Between a Formalist Rock and a Contextually Hard Place: The Gaps and Tensions Challenging Visual Arts Curricula in South African Higher Education

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Between a Formalist Rock and a Contextually Hard Place: The Gaps and Tensions Challenging Visual Arts Curricula in South African Higher Education

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ABSTRACT
This article explores approaches to visual arts curricula within the institutional setting of a South African university and considers the characteristics and experiences of undergraduate students. The notion of cultural literacies provides a useful entrance to a discussion of the paradoxes affecting this field. Criteria for academic achievement in visual arts are idiosyncratic and difficult to articulate, while the discourses of contemporary art practice sometimes contradict institutional assessment requirements. The implicit tensions between contextual, relativist practices and formalist outcomes are manifest in institutions globally but exacerbated locally. The disjuncture between students’ and lecturers’ knowledge, skills and expectations are layered with the contextual realities of higher education and the nature of the “artworld” in South Africa. Recent literature on the drive to decolonise curricula is discussed in relation to social realist conceptions of knowledge and knowers, drawing on Bourdieu, Bernstein and Maton. This lens has promise for understanding how visual arts programmes can become more epistemologically diverse, while identifying and retaining “powerful” knowledge. This frames empirical evidence and reflections on challenges facing an undergraduate curriculum in visual arts. The article draws conclusions about the often-tacit nature of visual culture and art practice. Dialectical, research-based approaches suggest the possibility of more responsive and effective curricula.

KEYWORDS
Fine Arts; curriculum; higher education; South Africa; cultural literacies

Introduction
The above title refers to a difficult context with competing challenges. Institutional terrain in South African higher education is indeed challenging, layered with broader social, political and economic national concerns. The 2016/17 student protests against high fees and the hegemony of western knowledge continue to influence the academy (Jansen 2017; Leibowitz 2017). Increased access to free higher education and demands for decolonisation put financial and epistemological pressure on institutions to develop curricula that do not reinforce social inequalities. The humanities globally are in decline, and this local context increases the pressure on fields such as the arts (Ikpe 2015; Wright 2013) that are expected to provide social cohesion and “soft” skills, but with dwindling

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resources. The institutional setting will be described before outlining the particular challenges affecting Fine Arts curricula in higher education locally and globally. Interviews conducted with undergraduate students illustrate how the literature and theoretical concepts resonate with my perspective of the field. These explanations enable me to propose directions for further research with the aim of critically addressing how curricula are enacted in the field generally, and in my own practices. It is important to distinguish between critical issues which are common in the field as a whole, and empirically based reflections specific to the Centre for Visual Arts (CVA).

My position is that of a lecturer at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), South Africa. “Transformation” is one of the institution’s explicit goals, and the institution reports success in terms of numbers, with 97% black students, of which 78% are described as African. Fifty-seven per cent of students are female. The academic and administrative staff combined are 60% black African, with an explicit goal to increase this (UKZN 2019). “Transformation” has come to be understood as prioritising previously disadvantaged and marginalised groups when it comes to academic staff and student demographics, towards addressing unequal social relations (Mgqwashu 2016). However, the terrain remains contested, with some continuing to argue that redress is evolutionary, a social contract and that the institution was transforming well before the advent of democracy in 1994 (Chetty and Merrett 2014).

Undergraduate students are now mostly from socioeconomically disadvantaged schools with few resources, and most rely on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Many arrive at university underprepared by their schooling in terms of academic literacy skills, with the added challenge of learning mostly in English, which may be their second, third or fourth language. When student unrest occurs on campuses, academic exclusion is one of the recurring reasons cited for protests, as well as perennial problems related to accessing NSFAS funds at the start of the academic year (Naidu 2020).

In this institutional context, student enrolment at the CVA has swelled since 2016. This is surprising when the national narratives focus on jobs, economic growth, emphasising skills training and professional degrees with “employability” outcomes. Historically, Fine Arts has been seen as an elitist discipline, with its institutionalisation associated with western epistemologies and modernism. It seemed curious that most of the students were male, by a large majority. Students’ cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, and what they expected from a Bachelor of Visual Arts structured degree (BAVA) also seemed worthy of enquiry. The small permanent academic staff is mostly white, middle class women, including the author. This is a factor to consider in pedagogical practices, and in relation to transformation discourses. Unlike most university Fine Arts departments, the CVA does not require students to submit a portfolio or to have studied art at school to matric level. Currently, this means large classes comprising students with a wide range of experiences and skills, which complicates curriculum decisions.

