My Trepidation: Personal Ethical Pitfalls and Dilemmas in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Located within the broad framework of critical approach and critical pedagogy, this paper reflects on personal experiences of being caught within the complexities of research ethics in the scholarship of teaching and learning. The paper presents multiplicities in the interpretation and application of ethical procedures in the drive to maintain rigour and transformation in teaching and learning research. Whilst advocating for adherence to research ethics, the paper problematises resistance to change often mounted by those in power in the name of ethics. By implication, the paper exposes the technocratic utility of research ethics at the expense of emancipation and at the same time argues for contextual interpretation and application of ethical procedures for the emancipation of the marginalised. The paper is conceptualised and presented in the tradition of autoethnographic thick description. The findings reveal differences of opinion about the adopted ethical procedures. Whilst on the one hand, many participants identify with the ethical spirit adopted by the researcher, on the other hand, some participants rejected the ethical stance of the researcher. The conclusions suggest that the adoption of covert ethical approaches coupled with critical pedagogy in the context of the scholarship of teaching and learning are most likely to attract pitfalls in research ethics.

Keywords: *research ethics; critical approach; critical pedagogy; scholarship of teaching and learning*

Introduction

Higher education teaching and learning is built on the tradition of research. In South Africa, universities are categorised into universities of technology, which are the former Technikons that trained students for the job market as opposed to theoretical orientation offered by the traditional universities (De Jager, Monapula-Mapasela and Ntshoe 2017:244); comprehensive universities which are supposed to offer a combination of Technikon-type of qualifications and traditional university qualifications and lastly, and arguably the most prestigious category of universities, the research universities which have all the characteristics of traditional universities as research institutions (De Jager *et al*. 2017: 244). Notwithstanding these various categories, it is important to highlight that the different categories of universities are generally built on and have in common three 'legs' that form the core business of the institution of higher learning which are Teaching and Learning, Research, and Community Engagement (Darmalaksana, Ramdhani, Cahyana and Amin 2018:788). Whilst only the research leg may appear to focus on research, the two other legs are also built on research tradition. For instance, Teaching and Learning has the scholarship of teaching and learning which represents the research aspect; similarly, Community Engagement has scholarship of community engagement for the same purpose.

Therefore, research is the foundation upon which the institutions of higher learning build their

activities. This is because universities are taken as epitomes of knowledge construction. Since epistemological issues are admittedly a contested terrain, there is a need to validate the constructed knowledge in terms of the methodological procedures and ethics. Ethical issues are more critical in research that deals with human and animal subjects. This paper deals with some ethical issues in the context of the scholarship of teaching and learning. Obviously, the principal players in the scholarship of teaching and learning are the human subjects – the teachers and the learners. Although issues of ethics in such a context may seem straightforward, there are pitfalls when it comes to research that seeks to emancipate the vulnerable and transform the institutions. This is because change by itself is prone to resistance. In this paper, such resistance, as it shall become apparent later, is mounted on the grounds of ethics.

Research Ethics

According to the Policy and Procedures on Research Ethics of the University of Zululand (2013:6)

> Research ethics refers to the principles and practices that guide the ethical conduct of research. These should embody respect for the rights of others who are directly or indirectly affected by the research. Such rights include rights of privacy and confidentiality, protection from harm, giving informed consent, access to information pre- and post-research and due acknowledgement. Ethical conduct in research also includes the avoidance of inflicting animal suffering of any kind and protection of the environment.

