Chapter 2

An epistemic death or wrong perceptions? Power dynamics and complexities in theological learning spaces

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Abstract

This chapter is based on self-reflection and draws on the notion of 'locating regimes' and 'moving methodologies' to discuss the complexities of learning spaces in theological education. I argue that disconnections deserve the same attention as connections which create networks for learning spaces. I further contend that paying attention to the power dynamics that shape the learning environment has the potential to configure dominant multiple forms of subordination and exclusion. By reflecting on a personal journey of theological studies, the contribution identifies opportunities for contextual engagement on challenges which present an epistemological crisis by creating disconnections.

The study interrogates students' perceptions and concludes by engaging with contextual challenges of migration, climate change and substance abuse to highlight how learners can use their personal experiences to critically engage in the learning spaces. As part of critical reflection on the interface of curriculum and pedagogy as presented at the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria, the contribution highlights the significance of inclusive and non-hierarchical pedagogical relations in and beyond the classroom. It provides some theoretical considerations on power dynamics that take place in the classroom. In acknowledging that students come into learning spaces with

a wealth of experiences from their lives and communities, we disrupt power dynamics in those learning spaces and level the learning field so that status, power, gender and other complexities are no longer the determining factor for participation and thereby create a conducive environment for new knowledge.

Introduction

> 'If they ask me to present something, I will die.' (International Summer School, female student, 12 July 2022, Lesvos, Greece)

I started drafting this contribution while attending an international summer school on 'Cultures, Migrations and Borders' organised by the University of Aegean on the Greek Island of Plomari, Lesvos from 5 to 14 July 2022.[1] I presented a paper and decided to stay for the two weeks duration of the programme and this allowed me to engage with post-graduate students from different backgrounds. Most of the participants were drawn from Europe and the majority were students from the field of anthropology conducting research for master's and PhD projects. There was one student from Portugal whose grandparents once lived in southern Africa and had an interest in learning more from me about the colonial past. She kept saying to me, 'I am not an anthropologist and if I am asked to say anything, I will die'. During our conversations, I explained to her that I was also not an anthropologist and observed how she was actively engaging outside of the class because she was informed about global issues. However, I did not understand why she was not keen to talk during lecture lessons and later asked her why she thought she would die if she was asked to make any presentation in class.

1 For more details, see; https://www.sah.aegean.gr/en/events/9th-international-postgraduate-summer-school-cultures-migrations-borders-plomari-lesvos-july-4–14-2022/.

Her explanation was simply that she was not an 'anthropologist'. It became clear to me that when she heard some presenters state that they were 'anthropologists', she felt incompetent to engage in 'such an academic space with learned people'. I had difficulty understanding how it is that we can all attend a summer school as learners and scholars from diverse and interdisciplinary backgrounds but discover that some of us feel incompetent to engage. Although this experience happened within the discipline of anthropology, this reminded me of some experiences in theological studies. Having been a student in theology, I remembered how I often felt incompetent and sometimes uncomfortable engaging with those who called themselves 'theologians' – I felt that I was not at the level of engaging with them. I then concluded that there were power dynamics that came with status or background and intersected with other complexities to distort the learning environment and I decided to interrogate ways in which these complexities could disrupt learning spaces.

Just as I did, the majority of students training for ministry often approach theological studies with misconceptions that are prevalent in society. People may ask you about Bible verses because they know you study the Bible, but after studying theology one realises that it is not all theological students who major in biblical studies. This is contrary to the perception that theological students know the Bible. Admitting that one does not know where to find Bible verses after graduating with a degree in theology does not present us as good theologians, so we often have to act like we know where to find scriptures - even if we have to google for some answers. Looks like this is one of our pedagogical dilemmas. Put simply – our missional theology is not as practical in class as lay people think. Practical theology is not practical during lectures, nor missiology all that missional – although we do study prayerfully. Missional and practical theology as an academic discipline needs to address pedagogical and theoretical considerations on power dynamics that take place in the classroom so that mission is 'contextual and transformed' (Bosch, 1991).

Bosch (1991) introduced us to the concept of 'transforming mission' and succinctly mentions 'paradigm shifts in theology of mission' as a reminder that contemporary churches and global missions should constantly be aware of the shifts which take place due to several contextual factors such as politics, conflict, modernity, globalisation and environmental crises induced by climate change. 'These paradigm shifts challenge us to do things differently and to let a fresh generation of leaders and thinkers take new initiatives' (Fagerli et al., 2012:8). This contribution is a critical reflection on the interface of curriculum and pedagogy as presented at the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria and highlights the significance of inclusive and non-hierarchical pedagogical relations in and beyond the classroom.