Literature reveals that such challenges are in general characteristic of the field of visual arts in higher education in South Africa, and of institutionalised arts programmes.

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1 NSFAS is a government entity under the Department of Higher Education and Training established according to the NSFAS Act (Act 56 of 1999) to provide financial support to disadvantaged students to attend public universities or TVET colleges. For more information, see https://www.nsfas.org.za/content/bursary-scheme.html
internationally (Belluigi 2016; Bolton 2006; Walmsley 2013). This prompted a small research project aimed at learning more about CVA students’ backgrounds, motivations and learning experiences.

The notion of cultural literacies provides a useful entrance to a discussion of the paradoxes affecting the teaching and learning of Fine Arts, due to its emergence as a discipline from western paradigms and my sense of the field as a site where the intersections of cultures are literally visible.

**Cultural literacy**

Rutten et al. (2013) define cultural literacy as the intersection between literacy studies and cultural studies, providing an overview of its origins. The notion of multiple literacies emerged from globalisation, and the related need to accommodate diversity among changing populations. At the same time, technological developments contributed to increased awareness of changing literacy practices. Highly influential in education, and adult education in particular, the notion of literacy as ideological (bound up with power relations and social hierarchies) opposed “autonomous” literacy models (which treated literacy as a collection of neutral skills) (Street 1996). Similarly, the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies emerged from adult education, which flourished in the 1990s and early 2000s (Rutten et al. 2013).

Maton (2014, 86) refers to the intense battles of the “‘culture wars’ over the rationale, role and form of the arts and humanities”, waged over several decades, which included cultural literacy debates:

Central to this controversy has been a “canon brawl” (Maton 2014) over not simply what should be considered great cultural works but also whether canons should exist at all … the basis of claims to artistic or humanist “knowledge”, and who can be said to “know”.

This relates directly to questions of power and literacies, and is strikingly relevant to current debates on curricula in higher education institutions in South Africa, for example, if one replaces the word “literacies” with “knowledge”, “Whose literacies are dominant? Why are some literacies marginalised? What should we teach our students? What exactly do we mean by ‘we?’” (Rutten et al. 2013, 445).

In this way, cultural literacies suggest a pluralistic pedagogical perspective, which incorporates flexibility and responsiveness in the face of uncertainty. This does not necessarily exclude canons, but simply allows for critical engagement with both high and popular culture as well as self-reflexivity in terms of value judgements (Rutten et al. 2013, 453).

The term “cultural literacy” seems to mean having a familiarity with cultural and canonical knowledge “which every American should know”. Schweizer’s (2009) regressive argument against relativist approaches in education, seems faintly related to critical and social realist concerns with “powerful knowledge”, and that this is a socioeconomically coded issue:

I’m afraid that the enemies of cultural literacy have simply got it backwards: by downplaying the importance of a common culture and shared fund of knowledge, they play into the hands of the wealthy section of society. These elites are not likely to forego the advantages that come with knowing how to situate utterances within their proper contexts, how to read
information within a web of references, how to place events on a chronological timeline, where to place a location on the globe, and the meaning of concepts such as “quixotic” or “Orwellian”. (2009, 54)

This example is narrow, dated and assumes a homogenous “American mainstream” (2009, 56), but it does speak directly to conceptions of knowledge, and how we position it in the curriculum in order not to reinforce inequality. Luckett and Hunma (2014) warn against the danger of confusing social hierarchies with hierarchies of knowledge. Emphasis may be placed on a contextually responsive and student-centred curriculum, but a largely relativistic approach may be at the expense of disadvantaged students’ educational development and ultimate empowerment. The question is posed, should curriculum change to validate students’ existing meaning-making codes, or should students be given access to the “key” to the code of the curriculum? (Luckett and Hunma 2014). A middle ground is possible, which draws on the literacies of students’ “lifeworlds” and makes explicit academic values, procedures and assumptions, although this requires conditions that may be difficult to achieve in practice (Daddow 2016).