Scott and Morrison (2007: 87) identified three forms of ethical approaches: covert, open autocratic and open democratic. By covert approach, they mean that the researcher conceals the nature of his/her activities from the participants. This is to avoid participants from behaving in a particular way once they are aware of the nature of the research (Scott and Usher 2004: 129). In this approach, participants could be said to behave in the most natural way as they would not be influenced by what the researcher is looking for. In fact, the researcher could be one of the participants. One example that captures such an approach, is presented by Yancey (2014: 77-78) where he discusses Welch's research among a fundamentalist group of the Baptist church. Welch did not reveal her project until she had collected enough data to author a book. Because she had become one of them, she was well-received when she finally revealed her identity and her reason for joining the congregation. However, the overriding desire for researchers is to obtain informed consent (Silverman 2011: 93), in which case, the researcher would be operating on either an open autocratic or an open democratic approach. Scott and Morrison (2007: 88) argue that the researcher would want to protect the participants by unilaterally deciding on how to conceal certain identifiers, one of which would include the setting of the research project. In other words, the researcher identifies what could potentially harm the participants and, sometimes through deception, hides that information. This represents the open autocratic approach.

The open democratic approach represents negotiating and renegotiating with participants about what information and perhaps how the information should be reported (see for instance Ntombela 2020: 20). The open democratic approach underscores the interconnectedness of epistemology and ethics (Scott and Morrison 2007: 88; Scott and Usher 2004: 134) where through the process of negotiating what is to be collected as data and how to report it, the participants, and the researchers' become co-creators of knowledge.

Critical Approach and Critical Pedagogy

The critical approach to research is consistent with critical theory (with small letters 'c' and 't') and Critical Theory (with capital 'C' and 'T'). The latter refers to the theory that was founded by the Frankfurt School, which could be said to be a reaction to the 'meaning of Enlightenment in the [context] of Marxism and Freudianism' (Scott and Usher 2004: 23). The former constitutes a theory that critiques the positivist view of research. In that respect, critical theory would constitute elements of Critical Theory but will also draw from other approaches that are critical not only of positivism but also of 'scientism and technical-rationality' (Scott and Usher 2004: 24). Emancipation is foregrounded in many aspects of critical theory; among its tenets are dialectical reflexivity and praxis with the educational values of empowerment and transformative form of life (Scott and Morrison 2007: 49; Scott and Usher 2004: 35).

Action research has been included as part of critical approach as it critiques practices and by its dependence on action, influences curricular changes and institutional traditions (Scott and Usher 2004: 35). Notably, action research fuses the notion of ethics and epistemology and further acknowledges the fact that practitioners are knowledgeable about their actions in a manner that they can analyse and reflect on them (Scott and Usher 2004: 36). Similarly, a feminist approach is part of critical theory on account of its emancipatory and transformative agenda (Baum 2017: 83). In this case, the dominant discourses embedded on patriarchy and therefore oppressive, are interrogated with the principal aim of dismantling them and thus emancipating those who are oppressed by them. The feminist approach seeks to critique and disrupt patriarchal dominance in order to facilitate social inclusion and transformation (Baum 2017: 97). Linked to the critical approach theory is critical pedagogy. Writing in the context of Africa, Bunting (2019: 142) posits that critical pedagogy 'is substantiated and informed by an emancipatory purpose intended to foster the philosophical disposition … to realise … the objectives and the social, political and economic transformation of Africa.' According to Abdollhzadah and Narafshan (2016: 198), there are three tenets of critical pedagogy: reflection upon the individual's culture; development of voice and transforming of society. They argue that these tenets should find themselves into the school curriculum as part of the adoption of critical pedagogy. Earlier, Giroux (1985: 40) suggested that critical pedagogy would allow teachers to be transformative intellectuals and develop schools into democratic public spheres.

The critical approach theory and critical pedagogy are intertwined in that they both have emancipatory ends. The critical approach theory on the one hand, finds its expression in research whilst critical pedagogy on the other hand is realised in praxis. This means criticality is at the centre of intellectual work, be it the passing or construction of knowledge. In that respect, reflexivity becomes central as researchers and lecturers reflect on their praxis and epistemological orientations (Ntombela 2017: 62-63).

