cultural science

Owning your emotions or sentimental navel-gazing: *Digital storytelling with South African pre-service student educators*

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Abstract

Literature argues that for post-conflict pedagogies to facilitate student engagement across difference it requires emotional engagement with the subject. However, how to achieve such emotional engagement, without falling into the trap of sentimentality, is an area that is under-researched. This paper reflects on conversations with South African students in a final year pre-service teacher-training programme, who developed digital stories as a vehicle for student engagement across difference. Applying 'critical emotional reflexivity' (Zembylas 2011) as an analytical framework, we found that students described the digital storytelling process as opening up different ways of being with/for the 'Other' and allowing them to start questioning cherished beliefs and assumptions about the 'Other'. However, they had difficulties in placing themselves in a bigger historical and socio-cultural context. Furthermore, the specific set-up of the project made it difficult to track lasting social change within students, the fourth element of Zembylas' theoretical framework. Findings also confirmed the potential of digital stories to lead to sentimentality and 'passive empathy' (Boler 1999), characterised by pity from the part of the privileged observer and resentment from the subjugated storyteller. We recommend adding a historical-political analysis of previous students' stories to the digital storytelling process in order to help students deconstruct positions premised on the existence of clearly differentiated identities and to consciously create spaces where a reflection on the emotions students encountered while sharing and listening to their stories can be facilitated.

Keywords: digital storytelling, digital stories, critical emotional reflexivity, emotions, sentimentality, empathy, South Africa, Higher Education

Introduction

While over the last 18 years racial integration has happened in many Higher Education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa, social, class and cultural integration among students are lagging behind (Jansen 2004; Pattman 2010). Bringing students together into integrated environments of learning is not enough to break down deeply rooted beliefs and assumptions that impact on students' conscious or unconscious choice of social engagements (Jansen 2010; Soudien 2012).

Authors such as Boler or Zembylas suggest that to overcome these barriers to an engagement across difference, in particular in post-conflict societies such as South Africa, one needs to acknowledge the politics of emotions that govern our classrooms. They argue that research around emotions in learning and teaching largely view emotions as private, individual and internal states of being (Zembylas 2007; Zembylas 2011; Zembylas 2005). Crucially, this focus fails to acknowledge the role of emotions in a broader historical and socio-cultural context, as a site of social control but also of political resistance (Boler 1999).

One way to facilitate this engagement across difference and to unearth students' historically situated and culturally mediated lived experiences is the telling of stories (Aveling 2006). A digital story, which in this study is defined as a first person's narrative, combining voice, sound and images into a short video, is such a tool. Digital stories originate directly from participants lived experiences and often deal with significant episodes in somebody's lives. Hence, the digital storytelling process tends to be emotional. Joe Lambert (2010, v), founder of the Center for Digital Storytelling makes a bold statement in the introduction to his 'Digital Storytelling Cookbook': 'The students that share their stories in our circles recognize a metamorphosis of sorts, a changing, that makes them feel different about their lives, their identities.' But do they really? Critical voices warn against the danger of 'sentimentality of digital stories', arguing that it promotes 'individualistic, and naively unselfconscious accounts of personal stories' (Hartley and McWilliam 2009, 14). The danger of this sentimentality (Zembylas 2008; 2011), which can reside in both the teller and the listener of stories, especially when storytellers and their audience are from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, lies in the risk of desensitization of the story listener and feelings of defensiveness and resentment in the storyteller, leading to a re-affirmation of established beliefs and assumptions as opposed to change and transformation within students. Authors such as Zembylas (2008) or Boler (1999) argue that only through 'critical emotional reflexivity', reflecting on the emotions experienced in these encounters across difference, theorizing students stories and placing them in a wider socio-political and historic-economic context, can this sentimentality be avoided.

This paper critically examines a digital storytelling project at a Western Cape Higher Education institution (HEI). In this project final year students in a pre-service teacher-

training programme reflected on their journeys' towards becoming teachers, using the process of digital storytelling. This process led to the release of explosive emotions among students and facilitators. The particular focus of this paper is to explore whether or not the particular digital storytelling model adopted for this study, closely aligned with the model developed by the Center for Digital Storytelling, allowed students to develop 'critical emotional reflexivity', necessary to transform students' engagement across differences or whether it promoted sentimentality, merely re-affirming individual student assumptions and contributing to further polarization in the classroom (Zembylas 2007, xiii).