Knowledge structures are differentiated, and this plays out differently depending on the discipline. Similarly, knowing “how” is distinguished from knowing “that” (Tomaselli and Mboti 2013). In this case of visual arts curricula, knowing “how” refers to the practical skills of how to make or “do” art, also described as procedural disciplinary knowledge. Knowing “that”, or “what”, the substance on which the academic study of art was founded, can be understood both as factual knowledge and, in this example, the more tacit, culturally bound assumptions about the nature of art (Bertram 2012).

The concept of cultural literacy as situated in ordinary, everyday practices relates to identity, community and subculture. This social definition converges with social realist theories of curriculum to bring together the concerns of this article—contemporary Fine Arts practices, higher education, and a socially just, empowering curriculum.

**Knowers and knowledge in visual arts**

Art as a field clearly demonstrates the effects of socially structured relations, according to Bourdieu (1993), highlighting the role of practice in linking his key concepts of habitus, forms of capital and field. It is through social practice that fields develop and are maintained. Habitus is a set of dispositions that accumulate due to repeated socialisation experiences until they become embodied in the individual. A relevant example is the concept of taste:

Taste is inculcated through participation in particular social environments over time. Although each habitus is unique, people who have moved through similar social contexts develop similar habituses. Habitus is thus the embodied social history of the individual… a durable set of socially constructed predispositions that structure social action, largely in unconscious ways. (Dimitriadis and Kamberelis 2006, 68)

In cultural terms, taste can be a marker of power relations between social classes and forms of capital which maintain inequality. Cultural capital occurs in different forms, including institutional, objective, and embodied in the forms of habitus. It is important to note that individuals have agency within structures, and thus practices are not necessarily predictable, despite introjected attitudes and behaviours.
This relates to the concept of an “ideal knower” who possesses a particular gaze—a “mode of recognising and realising what counts as an ‘authentic’ sociological reality” (Bernstein 1999, 165). All fields or disciplines can be understood as knowledge-knower structures. The gaze refers to knowledge which equips the knower with the discourses and assumptions of a knowledge community. In the Humanities, much of that knowledge is accumulated tacitly, through knowers’ cultural contexts and social interactions. Unconsciously adopted assumptions may guide the practices and dispositions within a community of legitimated knowers (Maton 2014). In curriculum knowledge, some knowers’ gazes are privileged over others, in contrast to the sciences where knowers are trained in knowledge and procedures perceived as being more universal and applicable across contexts (Figure 1).

For this, Maton (2014) draws on Bernstein’s (1999) theorisation of knowledge that distinguishes between vertical and horizontal knowledge structures, the former typified by the sciences and the latter by the humanities. Vertical knowledge structures are hierarchical and build on existing knowledge in an integrated manner. The humanities tend towards separate disciplines with strong boundaries, that add new approaches rather than building on existing knowledge. This essentially means that knowledge is more relativist to specific communities of practice, such as in Fine Arts, and knowers are integrated into the hierarchy by sociality (Maton 2010). It is advantageous to have certain forms of cultural capital, a born or cultivated gaze, to fully access tacit aspects of the curriculum.

**Figure 1.** The field of Fine Arts mapped onto LCT’s knowledge-knower structures (adapted from Maton 2014, 93).
Fine Arts curricula in higher education

Visual arts curricula in higher education globally are beset by paradoxes, because the postmodern discourses of contemporary art are sometimes incompatible with institutional requirements which tend to be more modernist in character (Walmsley 2013; Wright and Maton 2004). There are tensions between theory and practice, and similarly gaps between the academy and industry. There is in general little consensus on university curricula, largely because understandings of what constitutes “art” are not shared or conclusive in postmodernity. Belluigi (2016) identifies binaries of formalist versus contextualist understandings, and the absolutist canon versus the constructivist relativism. While creativity and critical thinking are what tend to be espoused, assessment practices often encourage reproduction (Belluigi 2009).