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

It should be acknowledged that the scholarship of teaching and learning is often misunderstood and misused; however, Mathany, Clow and Aspenlieder (2017: 6) define it as hypothesis-driven research that involves one's critical reflection about own practices in order 'to understand the relationship between teaching strategies and learning outcomes. The other definition is that it is 'a systematic, evidence-based way' of evaluating as well as doing research on one's teaching (Mathany *et al.*, 2017: 6). De Jager *et al.* (2017: 245) add that '[a]n activity has to meet … these conditions in order to be considered an SoTL [scholarship of teaching and learning] activity': systematic study of some aspects of teacher's teaching; must be based on validated criteria of scholarship; making transparent how teaching makes learning possible and making outcomes of such an activity publicly available. More importantly is the place of reflection in the scholarship of teaching and learning which must cover

content of what is taught, processes of how such content is taught and why things are done the way they are (i.e., why teaching proceeds the way it does) (De Jager *et al*. 2017: 245).

The common theme that seems to run through critical theory, critical pedagogy and the scholarship of teaching and learning is reflection. The practitioners in all instances must reflect upon their own practices. In critical theory and critical pedagogy, reflection happens in order to adopt an emancipatory ethos. In the scholarship of teaching and learning it is necessary in order to improve one's own practices. This seems to overlap with tenets of action research located within critical theory.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is research that looks at and analyses individual experiences with an aim of understanding cultural experiences (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010: par 1). Ellis *et al*. (2010: par 3) regard autoethnography as 'one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist.' It is important to note that the protagonist in autoethnography is the 'self' of the researcher. This research is therefore framed within the autoethnographic thick description which I shall now turn to. The participants' names have been coded in keeping with the ethical consideration of anonymity. Any direct reference to identifiable institutions has been altered for the sake of confidentiality.

I joined the historically black university in February 2013. It was wonderful to be in the institution that contributed to my academic stature. Although I was thrilled to be the member of the academic department, I had a slight sense of uneasiness because some of my colleagues were my former lecturers. I did not find it immediately easy to forget that I had always considered them my superiors and then I had to relate with them at a collegial level. I must say that this relation was easy with some of my former lecturers but not with others. Some made it a point that I recognise my subordinate status and not rise to the level where they already were. This sometimes happened not only to me but also to my other colleagues who were at the same level with me. Unfortunately, because of my independence of mind, some of my contributions were publicly bastardised but I endured. As I established my footing in the department, I began to understand some of the things I went through as an undergraduate student. I also realised that little had changed in terms of how the department was viewed by either the current or the former students – it was still very much viewed as a 'no go area' and an obstruction to student attainment. Like some of my colleagues, I was bothered by this image. I had always wished to contribute to my fellow Africans' wellbeing and to humanity in general. I then started to interrogate some of the challenges that were responsible for the image the department was projecting.

There were different issues that I began to research with an aim of contributing the necessary change to the department. My findings were often communicated at various local conferences in the presence of my colleagues. Most of my research had been informed by my following the critical approach, which I began to see made some of my colleagues uncomfortable. My adoption of this approach was mainly to highlight the issues at hand. In May 2016, in the 1st Teaching and Learning conference, where the central issue was assessment, I presented a paper that investigated linguistic imperialism. Even though the presentation was well-received, I did not develop the paper further. In the following year, the dean of the faculty, probably captivated by the abstract of that paper, located a journal where he felt the paper could be published. I welcomed the idea because it was also going to help me effectively communicate my findings to my colleagues. I anticipated that my findings would kick-start debates and possible adjustments in the departmental assessment scheme, and I almost achieved that. In April 2018, the article was published by an accredited peer-reviewed journal.

The article was also circulated by the then dean of the faculty, which was a common practice that encouraged knowledge sharing among academics. It was immediately met with congratulatory messages, but my euphoria was to be short-lived as there were a few negative messages.