Given that this volume aims to ' inform the current practical theological and missiological curriculum,' the chapter's contributions focus on pedagogical settings within the curriculum and address how learners should engage with instructors through faculty research themes. Paying attention to learning and communication barriers should shift from traditional approaches to inspire transformative engagement with students and local communities. As such, theological education has a significant role to play in responding to these paradigm shifts.

The reflection on the encounter with a student in Greece is intended to highlight some of the misconceptions within the discipline of theological studies. Here is another reason: I still remember vividly the first days of my experiences in one of my first lectures during my undergraduate studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg years back. I had come from a spiritually vibrant youth ministry where we had learned and practised deep Christian spirituality in which we encouraged each other to pray without ceasing. Then boom! – when I was attending a theological class, I happened to be the only one who carried a Bible into the classroom (some may have brought electronic versions on laptops and phones). I also noticed that there was no prayer conducted

to constitute and close the lecture – all these were wrong perceptions which I brought into the academic space. I had to deal with an epistemological crisis which arose from my initial experiences, especially after a lecture on African Traditional Religion (ATR) where the professor spoke on 'How Africans worship Ancestors'. There was so much to learn about African spirituality and understanding the African context, but my misconceptions almost ruined the learning experiences.

Like the student I met in Greece, I felt like I would die! I had to deal with an epistemological crisis. It felt as if my faith was being tested and challenged. But as I look in retrospect, I am glad that I studied theology at a liberal university and not at a seminary. I needed to grow by engaging with other religions and not just defend the Christian faith outside the module in Christian apologetics. I needed to develop the skills of thinking critically and engaging constructively within the academic learning environment. I had come with wrong perceptions and nobody prepared me for theological studies at university. I brought the misconceptions into class with all the perceptions inherited from my community and this almost ruined an otherwise exciting fulfilling adventure. What if I withdrew before completing my studies? What if I defended my perceptions and convinced everybody that a theological class should be a 'prayer room'? Maybe I would have died an epistemic death.

I have observed a similar trend with some of my students and they expect me to know everything and do not seem keen to engage in discussions on matters that affect them in society. It could be that they have wrong assumptions or are intimidated by my status as an academic or theologian and these wrong perceptions or power dynamics need to be interrogated.

Theological pedagogy can draw on the notion of 'moving methodologies' to inspire constructive engagement in class. For example, in a volume titled *Moving Methodologies. Doing Practical and Missional Theology in an African Context* (Cilliers, 2022) scholars highlight the need for changes in

the methodologies in practical and missional theology in the African context and have underscored the need to shift from exclusively working within a Western methodological paradigm towards including methodologies more relevant to an African context. The authors provide insights on the need for African scholars to develop moving methodologies for various African communities and settings 'because God is movement'.

Drawing on the related notion of 'methodologies on the move', Amelina, Faist and Nergiz map a new agenda for approaches to migration research to address the question of how empirical research can be contextualized 'and how to deal with national and ethnic categorizations within the empirical studies' (Amelina et al., 2016:2).

Methodologies on the Move outlines an emerging epistemological basis for migration research and is grounded on the multi-sited method of ethnography which provides detailed insights into qualitative and quantitative research designs by presenting 'innovative data collection methods on geographic and virtual mobility, and on cross-border social practices' (Amelina et al., 2016:8). This is another example of how 'moving methodologies' present a shift from exclusively working within a Western methodological paradigm towards including methodologies more relevant to an African context.

In the sections that follow, I use the notion of location regimes to discuss the factors which influence power dynamics in learning spaces and explore how we can draw from our experiences to create safe learning spaces. I will also explore the key interlocutors and complexities in the location or dislocation of learning space and draw on contextual challenges of migration, climate change and substance abuse to highlight how students can use their personal experiences to constructively engage and meaningfully contribute to the learning spaces and disrupt power dynamics on status, power, gender and other complexities.

These are the important questions to be answered:

- What are the factors which influence power dynamics in learning spaces and how can these create safe learning spaces?
- What are the key interlocutors and complexities in the location or dislocation of learning spaces?