In contemporary art practise, students tend to be rewarded for work that is innovative, “original”, and disrupts what has gone before. This implies uncertainty and risk taking, but students also need cultural capital or knowledge of implicit criteria, to make sense of what it means to break boundaries. Lecturers in this field may encourage students to “play”, but feedback from formative assessments might not relate to marks awarded in final summative assessments (Belluigi 2009). The tension between “the discipline” of contemporary art practise and the pressure for results from an institutionalised, outcomes-based system makes it difficult to practise curriculum responsiveness. There is often a disjuncture between lecturers’ expectations and the knowledge, skills and backgrounds of students. Students may choose to make work strategically that they think lecturers will like, and thus “Teachers should examine and make explicit their own beliefs and ideologies”, because misalignment between espoused and practised curriculum has a negative impact on student performance (Belluigi 2009, 714). According to Luckett (2016), all actors in the higher education context arrive with pre-existing “structural/cultural conditioning” and this is followed by socio-cultural interactions in which individual and collective processes unfold as people work on their subjective aspects of their project. Thus curriculum can be understood as having “culturally emergent properties”, which are unpredictable, but also subject to contextual restraints (Luckett 2016, 418). These factors are linked to how students may be disadvantaged by a western-influenced curriculum.

Process is recognised to be where real learning takes place, and the critique sessions are a key aspect of formative assessment, supplying verbal feedback, but where no marks are given. Thus the final product which is marked becomes the emphasis, even though this is counter to contemporary art trends. It is a challenge that criteria of “success” can be unpredictable and hard to articulate, even without obvious cultural diversities in the mix (Bolton 2006). Thus assessment strategies may be mysterious to students, and in practice, idiosyncratic to individual lecturers (Belluigi 2016; Walmsley 2013). These problems are characteristic of the field, locally and internationally (Belluigi 2016; Walmsley 2013).

As a lecturer, these concerns resonate. In the postmodern milieu, the “what” to teach is so open-ended, and one cannot assume that students are adequately prepared for exploring interdisciplinary contemporary art. In these practices, concept and critical thinking may trump technical facility and old-fashioned naturalistic depictions in artwork. The latter however may be more highly valued by the average student, who seem to prefer...
reproducing images from popular culture over exploring originality. This capacity may be more useful in terms of employment in various creative industries, than making intellectual statements for elite and possibly shrinking audiences and/or art markets. Curricula should promote both technical proficiency and the ability to extend creative practice beyond the known, but recognising this does not necessarily make the selection of approaches easier to address.

The influence of “the decolonial turn”

In any discussion of current curricula in higher education in South Africa, it is impossible to ignore the impact of coloniality, understood as an “epistemic (as well as military, political and socio-cultural) event with structurally enduring effects…particularly in the Human and Social Sciences” (Luckett 2018, 197). It is argued that students’ and lecturers’ experiences are inextricably connected to the reality of inequality that was created and is sustained by the hegemony of colonial knowledge (Leibowitz 2017). According to Bolton (2006, 59), “in South Africa, historically, the education system with its separate policies for different racial groups perpetuated social division with respect to race, but also with respect to class, gender and ethnicity”. This emphasises the need to ensure that art assessment practices facilitate all learners’ access to “criteria and judgement processes delineating the concept of achievement in art”. Reflection on disciplinary assumptions, and how to make these more explicit and flexible in curriculum design and delivery, is an ongoing project. In addition, links are frequently drawn between modernism and the colonial project, aptly expressed by Mbembe (2017, 97): “Colonization was a project of universalisation. Its purpose was to inscribe the colonized in the space of modernity.”

There is, however, lack of agreement on definitions, and debates persist on how to decolonise curricula and research in practice (Dyll 2020; Mgqwashu 2016). Genuine attempts to decolonise can be derailed by reducing the discourse to a rhetorical commodity that is not enacted. Ideals tend to fall victim to neoliberal institutional economics, while lack of meaningful change may inadvertently ensure “continuous colonisation of the higher education sector” (Fomunyam and Teferra 2017, 204).

Simply including African knowledge in historically “Eurocentric” curricula is considered to be insufficient, but rather that Africans should first see themselves “in relationship with ourselves and other selves in the universe”, through Afrocentrism—an idea that is not new (Heleta 2016; Ngũgĩ 1986, 87). Contextually responsive curricula promote social justice in more nuanced ways and are intended to increase relevance to students’ lived experiences (Fomunyam and Teferra 2017). As lecturers we may feel we are responding to the social and cultural backgrounds of our students, but not be aware of our own levels of “knowledge blindness”, in terms of the concepts of knowers, gazes, and knowledge structures in our curricula. These layers are particularly pronounced in the humanities, and the arts, as mentioned above, where privileged knowers tend to have greater epistemological access due to possessing tacit cultural literacies.