Most of the initial messages were positive. For example:
>Congrats to 214. Way to go for the department in 2018! (11 – 8 May)

And,
>Congratulations 214 on a very interesting article! Especially since the article is based on practice within the department, I think we should have a presentation and discussion on it soon – 214? 11? (163 – 8 May)

Below is an example of a negative response:
>I think it would have been polite for you to advise us you were writing about us, 214. And even, perhaps have invited responses. (138 – 8 May)

To this message I responded:
>Yes, I did wrestle with that part for the greater part of the writing and ultimately ended up going it solo. I am always struggling with ethical issues when writing articles of similar nature and try by all means to be on the objective side as possible, but I must admit that it is not always that easy. I did discuss ethical considerations with journal editors, and they gave me a green light. In my mind I thought I would appreciate responses for the work already out there, but I'm aware that that may not have been ideal for most. Whilst I'm still very much open to responses, the article reflects my personal opinion which has not been informed by any other's input and that's how I wanted it to be. The second round might be collaborative where the interpretation takes various points of view.
>Thank you all and apologies to those who feel offended by the article.

And then there was a constructive message suggesting a way-forward to responding to the issues raised in the article:

>Perhaps we (as a department) will be prevailed upon to discuss some of the issues underpinning the arguments made by 214. For me, one of the important issues include:
>* To what extent do we 'penalise' perceived language deficiencies?
>* What 'rules' will influence us?
>
>My suggestion is that we hold a series of meetings to thrash these issues. (11 – 8 May)

The other message was positive but raised the same concern highlighted by 138:

>This is in fact an issue we do discuss. Formalizing it too much is impractical because of the real fluidity of the language/content boundary. We indeed ought to keep the conversation going, and current, and a departmental policy document might be an idea – although with the caveat about fluidity.
>
>But I, too am I [sic] interested in the ethical underpinnings of this paper. Were consent forms issued? Did it – or its underlying project – go through the Research Committee? (31 – 8 May)

Whilst the drive so far seemed to have been that of engaging with the contents of the article academically by seeing the extent to which we could converse around the arguments and perhaps be able to inform our practice, some colleagues took a different turn that amounted to personal attacks which angered other colleagues in the department. The first of such comments went like this:

I suggest that we *read* the article before sending out unqualified congratulations … (138 – 8 May) [emphasis in the original]

This comment was countered by some colleagues:

I think your *sarcasm* is unwarranted and offensive. Publications in accredited journals are always cause for congratulations, surely? We can and often do congratulate our colleagues before we have *read* their work – as you yourself congratulated 214 earlier today, seemingly before *reading* his article. However, my and other's *reading* of it has brought its contents into our conversation. To suggest that colleagues who have subsequently chosen to send *unqualified* congratulations have done so in a state of ignorance or naivety – my *reading* of the implications of your comment below – seems to me to be an intellectual and personal slight that I find hurtful. I think you should send an apology. (163 – 8 May) [emphasis in the original]

These kinds of exchanges were never intended and even this one below seems to deviate from the spirit earlier taken by other colleagues:

I have read 214's article and am surprised that while participating in a departmental process of selecting potential students, members of the department and the concerned students became subjects of a research. Apart from not complying with ethical issues requiring the researcher to get the informed consent of his/her subjects, the article makes many incredible assumptions and innuendos about archival sources/foundations of the lecturers impacting on their interpretation of pedagogy. So, a Zimbabwean trained academic, even when two of his degrees are obtained from South African universities, is by some inexplicit definition/criteria - British oriented and a peddler of British linguistic imperialism? How do we exercise our academic functions without feeling that we are being pried upon and preyed on, or being academically ambushed? Would some of us be wrong if we refuse to participate in future activities that produce literature (Scoresheets) that become sources of research. That is why ethical considerations in research are essential, and in my view of this violation, 138's point is valid. I suppose 163 is aware of the informed consent requirement when using human subjects for research purposes. There is nothing sarcastic or hypocritical about making a point in defence of research ethics, and in defence of the integrity of the department, whose skirts have now been blown above our heads. (1213 – 8 May)

There was an attempt to bring back the rationale for the article and to approach it from the positive spirit in which it was written. The comment that follows is a case in point:

Others can take up the issue about whether 214's paper may have infringed upon any institutional rules in terms of committees, ethical clearance etc. But I think it would be very naïve to assume that such bureaucratic processes are merely there to fulfil their ostensible function – to protect against ethical violations in research – and do not also function as machinery of power and gatekeeping, to police and discipline knowledge production. Nonetheless, I am not disputing their necessity. However, in this case, I feel that the research is ethical in its spirit, whether or not the letter of the law has been breached in any way. The actual comments published are innocuous in themselves and I'm sure similar ones have been made in assessment by academics in the field from across the globe. I can't see that there is anything there that would embarrass any individual personally, even if he or she could be identified. What the article does is highlight the way a particular kind of assessment functions in a collegial setting and I think it makes an important contribution in that. As scholars we are free to challenge 214's conclusions but we should first engage with them on their merits.

It is brave and tricky to research one's own academic environment – yet such research is vital in order for our work to engage with social challenges and become a force for positive change. 214's careful and responsible use of anthropological techniques of participant observation within our department seems to me to be within the spirit of Bourdieu's Homo Academicus *– about which there is a nice summary/overview by Jessica Poulin at the following link : https://newanthro.wordpress.com/2015/03/18/pierre-bourdieus-homo-academicus-objectifying-the-academic-object/*

Just my personal views and I look forward to further discussion and questions raised by the article, such as those that 11 has highlighted. (163 – 8 May)

There was another attempt to resurrect the discussions so that the department would benefit from the arguments raised in the article:

Thanks prof. I reckon this will help us set a productive tone for discussions on some of the issues that we ought not to gloss over. I really like 31's idea of formulating a departmental policy on some of these things. And I actually think this will help when we start marking and moderating. Even though we need not aim to produce formulate [sic] a concrete policy immediately, I would like to suggest that we consider having those discussions right after sending semester marks in. Any seconder, please? (11 – 10 May)

The attempt was effectively squashed once and for all. The writing was on the wall and no further comment on the article was to be made after this one:

I appreciate your trying to ameliorate this debate, but perhaps pouring oil on it is likely to muddy the waters ... if you'll forgive the mixed metaphor!
I think the ethical issues raised by 214's article and how it was written are rather more urgent than a discussion of assessment practices, which I think is what you're proposing. I hope 131 will call a meeting in which we can all voice our opinions. In the meanwhile, here's why I think this is urgent and concerns us all as members of the department.

So, colleagues:
1. *The processes described in the article were for a specific purpose, namely, to select applicants to a programme. The assessment undertaken was by definition normative not developmental. It is not representative of assessments made by students already admitted within the department.*
2. *The processes described were internal to the department, which all of us took for granted were confidential. Comments we made on applicants were made on the understanding of privacy. 214 participated in these processes and made no attempt at the time to question or contest them.*
3. *There was no informed consent. As colleagues we were not asked if we were willing to have our information turned into an 'archive for research' – or to be published. Applicants to the department were not asked this either.*
4. *Public disclosure, without consultation, is a drastic breach of trust. How can we work co-operatively and collegially with one another if we cannot trust one another, and if we do not share respect for one another's privacy?*
5. *The information that was drawn on was not set up for research purposes, nor was it designed for public dissemination. This information was generated by a colleague whose work was not credited or acknowledged. Student records – and documents to do with departmental processes – are the intellectual property of the department and the university, and permission should be sought to use them.*

6. *There was no clear research methodology. The ethnic and national categorisation seem irrelevant to the central argument, that criterion-based assessment is preferable to norm-referenced assessment.*
7. *These categorisations clearly identify particular applicants, some of whom have become our students. These categorisations are distasteful and reductive. In what ways is it useful for research purposes to describe us as 'Zambian black male', 'Zimbabwean black male', 'South African Indian male, 'South African coloured male', 'Nigerian black female', 'South African white male' etc.? Is this really how we see each other?*
8. *The journal is online and open access. And the academy to which we belong is small. So, this disclosure makes very public the processes and the persons who've been turned into 'subjects' in the study. This may well impact on prospective employment or study opportunities.*