Factors which influence power dynamics in learning spaces

There is a need for us to interrogate power dynamics in learning spaces as these are often a reflection of what happens in society. For example, in an article titled; 'Inclusive Classrooms: Disrupting Power Dynamics' Iesha Small observed the following:

> Power dynamics ...could be limiting [to] learning potential ... [and] teachers ... may feel uncomfortable talking about equity; we don't want to be political; we just want to teach! But ... realised during ... 14 years in the classroom that education is inherently political. It can be withheld for political reasons, and educational access and outcomes have historically been, and still are, impacted by gender, sexuality, ethnicity, family income, disability and special educational needs ... Power dynamics in schools are similar to those in wider society, [and] in wider society there are a number of groups who automatically wield more power. (Small, 2022:1)

It is important to realise that power dynamics in learning spaces reflect a wider society. By implication, it is possible that African learning spaces can mirror the patriarchal nature of the African male-dominated communities. I have observed that there are more female students than male students in most classes within the Faculty of Theology and Religion. In contrast, we have more male teaching staff as compared to a few females. The same is also true when we look at racial representation, there are more black students and fewer black

teaching staff. Therefore, the impact of race, gender, sexuality, status and student backgrounds will have implications for the power dynamics at play. Small (2022:2) suggests two ways to disrupt differences in power and status within the classroom to ensure a more inclusive environment.

- Learning in pairs and small groups, for example, discussion boards and group exercises where there are clearly outlined ground rules for engaging. Such rules can disrupt power dynamics.
- Question and answer sessions where learners are encouraged to engage by simply asking, 'Who haven't I spoken to properly today?' or 'Who hasn't said anything today?'

Small's observations are in line with those from a 2006 study conducted by Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, which showed:

> [The] many complex ways in which power relations based on race, class, gender, disability and sexual orientation played out...and how these dynamics directly influenced the teaching and learning process.
>
> ...The positionality of the teachers and learners, in particular the racial category of whiteness, emerged as a key power relationship mediating classroom dynamics. We suggest that the facilitation model of teaching does not account well for these dynamics and that further efforts are needed to better understand how societal power relations affect teaching and learning efforts and what responses... educators can make to negotiate these issues. (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2006:1)

The complexity of the ways in which power relations based on race, class, gender, disability and sexual orientation in learning spaces needs to be explored as a way to contextualise and decolonise education within the African context. This is particularly important in order to interrogate and disrupt the positionality of the teachers and learners, in particular the

racial category of whiteness, which emerged as one of the key power relationships mediating classroom dynamics in this study. Given that power relations are based on race, class, gender, disability and sexual orientation in learning spaces, there is a need for us to explore more ways in which learners and learning facilitators can negotiate these intersecting issues. In some cases, power dynamics have to do with 'conformity to mainstream norms, which [can be] explained in terms of limitations in most teachers training in dealing with diversity' (Sidky, 2017:187).

Lee and Schaller (cited in Sidky, 2017:187) emphasise that 'it was not the teacher alone who could determine the quality of relationships she established with her students'; rather, these relationships are affected by 'the greater society and program context, the course, the teacher, and the students'. Is that notion of the teacher as the major source of power identical to that of being paternalistic? Being paternalistic was always justified on the teacher's part as being for the student's benefit. However, do teachers have the right to decide what is good for the students? Should it be a top-down decision or one that is negotiated (Bakhtin et al., cited in Sidky, 2017:187)?

There is a need for intentionality when it comes to establishing relationships and addressing the complexity of learning spaces so that the context is taken seriously and learners are involved in decisions that affect them. For example, some scholars, such as Townes (2015), have acknowledged the intersectionality which constitutes the complex aspects of factors that contribute to complexities surrounding the marginalisation of women. In the American context, womanist theologians have also highlighted issues of racism, classism, sexism, sexual orientation, and the various ways in which these trajectories impinge on African American women's lives (Weems, 2003).

Locations and epistemology in learning spaces

This contribution approaches location regimes as 'knowledge systems or culture that calibrates the relative value, significance and meaning of locations' (University of Helenski, 2017:1) to argue that disconnections are as important as networks or connections which embody multiple forms of power, subordination and exclusion in learning spaces. By using these notions to reflect on student learning, the contribution highlights the significance of shifts in relative location and sheds light on power dynamics in relations, separations or disconnections that are established as people located in different contexts within the learning environment.

There are various themes and concepts which have informed responses to various contextual realities in which theology has an important role to play. For example, theological students can engage with themes on pressing global issues, such as poverty, unemployment, gender-based violence (GBV), and environmental awareness of climate change. These themes have taken a nuanced approach in dialogue with the prevailing concepts developed by academics in 'specific social locations and political and theological persuasions' (Werner et al., 2013:330). Humanity is at the centre of global knowledge accumulation and the development of academic and community-based responses to these realities will depend on the different contextual articulations and locations, but we are bound together in humanity. As the Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu observed; 'My humanity is bound up with yours, for we can only be human together' (cited in Hong, n.d.:1).