Who studies Fine Arts and why?

As mentioned, the study aimed to better understand students’ backgrounds, and their expectations of the institution and of the discipline of Fine Arts. This would be a first
step towards gaining insight into students as knowers in their field of study. An interpretivist stance acknowledged my knower positionality and dual role as lecturer and researcher, to obtain participants’ perspectives from their own lived experiences. Individual interviews drew out information relevant to the theoretical concerns and research questions, and allowed unexpected themes to emerge. In terms of sampling, the intention was to include the whole research population because Fine Arts has relatively small classes, and the majority of students participated.

In order to try to reduce the impact of student–lecturer power relations on participants’ responses, an isiZulu-speaking research assistant not previously connected to the CVA interviewed 46 students registered for studies in Fine Arts. Of these, 31 students were in first year, and 15 were in their second year of study.

Participants’ basic biographical data were recorded (see Table 1 above). The 10 questions in the interview schedule explored what factors had influenced them to study Fine Arts and why they chose the CVA, what they did before coming to university, and if they had any prior experience of studying art. Further questions explored their expectations in terms career plans, their family backgrounds, and how their studies are funded. At the end, participants had the opportunity to comment or ask questions.

Of specific interest were parents’ occupations, to gain some idea of household income, family levels of education, and likely attitudes to the study of Fine Arts. Similarly, whether the student had done art for matric at school may have provided a clue as to students’ cultural literacies relevant to the discipline, both in terms of knowledge and likely contexts and resources of their schools.

The limitations of the research are several because it is a small pilot investigation. The nature and number of questions yielded some predictable information, which I had already surmised from contact with students in class, but tested my assumptions about them as a group. Most of the interesting information about the student’s experiences and attitudes was in response to question 10, which was the most open ended.

### What the interviews revealed

Table 1 lists the basic information about the students’ socio-cultural, economic and educational backgrounds. From these figures, all but two were between the ages of 18 and 20. Almost two thirds were male, and two thirds overall spoke isiZulu as their first language. The racial demographics are in keeping with the rest of the institution. The data does not explain the gender imbalance, and it would be useful to compare this with general statistics on participation in higher education, and what obstacles female students experience. An almost even split occurred between those who studied art for

**Table 1.** Basic biographical details of first and second year students (total 46).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>44 aged 18–20 years, one 24 years, one 40 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>36 black African, 4 coloured, 4 Indian, 2 white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>33 male, 13 female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home language</td>
<td>34 isiZulu, 10 English, one isiXhosa, one tshiVenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art experience</td>
<td>24 did matric art, 22 had little or no previous art education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental situation</td>
<td>7 without any parents, 9 had one parent, 29 both parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents/family income</td>
<td>19 parents/guardians unemployed, or very low income jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fees</td>
<td>31 NSFAS funded, 1 bank loan, 7 parents pay fees, 7 have staff fee remission benefit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
matric (24) and those who had no prior formal art training (22). This almost 50/50 split is unusual for a university Fine Arts programme.

The information about students’ parents, family income and funding of studies are more difficult to report on dispassionately and are interrelated. These figures help to give shape to some of my assumptions and reasoning when designing the study but suggest complexities that this pilot collection of data does not reveal. That two thirds of the students are NSFAS funded tells its own story regarding family income. The seven students with fee remission due to parents being university employees must enjoy very different resources to the 19 students whose parents have very limited or no regular income. The figures disguise the impact of students’ words. Even short answers are deeply touching, several speaking of recent losses, suggesting gaps, and struggles. These individual challenges are spread differently across the group, for example, it is not only “underprivileged” students who have lost parents. These layers are important for understanding barriers to learning but not necessarily helpful in addressing the broader issues of epistemological access. However, the data suggests great resilience and agency on the part of many students to even reach university.