Sentimentality in students' trauma stories

There is a growing interest in the literature regarding the use of pedagogical practices that unsettle established beliefs and assumptions and confront students with the power structures that impact on their engagement with each other (do Mar Pereira 2012). South African authors such as Bozalek (2011), Hemson, Moletsane, and Muthukrishna (2001); Jansen (2009) and Soudien (2012) readily agree that for real transformation within students to happen, issues of difference cannot be addressed on a cognitive or intellectual level alone, but require emotional engagement with the subject.

Allowing space in the classroom for emotional engagement across differences is not an easy task. Many educators shy away from difficult topics such as race and privilege, for fear that emotions may surface, be they bitterness, anger, resentment or real pain (Burbules 2004). There is also a dearth in the literature on how to engage with emotions in a manner which avoids sentimentality. Zembylas (2011: 20, emphasis added) argues that sentimentalizing emotions in trauma narratives - and more recent research into the experiences of racism suggests that racism may in itself be a traumatic experience and my for example cause post-traumatic stress disorder (Chou, Asnaani, and Hofmann 2012) – can lead to:

> *first, a sentimental reaction by students who identify with privilege and respond defensively yet feel uncomfortable and guilty, fearing that they will be exposed as immoral by refusing to bear any longer a population's collective suffering; second, an intense resentment by those who feel subordinated and may eventually get stuck in victim politics; and third, the desensitization of the student-spectators who get irritated by the scenes of suffering in some way, refuse engagement with it or minimize its effects, misread it conveniently, and reduce it to a few pedantic phrases.*

To counter this sentimental reaction, it is necessary for students to enter a space of 'critical emotional reflexivity' (Zembylas 2008), a process of using emotions as catalysts, to allow the questioning of beliefs and assumptions, exposing privilege and comfort zones, with the aim of learners finding new ways of being with the 'Other', and ultimately

leading to the transformation of 'relationships, practices, and enactments that benefit teaching and learning for peace, mutual understanding, and reconciliation' (Zembylas 2011, 2).

Digital storytelling to engage with the 'Other'

In this study we developed a digital storytelling model closely aligned with the one promoted by the Centre of Digital Storytelling (CDS) in Berkeley, California (Lambert 2010; 2009). The CDS has its roots in the community arts movement, which is strongly situated within a social change framework (Lambert 2009). A digital story is defined as a personal narrative, which combines voice, sound and images, into a short video (Lambert 2010).

The CDS' model of creating digital stories is specific and involves a workshop run over several days, in which participants collaboratively develop their stories. The communal sharing of stories is the main element in the process of digital storytelling, which is called the 'story circle' (Lambert 2010). One of the seven steps that define the CDS workshop process is 'owning your emotions' (Lambert 2013: 57). Lambert maintains that by listening to and sharing these often complex, 'big emotions', that surface especially in the story circle, one can start make meaning of one's own story and help the audience 'understand the journey contained within this story' (p. 57).

Consequently, the product of this workshop is an individual account that 'can often be confessional, moving, and express troubles as well as triumphs…' (Hartley and McWilliam 2009: 4). This authenticity has been one of the most powerful elements of digital stories, leading to intense emotional engagement both by the author and the audience of a digital story, as Burgess argues (2006: 210):

> *Somewhat paradoxically from a critical perspective, it is the very qualities that mark digital stories as uncool, conservative, and ideologically suspect – 'stock' tropes, nostalgia, even sentimentality – that give them the power of social connectivity, while the sense of authentic self-expression that they convey lowers the barriers to empathy.*

However more critical voices warn against the danger of 'sentimentality of digital stories', contending that it promotes 'individualistic, and naively unselfconscious accounts of personal stories' (Hartley and McWilliam 2009: 14). Hartley and McWilliam for example call for everyone involved in digital stories to 'maintain a reflexive and critical attitude within a supportive and human purpose' (2009: 15). Lambert himself warns of an 'exaggerated tug on emotions' which can be read as dishonesty (p.58). However, there is little critical engagement in the literature on how to manage or engage with this fine balancing act between 'owning your emotions' and 'sentimentalising your story'.

