are the consequences of the past. Some people are so negatively influenced by the past that they are not prepared to trust new political parties.



- Student 2 (A): Politici moenie die verlede gebruik om swak regering te regverdig nie. Ons moet leer uit die verlede en nie dieselfde foute herhaal nie. Daar moet beleid in plek gestel word om 'n herhaling van die foute te voorkom. (Politicians should not use the past to justify poor governance. We must learn from the past so that we do not repeat the same mistakes. To make sure that we do not repeat the same mistakes today, we need to adopt policies.)
- Student 7 (E): It is bad when people have a mentality of fear. SA has unrealistic expectations from government. Ordinary citizens can still make a difference today. Political and economic issues of the past can be resolved today.
- Student 1 (E): Perhaps it is greed that motivates politicians now, since they never had access to power and money in the past.
- Student 2 (A): Mense is van nature gierig. (People are greedy by nature.)
- Student 8 (E): There is anger that has remained about apartheid and that anger is transferred from generation to generation, so that people will not find reconciliation within themselves until the inequality is addressed.
- Student 2 (A): Dis 'n bose kringloop. Mense glo die waardes wat hul ouers aan hul oordra. So as jou ouers negatief is, gaan hulle jou negatief maak. (It is a vicious circle. People believe in the values that their parents inculcate in them. So, if your parents are negative, they will make you negative.)
- Student 5 (E): I know it was not the TRC's role to solve all our problems, but because we were placed in different categories in the past, we are still struggling to deal with that today.
- Student 9 (E): Although there are still parents who raise their children to discriminate, we have made a lot of progress in addressing racism, sexism and xenophobia.
- Student 3 (E): We are too sensitive about racism, sexism and xenophobia in social media. Sometimes comments are light-hearted and should not be taken seriously.
- Student 2 (A): Ek het 'n ander standpunt. Ons moet fyngvoelig wees oor kwetsende aanmerkings al neem ons nie self aanstoot nie. Anders gee mens die persoon wat die aanmerkings maak, die indruk dat dit in orde is. (I have a different opinion here. We need to be sensitive about offensive remarks even if we do not personally take offence. Otherwise one gives the person making the remarks the impression that it is okay).
- Student 10 (E): People are ignorant and must be conscientised, educated and punished for racism, sexism and xenophobia.

- Student 4 (E): Just as you spread hate, you can spread love. As university students, we can play a positive role to say positive things about other races, sexes and foreigners. We do not have to spread hate.

## Discussion and Findings

Thematic analysis was used to identify common themes in the transcripts of students' oral contributions. The qualitative data yielded themes and ideas that came up repeatedly.

While a few of the students had appreciation for what the TRC did, the majority felt that retributive justice would have been better for the country. It was clear that students had more confidence to express their true feelings about the TRC and to what extent it dealt with the past when they engaged with one another in the small-group tutorials without the physical presence of a lecturer. One explanation for this observation can be that some might still feel (as one student mentioned) that they have to be grateful for the TRC since the older generation expects it of them. Furthermore, South Africans who witnessed the TRC process and the transition to democracy have tended to glorify the TRC, Nelson Mandela and the struggle stalwarts whose negotiations at CODESA paved the way for the TRC process. The choice for restorative justice has rarely been criticised by witnesses of the TRC and the transition to democracy. However, the dialogue in the tutorials based on students' real-life experiences illustrated that there are serious questions in their communities about the extent to which restorative justice has managed to reconcile South Africans. Students also had their doubts about the extent to which restorative justice has helped victims of apartheid to reconcile with themselves.

The research questions in this study sought to establish how EDP students used the multilingual concepts at their disposal for meaning-making in the module, and secondly, how their multilingual oral engagement in the course contributed to knowledge construction and enriching the curriculum content. What emerged from the qualitative data in the oral tutorial videos discussed above is that students managed to apply the theoretical concepts of the textbook glossary practically in the tutorial discussions. They were able to use the multilingual concepts for meaning-making and to validate their real-life experiences in their communities. In their engagement with their fellow students, the lecturer and the tutors, they were able to make unique contributions to knowledge construction based on their authentic experiences in their communities.

This study illustrated that the vernacular literacies of EDP students can play a constructive and innovative role in creating epistemological *and* ontological access in higher education. Epistemological access is created by developing multilingual technical terminology in a subject field. By acquiring multilingual concept literacy, students are empowered to contribute to knowledge construction in the subject field from their own life experiences and worldviews, that is, the ontological dimension of teaching and learning. While many transformation efforts in higher education have focused narrowly on formal access, for the authentic transformation and decolonisation

of higher education environments, it is vital that both epistemological and ontological access are created. This study found that a dialogic mode of teaching in which multilingualism plays a central role and that takes students' vernacular literacies seriously could make some contribution to achieve this goal.

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