Moving on from the demographic information, the most common reason for studying Fine Arts (24 responses) was for the “love” of it, and some used the word passion. Twenty-six students’ families supported their choice of degree, while eight did not approve. Twelve of the students’ families needed convincing but eventually accepted it. It seemed like some parents were simply happy that their child was attending university. For example, a student with NSFAS funding, whose father is a panel beater and whose mother passed away, said his family do not know what degree he is doing. He elaborates, “I didn’t tell him because people don't appreciate us … as artists. So they would find out when I am graduating.” Nine students had started different degrees before changing to Fine Arts, including degrees in Commerce, Law and the Sciences. Some had changed after failing, but all said they were happier doing art. One student had completed his N4 in Civil Engineering to satisfy his family, before doing his choice, Fine Art. This reiterates that art may be seen as a calling, although another interpretation could be that some may perceive it to be a softer option academically, being a “weakly structured” field (Bolton 2006).

A common theme among the answers to Question 10 was that most students feel happy in the CVA, as if they are part of a family. The identity of being an artist, fitting into a subculture and the affective dimension of a practice-based, expressive discipline, relate back to elements associated with cultural literacies discussed above. It is notable that several students understood the identity of artist broadly, including music, drama, and poetry as part of their work, although these are not part of the Fine Arts undergraduate curriculum. In my experience, students do not seem to link these in an interdisciplinary manner consistent with contemporary art practices.

The “stories” of three students, chosen purposively for this article, shows a range of backgrounds, experience and opinions about studying Fine Arts. The names used here are pseudonyms.

Zamo is 21 years old. Studying at UKZN on the Pietermaritzburg campus was a chance for him to leave KwaMashu, a peri-urban township near Durban reputed to be plagued by social ills (SABC news 2018). He said, “I just wanted to move away from KwaMashu and meet new people in a different place.” At home, he lived with his brothers because his mother passed away and he does not know his father. His school did not offer art, but
he would draw in the back of his school exercise books. He drew “Dragon Ballz” characters (from animated cartoons) and the scholars held competitions for drawing these the best. The first member of his family to get tertiary education, he qualified for other degrees, but he chose art even though his brothers did not support his choice:

They told me that we won’t support you financially if you pursue on doing this art of yours, one of them even said, you can even become a doctor but you chose art? So I won’t give you my money for registration. Then at a later stage they came to their senses and supported me because they realised that I love art and I want nothing else but art.

Zamo does get some financial help from his brothers and aunt, but also has NSFAS funding. His comments at the end of the interview are revealing:

When I first came here I had fear because I met people who had art background and I didn’t. But when I came here, the lecturers explained to me that they would teach me basics even if I hadn’t studied art. You know, I didn’t even know there are different types of pencils … The paper you are using matters, and after I learnt that it increased my skill. … we can draw the same thing but differently … my work would be proper. When you come here you are able to learn different things, the young artists here are coming from different places. We all have different mentality but at the end we have common goals. You can even add your background to your art work.

Zamo describes knowledge acquired through practice, but also associated with traditional western techniques and materials that he sees as making his work better. His comments suggest the effects of diversity, on what individuals are able to bring to their studies and what practices the field accommodates.

Sindi (21) comes from a slightly different background to Zamo, in that her mother is a teacher and she attended a school where she was able to do art for matric. Her father passed away. Sindi loved drawing from a young age, and loves drama, studying both subjects at university.

I am stuck between them because I enjoy the technical side of drama. And on the other side I love art, but it is too demanding and … I haven’t been guaranteed that I would get a job related to art. As much as there are some career titles, in reality I am asking myself if I am going to get that.

She was the only student to take a somewhat critical stance on pedagogical approaches:

…I feel like the lecturers could engage more with the students, because my current situation now, I don’t know what I am doing but we are doing it. You know when someone tells you to do this and you are like, ok … they would explain and then you try to do it your own way, something you would understand better. Don’t get me wrong, we get the support by being told that we are improving but then you don’t understand where we are improving. So I think there should be more emphasis on the way of teaching.

Although this is Sindi’s personal experience, her comments resonate with the issues mentioned in literature on assessment in Fine Arts curricula (for example, Belluigi 2014, 2017). Sindi’s ability to verbalise critiques may be enabled by the social and cultural capital of a background including her mother’s level of education, teaching career and income, and thus her own access to better schooling than other participants.