While there are studies exploring the interplay between emotional and cognitive labour through digital storytelling, such as Oppermann's (2008), Coventry's (2008) and Benmayor's (2008) work, there is a distinct dearth of literature around digital storytelling's risk to promote sentimentality, both in the actual stories and in the audience reaction. While these studies are helpful pointers on how a digital storytelling model complemented by an engagement with critical texts, can facilitate both emotional and cognitive labour, it still does not engage or work with the actual emotional responses of students experienced during and after the workshop, in particular after the often highly emotional moment of the screening of the stories, which marks the end of the digital storytelling process.

One study that starts questioning the benefits of repeatedly sharing trauma stories with a wider audience is Hills' (2010) account of a digital storytelling project on gender-based violence in South Africa. While acknowledging the potential for healing that the digital storytelling process initially afforded Thoko, one of her participants and the importance of sharing these stories for social activism, she reports that:

> *Thoko has noted that being involved with the project "really did help with the healing process," but she has also admitted that, somewhere along the way (as she began to share her stories), it started "rehashing old wounds."… She knew that it "was time to stop" when she began "getting pissed off by the pity looks after I give a presentation," which made her feel "weak and victimized."* (p.136-137).

This comment shows the limits of empathy and the risk of these stories being used for voyeuristic 'consumerism' by a passive audience, who continues to see Thoko as a victim. Hill again suggests, also drawing from Bolers' notion of 'testimonial reading' (1999), that one way of avoiding this 'sentimental reaction' would be to encourage viewers to take note of the emotions that surface while watching a story and reflecting on how they could be socio-culturally constructed.

This study will try to track the emotional journey that students experienced in order to allow us to see whether by opening up highly emotional spaces we achieved what we asked for, namely a pedagogy that has the potential to disrupt students' worldviews and consequently, engagement with the 'Other'. For our intervention to be successful, we would like our students to demonstrate critical emotional reflexivity (Zembylas 2008, 2011, 2012) in their engagement across differences, recognising and reflecting on the emotions experienced in encounters of difference, theorizing their stories and placing them in a wider socio-political and historic-economic context, as opposed to re-affirming existing beliefs and assumptions about the 'Other'.

Background to the study

This study is set within the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences in a South African University of Technology based in Cape Town. In this project 55 students developed teaching portfolios as part of their Professional Studies Course. This digital storytelling project is a complex eight-week project, in which students attend weekly workshops closely aligned with the activities in the CDS workshop model, such as the focus on story circles, and are guided and supported through the process of creating a digital story by a large team of lecturers and student facilitators. The project ends with a screening of the digital stories, to which students invite parents, family, friends, former teachers and other people important in their lives.

Students' demographic composition is highly diverse in terms of gender, age, race and language and students come to this project with varied levels of digital literacies and access to technology (see Table 1).

A series of activities were designed to help students explore their own identity and life trajectory in relation to the wider student population and related issues around race, class and gender. The first activity was based on Nazir Carrim's (2000) 'Who am I' exercise, which promotes the notion that identities are complex, multiple and ever changing, and that some facets of identity are more easily accessible than others. In this activity, students are first asked to list all the different identities they attribute to themselves, then group them along various categories, such as gender, family, ethnicity, social, professional, and compare these among their group members. This activity allows students to get a more nuanced view of their own identity (e.g. they are not only White students, but also daughters, mothers, teachers, South Africans), and to realise that students from different racial backgrounds foreground different identity categories (e.g. while race often does not feature among White students, it is ever present among African students).

Images 1-3: Examples of homogeneous group composition when students choose their own groups

Another activity that students engaged in, was the participatory learning and action technique 'River of Life' (Bozalek 2011), a visual technique in which students identify, draw and share critical incidents along their own life journeys in small groups, allowing students insight into each other's' differently positioned backgrounds. While the identity

exercise was done in students' self-selected groups, which were consequently highly homogeneous in terms of racial, cultural and linguistic background, for the River of Life exercise, student groups were randomly selected to encourage students sharing and engaging with each other outside their existing comfort zones and social engagements.

Images 4-6: Students drawing and sharing their River of Lives

Sharing of students' stories was further promoted during activities through pairing of students during the writing process and through a public screening of the stories at the end of the project[1].