   In a nutshell, the research is not ethical – and this makes it reflect badly on our university, let alone our faculty and our department. (138 – 10 May)

After this, there was no further engagement about this article on the virtual platform. Under the dictates of the last respondent, the meeting was called in the department to have everyone voice their feelings. The matter was further escalated to the chairperson of the University Ethics Committee. Some colleagues in the department were not happy about this arrangement and had wanted to write a counter report to the chairperson of the Ethics Committee but, not to create further rift among colleagues, this was not pursued. There was also concern that the colleague who reported the matter acted as the spokesperson of the department on the matter on which no mandate was given. The complaining colleague continued to use plural pronouns as if representing the concerns of other members and not personal ones. The reporter then indicated that the decision to report was based on the provisions given to whistle-blowers in which no one owed the department any explanation.

I decided to retract the paper from the journal. I even deleted the article which I had uploaded on ResearchGate. The matter unfortunately seemed not to go away easily. Although the article was removed from the journal to which it was initially sent, it still appeared on another platform which indexed the journal. Further complaints were sent to the chairperson of the University Ethics Committee, and I was asked to make sure that the article was removed from the Internet. I wrote to the editor of the journal again and asked if it would be possible to have the article removed from that indexer. Although I would not want to comment on the timing at which both complaints were launched with the chairperson of the Ethics Committee, the coincidence left a lot to be desired. I believe that as a department, we lost an opportunity to refine some of our crucial practices that impact heavily on the department's throughput and success rate. To date, there has not been any open talk about assessment in the department. Any mention of that subject seems to be an anathema and seems to carry the same amount of accursed omen as my article. It is unfortunate that what should be for the benefit of academia at large is safeguarded as a sacred space that must be perpetually kept away from the public. For the department, the status quo must be maintained at all costs!

It is this very status quo that I initially wanted to challenge, because to me, it had long been an inglorious one. In terms of performance, our department has constantly remained in the red. The way in which some colleagues interpreted my article indicated that assessment has a lot to contribute to the improvement of our performance. In order to understand how students, feel about assessment, I will quote a few interview responses from a study conducted in the department on a similar issue. I must also highlight that the same former colleague was denied permission to use some departmental records such as an external examiner's report in his study. Here is what his students said as extracted from his thesis:

Interviewer: Ok. Are there any other experiences surrounding the study of [...]? What other factors do you think we should be aware of? Anything.

Respondent: *Regarding performance, I do not know why – I'm not saying I'm intelligent, but then I don't know why we are…I mean…I am getting low mark when it comes to [...] because… I think maybe the way they mark, the way they… I mean…ja…the way they give us a lot of assignments or a lot of works to do. That also like affects the way…the way I perform.*

Interviewer: So, if you compare your marks in the other modules and your marks in [...], would you say there is a vast difference?

Respondent: *Of course. You don't wanna know. I mean if I can refer you to my last semester modules, I got two distinctions, and one merit and a pass…a pass…when I say a pass I mean a pass for [...]. Amandle' ndoda* [Man's strength]*, that's what they say.*

Interviewer: Do you feel that as a student you have an understanding of how the marking process is happening?

Respondent: *I was concerned why I'm getting – I mean low marks, and I decided to go to Dr 712 and to consult and ask him how they mark. And he showed a long process. And I think maybe that is the reason why…like…they are using their own formulas that I do not even know.* (Gazu 2017: XV)

The debate was going to help us discuss some of these issues and would have afforded us the opportunity to improve the department's assessment practices, unfortunately it was not to be so. It was even more unfortunate that those who opposed such debates happened to be the most senior members in the faculty who used their seniority to hinder progress. Although I of my own accord decided to retract the article, it does concern me that only the opinion and voice of the senior member who took the matter up with the chairperson of the Ethics Committee was taken. There was no consideration of the voices of other members. It is believed that the department at large would have benefitted from deliberations on matters of this nature. And I feel that it is this state of affairs that stands in the way of change and transformation in the department.