> Our world is diverse in many different ways, including interreligiously Learning to appropriately engage our neighbors of different religious traditions in ways that respect them and honor our differences is part of our Christian witness in our shared world. (Hong, n.d.:1)

Contextual realities in the learning spaces

In the following sections, I will draw on contextual challenges of migration, climate change and substance abuse to highlight how students can use their personal experiences to critically engage in the learning spaces. Acknowledging that students come into learning spaces with their experiences, disrupts power dynamics in those learning spaces and levels the field so that status, power, gender and other complexities are no longer the determining factors for participation. We all have encountered migrants, experienced the effects of climate change and have seen how substance abuse has destroyed lives and families. Therefore, we can all contribute by sharing our experiences.

Migration and the challenge of climate change

There are emerging issues which require urgent attention, such as the environment-induced movement of people due to floods, drought and extreme weather conditions. Students and young people can play an important role in addressing these challenges. There is a myriad of challenges which have created the global crisis in which we find ourselves and there is a need for theological students to further explore the relationship between the movement of people, religion and the environmental crisis and build on the work of scholars such as Anim (2019), Jenkins, Tucker and Grim (2016) and Korchide & Binay (2019), and some scholars are interested in the potential intersections in relationships between Christian or religious practices and environmental destruction, ecological and economic (in)justice and/or environmental sustainability (Oikos Study Group, 2006) and some have explored religion as a resource of ecological praxis and ethos (Altner, 1998), and the relationship between religion and anthropogenic climate change. These themes provide opportunities for students to engage in post-graduate research.

Migration is one area of research which continues to dominate global political and socio-economic debates as more migrants and refugees flee regions with political

instability, and locals are forced to move in search of safer living conditions for themselves and their families. The plight of displaced people has been escalated by the poor global responses to COVID-19 which affected lockdowns and restricted movement of people. Although these measures were intended to limit the spread of the virus, enforcing social distancing measures without considering the plight of the poor migrant communities tended to be inhuman. For example, Mpofu (2022) lamented political 'demagoguing' and the exploitation of poor families affected by the COVID-19 lockdown and observed how the mission of the church shifted to the margins and posited as follows:

> [T]he post-COVID-19 church should emerge as a church whose mission is God's mission (*missio Dei*) not merely the activities of the church where the poor are marginalised and exploited by the rich and powerful. Solidarity with the poor should be the essence of being church. (Mpofu, 2020:4)

In South Africa, the government has moved to stifle migration, and since 2018 the government has located the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) within the security cluster alongside justice, police, military and correctional services. A white paper on international migration proposed that migration legislation and policy should be clustered together with national security. This came with stringent measures aimed at restricting migration to highly skilled people or capital and thereby criminalising certain forms of migration. In essence, the passing of the Border Management Agency Bill by Parliament led to the creation of a centralised authority with sweeping powers over South Africa's ports of entry, including policing and customs. This bill has now been implemented and there is a need for studies interrogating how these policies will facilitate transformation within the context of justice protecting the livelihoods of cross-border traders.

Theology has an important role to play in mitigating the impact of livelihoods for displaced families by mobilising communities through life-affirming practices and values. In southern Africa, migration studies have tended to be devoid

of engagement with the religious experiences of migrants and refugees and religion is often mentioned in passing (See Carmona, 2010 and Nyamazana et al., 2017). Political instability, wars, famine and environmental crisis create a range of socio-political, public policy, and ethical challenges for governments, relief organisations and faith communities concerned with the care of migrants and refugees as they 'seek to balance the needs of their indigent and settler-migrants' (Carens, 2013, Wellman & Cole, 2011).

The role of theology in mitigating substance use disorder

One of the growing challenges among young people in South Africa and the world is substance abuse. Substance abuse disorders hurt family members and we must understand the implications of these effects so that we can develop plans for effective interventions and treatment (Sarkar et al., 2016:7). As communities and researchers, we can 'motivate and catalyse action in response to this disaster, and we must do so' (Sarkar et. al., 2016:9).

Substance abuse has a wide range of consequences for the substance abusers, families and communities. Patterns of behaviour are generated and propagated through various locations and dislocations as families break apart and re-unite under circumstances driven by substance abuse. Family systems often function as support networks that can be useful in addressing addiction to drugs and other substances.