Images 7-9: Students in the process of developing their stories

[1] Examples of digital stories developed in this course can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eyv3Pdy1NLQ&list=PLe5oHsfRWAnSZI0dAWwPRJad-uevbYfII

Table 1: Students' racial, linguistic and gender background

Race	**n**	**%**
Black	11	20%
Coloured[2]	30	55%
White	14	25%
Total	*55*	
Language		
English	35	64%
Afrikaans	9	16%
isiXhosa	11	20%
Total	*55*	
Gender		
Male	17	31%
Female	38	69%
Total	*55*	

Methodology

This study followed an interpretative/critical qualitative research approach. Data were collected through four focus group interviews with students in the project, one week after the final screening. Focus groups were diverse in order to mirror the class set up. In total, 19 self-selected students took part in these conversations, which lasted between one and two hours. We are using the term 'conversations' instead of focus groups to emphasize the informal, loosely structured nature of these interactions. We chose this method of data collection to create a less intimidating, more gratifying and stimulating space for students than is possible, for example, in a one-to-one interview (Madiz 2003). We deliberately kept the groups small to allow a safe space for students to reflect on their emotional engagement in the process of creating, sharing and listening to each other's digital stories. Although self-selected, we aimed to have focus groups that would mirror the diversity of students in the classroom. Some researchers argue that homogeneous focus groups help in particular marginalised students to collect 'collective testimonies and

[2] We are following the South African Department of Education racial categorization distinguishing between African, Coloured, Indian and White students, highly contested, but still widely used (Department of Education 1997). In South African the term 'Coloured' does not have the same connotations as it has in the US or in the UK. The term 'Coloured' in South Africa in general refers to any person of 'mixed-race'. In and around Cape Town, where this is study is set, Coloured stands for 'Cape Coloured' and is used for descendants of the many slaves that were brought in from the Dutch East Indies.

group resistance narratives' (Madiz 2003:365), but we followed Pattmann's argument (2010) that in our case, where we aim to allow engagement across difference, it is important to have conversations in diverse student groups. Following the approach of qualitative data analysis outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), the interviews were then transcribed, searched and organised around emergent themes. The four elements of 'critical emotional reflexivity', as defined by Zembylas (2011), were employed as an analytical framework for this study:

1. a *historical and political understanding of trauma,*

2. an ability to question cherished beliefs and assumptions,

3. the ability to engage in different ways of being with the 'other'

4. to transform relationships with the 'other' in order to lead to peace, mutual understanding, and reconciliation.

Ethical approval was sought through the appropriate institutional channels and students gave informed consent to participate in the study. To foreground the student's voice in this study, we included lengthy quotes in the findings. We see students both as distinctive individuals and embedded in a community of primary importance to them (Henkel 2000, 250–251). The community in this classroom is mainly defined by students' racial and linguistic background. Therefore, where possible, we add for clarification students' gender and racial background to the individual quotes.

Findings and discussion

As we have argued before, we see sentimentality and self-absorbed navel gazing as a potential result of the often highly personal and emotional process of sharing one's own story during a digital storytelling workshop. By exploring students' experiences and perceptions regarding the sharing and listening to life stories, through a 'critical emotional reflexivity' (Zembylas, 2011) framework, this study tried to understand whether this project merely led to an uncritical re-affirmation of existing beliefs and assumptions about the 'Other' or to actual change in students.

In his work 'The politics of trauma' (2011), Zembylas explores this concept of critical emotional reflexivity or, as he refers to in this book, 'critical emotional praxis'. He defines this concept along four dimensions (p. 2, emphasis added):

> *First, critical emotional praxis is grounded in a historical and political understanding of the role of affect in trauma culture and its implications for education. Second, critical emotional praxis consists in the ability to question affectively charged, cherished beliefs, exposing how privileged positions and comfort zones inform the ways in which educators and students recognize what*

and how they have been taught to see/act (or not to see/act) and empowering different ways of being with/for the Other. Finally, critical emotional praxis translates these affective understandings into relationships, practices, and enactments that benefit teaching and learning for peace, mutual understanding, and reconciliation.

The following section will first analyse the conversations among students in the conversations held at the end of the project along the four elements of critical emotional reflexivity and then for potential evidence of sentimentality, as defined by Zembylas (2011).