Discussion

First and foremost, it is important to locate these experiences within the broader framework of teaching and learning in higher education. Whilst teaching and learning might appear as apolitical, instrumental and a simple cognitive process, critical pedagogy informs us that teaching and learning is never neutral, but is personal, cultural and situated within ideological and negotiated knowledge (Canagarajah 1999:15-16). Therefore, traversing a teaching and learning terrain is similar to negotiating a political journey where it is easy to be met with opponents along the way. The adoption of critical pedagogy by the researcher immediately exposed the differing orientations of colleagues. Similarly, it might seem that whilst the scholarship of teaching and learning expects practitioners to reflect on their practices, the notion of reflexivity is a 'no go area' for some academics. This is seen in the comment made by 138 that departmental practices are confidential and by implication should not be subjected to scholarly interrogation which might be perceived as negative. It is disturbing that it is regarded as unethical if departmental practices are subjected to interrogation in the tradition of academic rigour.

However, it is important to note that not all colleagues held the same notion of the sanctity of departmental practices. This is shown by the eagerness of some colleagues to engage with the

findings of the research by attempting to influence some change that is implied by the article. But the fact that higher education is filled with power dynamics where, among other things, seniority, which often oppresses, is used to maintain the status quo, critical pedagogy becomes a viable option in order to disrupt such resistance. The negative reactions to the article were quite revealing about institutional sub-cultures. It showed that some ideological orientations were resistant to different voices. For instance, the unhappiness about the contents of the article invoked discourses of ethics and further sought to dictate how representations ought to have been carried out. The University of Zululand (2013) Research and Ethics policy indicates that differences of opinion in interpretive matters of research do not constitute ethical violation. Invoking ethical violations in such matters should therefore be understood as a mechanism for blocking the necessary change and transformation which is envisaged in any critical approach.

Nonetheless, the question of informed consent is a valid one within open autocratic and open democratic approaches. This requirement was invoked by the colleague who was not happy about the arguments raised in the paper. Without doubt, had the consent been sought, it would have been highly unlikely that it would have been given. Thus, opting for the covert approach was one way of interacting with a 'difficult' decision to publish or not to publish. Other colleagues did not see any ethical violation that informed consent was never sought; on the contrary, as one colleague responded, the research demonstrated another way of critiquing the system that did not always work in the best interest of free expression. This was further demonstrated by the willingness of some colleagues to interact with the findings in a manner that would advance and propose changes implied in the paper. Unfortunately, the dissenting voices proved too powerful for a positive response. The decision to retract the paper from the journal and all the other internet platforms was a way of fostering collegiality. It was also another way of acknowledging that those who did not give consent might have been genuinely hurt. The initial reaction by 138 was that some input could have been sought. This would also border on epistemological assumption that I was not in a position to write with authority on the matter that concerned the department. The authority to do so might either lie in the collective or with others. That I had projected my voice solo on the matter regarded as sacred was almost tantamount to sacrilege. If this be the case, then the great offence might have been the feelings of exclusion.

Even the fact that standard protocols of anonymity and confidentiality in the way the information was presented were followed such that none was identifiable, informed consent remained the biggest violation. This was even though none could identify information that pointed to oneself. This experience revealed to the researcher a few realities in the ethics of research. One of them is that ethical decisions are not as straightforward as they might seem. Even though the covert approach was adopted, not all participants approved such an approach. Another reality is that the taken-for-granted ethical decisions sometimes have dire consequences. In this case, the envisaged outcome of having colleagues engage in a conversation on the subject that was regarded as being of common interest and importance turned out to be a political contest. But it also revealed that dissemination of findings could be treated as an exposé. This is despite the fact that institutions of higher learning as research centres thrive on research output. However, research on teaching and learning, in the case of these experiences, does not seem to be expected to meet the public by some academics. This ambivalence is also reported by Mathany *et al*. (2017: 245).