Adolescent drug usage typically begins with nicotine from cigarettes, and it progresses to the usage of alcoholic beverages and illegal narcotics. Initially, the use of narcotics may be restricted to weekends only. However, later on, use may begin during the week, but only at night. Adolescents learn that if they use the drug, they will get the feeling they want every time. They learn to regulate the amount of medicine they consume to control the intensity of this feeling. They can either use the drug or leave it at this point and because drug usage is frequently done with friends, this stage is sometimes referred to as 'social use' (Milhorn,

1994:6). Alcohol's impact on individuals has a ripple effect on communities and has a wide range of serious consequences. For example, the depressive effect on drivers reduces reaction time and makes driving after drinking any amount of alcohol, regardless of the legal limit, very dangerous. At first, a person who has used alcohol may feel at ease, but the effects of the alcohol will impact aspects of life.

Alcohol abuse also leads to chronic brain conditions marked by neurobiological abnormalities that result in a compulsion to consume a substance and a loss of control over drug consumption. It is defined by the compulsive use of drugs and an inability to stop using them despite the negative consequences of doing so. Despite substantial health, economic, career, legal, spiritual, and social ramifications, a person with an addiction is unable to cease the behaviour, whether it is drinking, doing drugs, or anything else (Crowley et al., 2014:27).

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG)[2] has observed that alcohol, marijuana, nicotine, and *nyaope* or *whoonga* are among the most commonly consumed substances in this country. Although there is no such thing as magic when it comes to treating substance misuse and addiction, patients and their families can get support. Substance abuse is one of our generation's most pressing public health issues and students have an important role to play in addressing this scourge. The latest global data on substance abuse, misuse, and disorders shows that the problem is worsening, and the consequences are becoming more lethal than ever as there was an increased usage of substances during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., see Abramson, 2021). It is, therefore, critical that youth are involved in learning spaces seeking to find solutions and develop intervention strategies.

2 For more details see; https://www.sadag.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2918&Itemid=412 (Accessed 08 August 2022).

Theological studies can equip students with skills to critically engage on challenges regarding substance abuse. They can do this by using analytical skills to identify substance abuse challenges in their local communities. They also can draw from their own experiences from peer interactions. When students know that their context, experiences and different localities constitute a wealthy pool of academic resources, they will not feel less important in lecture rooms. They will engage with confidence knowing that nobody is better placed and equipped to address the challenge of substance abuse among youth than they are. Their experiences make them experts in the field and they can make relevant contributions to academia to develop intervention strategies which are relevant and contextual. Students can help to equip community leaders with the skills to approach the challenges of substance abuse.

Epistemological crisis

One way in which learning spaces can be configured is when we are always ready to learn from each other and acknowledge that truth is relative. Baghramian et al.support this view and notes:

> [R]elativism, is the view that truth and falsity, right and wrong, standards of reasoning, and procedures of justification are products of differing conventions and frameworks of assessment and that their authority is confined to the context giving rise to them. (Baghramian et al., 2020:1)

This observation underscores the idea that our contexts and experiences are critical components of the learning process. Therefore, it is the task of each student to listen and engage constructively, even with conflicting ideas, so that we learn and grow.

One of the reasons that I am writing this contribution is to clarify, in simple terms, that theological studies at a liberal academic institution shouldn't be confused as a discipline that has solutions for all societal challenges. This is why we

engage in interdisciplinary studies. Therefore, we need to address misconceptions regarding the intersections between theology as an academic discipline and the importance of interdisciplinarity as a way of enhancing contextual and relevant participation in the mission of God. Within the learning environment, this implies that people ought to be open to learning and building relationships which foster fellowship. As Breed and Semenya observed: learning spaces should facilitate 'fellowship, sharing, partnership, participation, and communion' in unison as the Holy Spirit unites us with God in ways that help us develop 'sociological unity, theological and ontological unity' (Breed & Semenya, 2015:6).

As we listen to each other, this becomes an expression of participation in the *missio Dei* and we also discern the work of the Holy Spirit and partner with God in responding to contextual challenges in the examples that I have highlighted. We do all this through a hermeneutical understanding that there is diversity and this diversity is an 'asset that could enhance the well-being of everyone if every person or every group contributes their unique gifts for the good of all creation' (Breed & Semenya, 2015:7).

Conclusion

This chapter was based on self-reflection and drew on the notion of 'locating regimes' and professional experience in theological education to highlight lessons for students engaged in Practical Theology and Mission Studies. The author also draws on student experiences to reflect on a personal journey of theological studies and identifies opportunities in the face of challenges which come with theological training particularly for students training for ministry. The study concluded by engaging with contextual challenges of migration, climate change and substance abuse to highlight how learners can use their personal experiences to critically engage in the learning spaces as a way to disrupt power dynamics and level the learning field so that status, gender

and other complexities are no longer the determining factors for participation in learning.

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