Mondi (19) did art from a young age, and did not want to do anything else but art. It was not available at his high school. He says, post-school, “I knew I am going to do this,
since it’s something I love. I wouldn’t feel good if I didn’t do it. I am enjoying it and it makes me happier.” He does not know what he will do after graduating. Mondi’s mother works as a school cook. She was not happy about his choice to study art. He said,

You know how black parents feel about studying art, they always thinking that you should do nursing, teaching, police. But she couldn’t refuse because she knew that from my younger age that I might become an artist. So I tried all I can to make her understand, and in the end she supported my decision.

He was not the only student to mention that black parents did not support art as a field of study. Like Zamo, Mondi’s studies are financed by NSFAS. He expressed initial fear, despite his talent and skill.

When I first came here I was scared. So I was thinking, everyone here knows very well what to do and as for me I am clueless apart from the skill I have. As much as it was hard but I thought I will learn as much as I can. Today I am fine and everything became normal. I am now feeling like part of the family and I am more comfortable and happy here.

Other students did mention career plans after graduation, such as owning studios and galleries from which to sell their own and others’ artwork. Very few indicated awareness that this is a very hard and unlikely way to make a viable living, and this suggested lack of insight into their own artistic capabilities and the levels of agency required by the “art world” as an industry. Beyond the academy, cultural capital and social connections are implicit, vital ingredients for survival. How to include this knowledge in the curriculum without undermining students’ identities is a challenge.

The curriculum as the social practice of knowledge

The data provided a mixture of predictable information and unexpected insights. The interviews based on the concerns of a lecturer who wanted to know more about the students and their expectations, in relation to the studio practice curriculum. In explaining question choice, the researcher became critically aware of prior assumptions, for example, that the influence of students’ parents’ occupations and income ironically risks stereotyping, while trying to do the opposite. On its own, this study does not go deep enough into these issues to fully explore them but signals fruitful ways forward.

Concepts of social and cultural capital are highly relevant to curriculum challenges. On paper, the cultural literacies of students and their lecturer may seem very far apart, given the demographics at UKZN, and the types of assumptions mentioned above. The disciplinary context is clearly one of intersections and uncertainty, informed by contemporary approaches to art, but needing deliberate management in education. Although many aspects of the curriculum may be hidden and unconscious, the broader “cultural literacies” at play in higher education have become more explicit in the process of transformation. The CVA curriculum is already flexible and responsive to context. Students do seem to develop a positive sense of belonging in the CVA as a community. Cultural literacy, if understood as a social practice, implies that rather than students adapting to the curriculum, increased understanding of the cultural elements in our context can strengthen the enactment of curricula, to empower students as knowers and co-creators of knowledge. Conversely, making students the main objects of study risks reverting to Schweizer’s (2009) deficit mode of cultural literacy.
Thus far, the most revealing insight is to do with utilising a more comprehensive strategy of data collection and analysis to place more attention on aspects of the curriculum that are less obvious. The details of students’ backgrounds and lived realities are the most tangible embodiment of tensions in the system. To explore what is taught, and how, refers to disciplinary knowledge. In studio practice, the relationship between the “what” and the “how” may be complicated, because practice is embodied knowledge, and how it relates to traditional modes and theory may be affected by unconscious forms of knowledge blindness.

To provide more reliable insights, increased triangulation of more data sources is needed. Possibilities include adding interviews with lecturers, analysis of student works (and interviews about these), perhaps case studies of particular projects, and the analysis of learning materials and curriculum documents.

**Conclusion**

This article reveals the complexities encountered when trying to explore the space between the proverbial rock and hard place in the title. It confirms that the layers of discomfort include socio-cultural intersections between individuals and institutions, as well as internal disciplinary tensions between modernist, measurable outcomes, and more contemporary, open-ended practices. Reflecting on student experiences and expectations has great value, particularly in the light of theories from the sociology of education relevant to Fine Arts. Such reflections need to be accompanied by deeper, more comprehensive approaches. Cultural literacies is potentially a bridging concept between social practices, Fine Arts curriculum, and theories of knowledge.

The epistemological pluralism and competing contextual interests of this field, described briefly here, suggest that by bringing together our stories and aspirations it is possible to move away from the idea of immovable systemic “rocks”. Hard places may be difficult but, on investigation, fertile ground for explicitly addressing different ways of knowing, without sacrificing “powerful” disciplinary knowledge.

**Disclosure statement**

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**References**