Different ways of being with/for the Other

Researchers on digital storytelling readily agree that the emotional content of a digital story, its 'emotional authenticity' has the potential to 'touch' people, to allow for personal growth, but also to help engage the audience on a deeper level (Lambert 2010:12). This is also the dominant narrative among the participants in the group. In the focus groups students spoke at length about how the sharing of their stories made them feel vulnerable, but also helped them make sense of their own lives and made their class come together, opened their eyes and hearts to each other's life stories.

The first quote shows the difficult and complex emotional labour this student experienced during the process of creating his digital story:

> *I think the whole project helped us in finding out more who we really are …. during that period when I was doing the River of Life … I mean I started to feel sad because I never knew that I could be emotional in my life. I never realized this - but during this whole process I could see that there was a need for me to cry out, … to let out all the things … It was really a hard experience for me.* (Zandisile - AM[3])

Students also reflected on the importance of sharing their often painful journeys, with colleagues in their class, with whom they had not engaged previously because of their diverse social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds and how this process of sharing helped transform their social engagements by foregrounding their common humanity.

> *… it makes me to talk with people whom I never talked to before and it was worse. I was sharing the story about my life and they are from other cultures and from different backgrounds to mine. So I had to expose everything about my life. It does bring us together because they also expose their lives. I saw - we all have problems - we have different genes, so what….* (Dowayne - CM)

[3] Guide to abbreviations used: C=Coloured, W=White, A=African, M=male, F=female

Most importantly in terms of empowering marginalised students, students referred to the 'healing' power of the communal hearing of stories, that they wouldn't usually hear or share, due to racial and class-based isolation (Delgado 1989). Critical race theorists call these counter-stories (Solorzano and Yosso 2002) and argue that by sharing these stories one can 'challenge social and racial injustice by listening to and learning from experiences of racism and resistance, despair and hope at the margins of society' (Yosso 2006:171).

> *I think the River of Life and the fact that we discussed our stories with the other groups, ja, it's very important …we all have stories to tell and other stories are more severe than others. So to just let it to grow inside, is not good, you need to tell it, so that others can also be healed … because you're not the only one who is going through that phase…when I show my story I get like individuals who say: wow I was touched by your story, but you made me proud. So to have that effect on others, you see, you didn't only heal yourself but you heal others as well because they were touched by your story and that encouraged them, motivated them to go further … because they see me as this individual who has been through a lot, but managed to be where I am today. Ja, I think it's good.* (Shanaaz - CF)

The above quote emphasizes the digital storytelling process' potential as a 'social pedagogy' (Benmayor 2008), a pedagogy that approaches learning as a collaborative process (p. 198), allowing for collaborative and social learning through sharing and disclosure and initiating a 'process of bonding and cross cultural alliance' (p. 198), a process in which 'vulnerability is transformed into pride' (p.199). It also shows the sense of collective responsibility in students for their colleagues' often traumatic experiences and stories, and the opportunity to draw strength from other students' stories of resistance and survival.

Ability to question cherished beliefs and assumptions

An integral part of critical emotional reflexivity is the ability to question deep seated beliefs and assumptions that one holds towards others based on their racial, ethnical or cultural background. In students' responses we found evidence of this as the following quote by a black African student shows:

> *Sometimes you will take people for granted and you think that this person has everything and this person does not have a problem you know and sometimes we always tend to use that race thing and say: I know these white people, they've got everything and they lived life perfectly… but when you compare - with some of my stories when I compare to some of the other people, the white people, I feel like my problem is really small to what this person has experienced and how this person got here.* (Tando - AM)

Students' conversations about the silences in their stories and about the resistance to the digital storytelling process among their peers provide insight into how they started to question some of the power relations that govern their classrooms. In particular the sharing of students' life stories in randomly selected groups, was for many a deeply uncomfortable experience, and seemingly more so within the white student group. When asking students in the focus group about this predominantly white resistance to this process, they argued that certain groups may have more to lose than others. In the following exchange two coloured female students recall an anecdote about a white male in her class:

> *Shanaaz: He said that everyone on campus sees him as like this big man …*
> *Michelle: Funny guy.*
> *Shanaaz: Big funny, like this happy guy on campus - confident. He doesn't want them to know that when he was in high school he was not like that at all. And his insecurities and …*
> *Michelle: Yes I think that was quite interesting when he said that - it's like the first thing that he said - what happens if the people see me in a different way?*