Whilst the scholarship of teaching and learning promotes reflections on one's engagement with teaching, the reactions of some colleagues indicate that such reflection should be kept private and should not suggest changes to be made by other stakeholders, especially peers. Those who had proposed that we meet as a department and discuss how we could address some of the pertinent issues raised in the article were probably driven by the urgency of change that characterises action

research. As noted earlier, action research is dependent on action (Scott and Usher 2004: 36). It differs from traditional research where academics simply visit such for the sake of citations. Some of my colleagues therefore saw the urgency of action arising from the findings and arguments of the article.

Also, it seems the colleagues who resisted the publication of the article failed to see the emancipatory ethos underlying the research. Seemingly, they failed to appreciate the extent at which the actions of academics affect students. For them, it seemed the processes should never be disturbed but should be shrouded in secrecy so that the outside world would never get a glimpse of what was happening. This is confirmed by the fact that the extracted interview that one colleague conducted with students showed how frustrated they were with the issues of assessment being kept unclear to them. The operating ethos seems to be one of keeping others in the dark. This is no different from any oppressive regime to which critical approaches are set to unsettle.

Conclusion

This paper set out to highlight the pitfalls that surround ethical decisions in the context of the scholarship of teaching and learning. The experiences of the researcher are presented in the tradition of autoethnographic thick description. These experiences highlight critical pedagogy in teaching and learning adopted by the researcher, which resonates with emancipation. Alongside critical pedagogy is critical approach to research which also interrogates power dynamics and oppressive regimes with an aim of emancipating the marginalised. The experiences of the researcher confirmed that power dynamics do complicate the dissemination of research findings within the scholarship of teaching and learning. Rather than ethics being used to safeguard and protect the vulnerable from harm caused by researchers, the experiences of this researcher confirmed that ethics can also be used as a gatekeeping mechanism. In this case, the disapproval of some colleagues about how the author of the article decided to formulate the text and frame the discourse compelled him to relegate such decisions as they were ethical violations.

The analysis of the experiences shows that researching one's place of work with an aim of fostering change and dialogue is not favourably received among all colleagues. The subject of interrogation of teaching and learning practices can be an ethical minefield. To balance between the outcomes of research and research protocols is not always straightforward. In that respect, ethical procedures are sometimes invoked by those who are in position of power to make sure that certain forms of research are not carried out while they are in control. More importantly, the experiences of the researcher highlighted the place of informed consent in research that deals with human subjects. Even though there could be perceived urgency in the research, which often is the case when dealing with the marginalised, there must be careful navigation on the issues of informed consent. One must be prepared to accept that some research might never be carried out as consent might never be obtained. This is more so in the context where consent is sought from those who feel threatened by the changes. In the case of the experiences of the researcher, the colleagues were expected to emancipate students, but some resisted that challenge by citing technical rationality.

Notwithstanding the centrality of informed consent in research that involves human subjects, there is also an issue of conscience in the context of continued repression. One reason why there are not enough progressive changes in favour of vulnerable students (and sometimes lecturers) in many academic regimes is the bureaucratic red tape, sometimes in the form of ethical procedures even though such procedures were put in place for the protection of the vulnerable. The result is that research that would assist those who are disadvantaged is often abandoned and the status quo remains unchanged. Those who challenge the system are most likely to encounter many obstacles

such as those encountered by this researcher. There is therefore a need to contextualise ethical procedures especially in the light of the envisaged outcome. The example could be taken from colleagues who appreciated the urgency of the matters presented in the article and tried to forge the way forward in a manner that would improve the life experiences of students. But also, it would be important not to confuse ethical issues with epistemology. The issues for instance regarding how the author chose to carry out the presentation of arguments are epistemological and not necessarily ethical. Similarly, the initial suggestion by one colleague to wish to have been invited is epistemological as it seems to authenticate knowledge that is co-created. If there is one lesson that came out of these experiences is that serious research in the context of teaching and learning where critical pedagogy has been adopted and research is approached through the lens of critical theory, ethical pitfalls are not far away, and the terrain needs to be navigated with extra boldness and extra caution.

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