In a similar fashion, this student reports an exchange between her (a coloured female student) and her white colleague:

> *You see I spoke to one student after this viewing of the digital story - a white student and like we were talking about the silence and those things. Like this student said to me: I would never had said that I failed a Grade but I also did. So I said: but that is why I'm here - that is why I'm - this is what made me want to become a teacher, because somebody showed an interest in me. And I said: that is why I put it in my digital story and she said: I would have never said that in front of everyone, that I failed at school.* (Chantelle - CF)

These vignettes point to the complex spoken and unspoken rules concerning which emotions are allowed and which are frowned upon in a classroom, establishing emotions as a site of social control (Boler 1999). It is interesting to note, how certain emotions are socially acceptable among students of a certain racial and cultural background, while they are not accessible to others. However, they also reveal how this project and in particular the focus group discussions, which allowed students the space for conversations across their usual social relationships and comfort zones, started a process, in which assumptions and deeply held beliefs began to crumble and existing power relations and dynamics were revealed and in some cases challenged (Boler 1999; Zembylas 2011).

Students' historical and political understanding

Authors such as Jansen (2009) or Zembylas (2011) contend that for transformation among divided student groups to happen, they need to develop an understanding of how their personal experiences and emotions are situated in a wider socio-historical context. There is ample research to show how difficult this process is for students (Aveling 2006; Benmayor 2008). In the South African context, educators are often surprised at the initial disinterest in conversations about the legacy of their shared history among students, as Nicholls' et al. title of a book chapter poignantly depicts: 'Apartheid was your past, not mine' (2012:73). In similar fashion, in this study only a few students reflected on how their own personal lives were affected by broader socio-political and historical contexts, both in their digital stories and in the conversations we had with them after the project had ended. The following quote is one of the few, in which a student reported how through his peers' personal witness accounts (Zembylas 2007), he could engage with his own history in a different way (Zembylas 2011):

> *I think earlier yesterday I spoke to D's story about apartheid … I told her that it was an eye-opener to me because - I mean like - we didn't go to school up to here … I mean … in first year she was in our class and I was thinking: what is this old lady doing in our class? And only as the time went by you heard her real story …and I told her this morning: it was a big eye-opener for me, because you know, because you always hear about, stories about Apartheid, but not as real as hers was … it was totally an eye-opener….* (Clive - CM)

While one could argue, that an engagement with the legacy of Apartheid might not be as pertinent for the current generation of students, as it might be for us authors - all part of a generation, who lived through those times - the impact of Apartheid can still be felt strongly in today's South Africa. Without an understanding of the systemic inequalities that continue to impact on students' access to each and every aspect of their life, be it housing, transport, schooling, employment or health care, students will lack the ability to move beyond their individual narrative to a broader, more critical view of South Africa's past, present and future. Nicholls et al. (2012:82) suggest that students' avoidance of the topic of Apartheid might be a way of 'defending themselves against the significance of it in present day South Africa, perhaps in an attempt to protect themselves from the complex and painful feelings that lay below the surface.' However, as painful as it may be, if one's objective is a transformation within students, this engagement with the past would need to be facilitated. Boler (1999) argues, that only by acknowledging the role of emotions in a broader historical and socio-cultural context, as a site of social control but also of political resistance, can social change be achieved.

Social change (peace, mutual understanding and reconciliation)

Boler (1999:157) stresses that students not only need to open up their hearts and minds, to actively listen to each other's stories, but also emphasizes the need for action: 'Ideally,

testimonial reading inspires an empathetic response that motivates action: a "historicized ethics" engaged across genres, that radically shifts our self-reflective understanding of power relations.' Without social action Boler and Zembylas (2003) may see an exercise such as the digital storytelling one as futile in the context of social justice education.

One limitation of the workshop-based digital storytelling model as promoted by the Center for Digital Storytelling and also of the extended workshop model as adapted for this study is that lack of follow-up, debriefing with workshop participants after they have left the workshop space. This project is the last assignments in the final year of our students' studies, which makes it difficult for us as researchers to explore how the emotional engagement they experienced during the project impacted on their lives beyond the classroom. However, from student responses in the focus group conversations, we could gather some ideas on how the project may encourage them to take their digital stories back into their own communities:

> *…I also hope to use my digital storytelling wherever I go to encourage other people especially where I come from, people who know me, know my background. Yes I did expose my private life to people whom - they do not even know my past and they do not even know where I come from but I think it can be more useful when I bring it to my community. They know me … we grew up together. Some of them, they give up along the way. Some of them, they didn't even reach matric but our background was on the same level. So I think that can also encourage them or encourage their kids to see where am I? And to reflect on my past. I think even my granny she's going to be proud when she [sees my story] in there [referring to his cell phone] - I will show her when I go to Eastern Cape, yes I will show her.* (Xolani - AM)

Dangerous emotions

In our discussion above, we have highlighted the benefits of this project, in terms of allowing students to share their own life histories and listen to stories of students, they may not engage with in their usual lives, limited by their usual social and cultural backgrounds, allowing the hearing of counter-stories, which usually may not be heard. However, reflecting back to the questions we posed ourselves in the introduction to our paper: 'Have our students changed? Will they engage differently with each other, when leaving the workshop space or their classroom?', we observed a caution in students, recognising each other in the conversations, but doubting whether this recognition would lead to lasting change in social engagement within and across student groups, once they had left school, as reported in other studies (James et al. 2006).

> *It changed the way we can look each other… we can see now that this is the person and then I am a person who can change. But the way we engage I don't think that [it will change].* (Hazel - CF)

To understand this caution, we decided to explore in more detail the experience of the day of digital story screening, which seemed to have been a pivotal moment in the project for students. The screening of these highly personal and often highly emotional stories, enhanced by a sentimental soundtrack and heart wrenching images, elicit an equally emotional response by the audience and we observed students, parents and lecturers often in tears (which resulted in this project being given the nickname 'Kleenex project'). In their recollection of this moment, a range of conflicting emotions emerged in our students, such as anger, pity, guilt and resentment.

This first comments for example show white students' anger about the 'temporary release', that the screening process allowed students, lecturers and parents and their own feeling of guilt:

> *Now in fourth year, you know, they expect us to be all integrated and be a happy family and it's such a false. I feel like you know, lecturers are crying, we all crying, but it's false because we've been with these people for four years and we've never bothered to ask them you know and now we are crying about their stories. (Sue - WF)*

> *I couldn't believe that I've seen these two people in my class for four years and suddenly … I heard them telling their story and everything and I just got such a shock. It suddenly made me realise like - how hard some of the people work here and how strong some people actually are. You'd often say like: ah you know - look at this person they never come to class and things - or they don't do their assignments… but you don't know that they're not doing it because they were up working all night until five in the morning like trying to earn money … it's very emotional… I was howling yesterday and then I … I felt bad when I got home… I felt so guilty… I thought: but all I had to do was ask that person, all I had to do was take an interest in them and I haven't for four years.* (Sue - WF)

The feeling of guilt expressed by lecturers and students alike, was seen as 'pity', which in turn resulted in resentment by those who felt subordinated:

> *Sitting there with them, looking at the story for me the aim was not for them to feel pity for me, because that's always been an issue for me. You don't feel sympathy for me. I don't want you to feel sorry for me. This is my story and I'm proud of it. I'm not ashamed of it. So for you to feel pity it's not going to help. It's not going to help me - I don't know if you will understand.* (Zandisile - AM)

Boler (1999) argues, that if students do not critically reflect on these emotions, if they stay in the space of 'passive empathy', they will rank their 'oppressions' against each other

‘in such a way that we are pitted against one another to produce guilt rather than empathy’ (1999, 164). Passive empathy is set up on existing power relations of parties, whether based on authority, such as in teacher-students relations or based on privilege, such as exist between different student groups: ‘Passive empathy absolves the reader through the denial of power relations. The confessional relationship relies on a suffering that is not referred beyond the individual to the social’ (p. 162).

Conclusion

This paper set out to make sense of the emotions that students experienced during a digital storytelling project and to explore the tension between ‘owning your emotions’ and ‘sentimentalising your story’, a fine line in digital storytelling projects. In order to distinguish between these we used Zembylas’ notion of ‘critical emotional reflexivity’ (2011) as an analytical framework.

Analysing students’ conversation showed the extent to which students essentialised race, identified along racial backgrounds and actively constructed entities in opposition to each other, confirming findings of previous research (Pattman 2010; Rohleder et al. 2008; Bozalek 2011).

The digital storytelling process proved to be a useful social pedagogy for facilitating emotional labour (Zembylas 2011) as it allowed students share and listen to each other’s stories, experience vulnerability, and helped them see each other and behave with each other in different ways. In reflecting on this process students started questioning cherished beliefs and assumptions about the ‘Other’, revealing the power relations that govern the classroom. This seemed beneficial for both students identifying with privilege as with disadvantage, as other authors such as Benmayor have found (2008), who argues that not only marginalised students felt empowered and gained from the process of sharing and listening to ‘counter-stories’, but privileged students equally benefitted and experienced transformation, allowing them to understand their realities in more meaningful ways.

However, findings also showed that students seemingly could easily talk about their own experience, but had difficulties in placing themselves within a bigger historical and socio-cultural context (Aveling 2006), an essential element of critical emotional reflexivity. Furthermore, the specific set-up of the project made it difficult to trace lasting social change within students.

Finally, the project revealed the complex range of emotions that governed this classroom (Zembylas 2012). Some of the students' responses showed evidence of ‘dangerous emotions’, sentimentality and of ‘passive empathy’, in the way that they responded to each other’s stories (Boler 1999), recognized as pity from the part of the privileged observer and resentment from the subjugated storyteller. Although it would be preferable

to silence this few critical voices and nagging thoughts, it is exactly these 'kill-joys' as Ahmed (2010:38) would describe them, who remind us to look more critically at projects like these. Ultimately what is at stake here is the risk of re-affirming existing beliefs and assumptions about the 'Other', as opposed to changing the ways students view each other and engage socially across difference.

It is important to note, that these feelings of guilt, pity, defensiveness, resentment and anger would not have been noticed or reflected upon, if we had not set up this final round of conversations among students in form of focus groups discussions. In a traditional digital storytelling workshop, these - according to Boler and Zembylas (1999, 2003) - dangerous emotions, which instead of allowing change in how students engage and think about each other, reaffirm existing beliefs and power relations, would have gone unchallenged. These final conversations with students provided a starting point for students and the research team to voice the emotions experienced in these encounters, and discuss how these emotions reflected existing power relations among participants of this study, based on unequal distribution of authority. Freeth (2013:159–160) argues that for effective dialogues across racial divides towards social change, these need to happen in a safe space, provide a certain amount of discomfort and need to be carefully facilitated:

> *Dialogue that enables self-awareness and shared awareness about differentials in privilege, that works, when necessary, at the edges of our comfort zones and that is skillfully facilitated, can become a powerful place for engaging about a shared, sustainable future.*

It seems that the focus group conversations – albeit unintentionally - allowed such a space, in which some of the more cautious voices were heard and students started to reflect more critically on their emotional engagement in the digital storytelling process and the underlying power dynamics that rule their classrooms. Most importantly, they alerted us to the importance of a critical lens through which to analyse the potential of sentimentality that accompanies these kinds of projects relying heavily on student emotions.

In considering future pedagogic interventions which could assist in being more conscious of the risk of sentimentality in students' digital stories, and promoting critical emotional reflexivity, the idea of unpacking previous students' work in relation to the historical context and the implications of social structures may be helpful for students before developing their own stories. To do this we would need to move beyond listening and sharing each other's stories, to start analysing them in order for students to begin to deconstruct the positions premised on the existence of clearly differentiated identities based on race, ethnicity, or culture (Zembylas 2011; Weis et al. 2002). This sort of critical consciousness requires 'knowing thyself as part of the historical process' (Fishman and McCarthy 2005:360). This might help in moving students beyond a position passive empathy (Boler 1999), to that of actively empathetic witness, which in turn could

contribute to the move towards transformation and social change in higher education. Extending the time after the screening process for debriefing and reflection sessions may also help in facilitating a critical engagement with students' emotions. More research is needed to determine how one could facilitate such a reflection on the emotions encountered while sharing and listening to these emotions – and what to do with these emotions once they have surfaced.

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