Agency and Deliberative Communication in the Classroom

Leyla Tavernaro-Haidarian

Abstract
Among many challenges in the space of education in the global South, we find that curricula are often out of touch with the contextual reality of students and that classroom or lecture-hall sizes are often too big to engage a critical majority. Therefore, reimagining educational processes, or aspects thereof, becomes imperative. This article proposes that cultivating relational models of communication in the classroom is particularly useful in empowering students to connect with, participate, and actively co-shape the content and process of curricula and that it does so by casting agency as the freedom to work “with” rather than “against” or independently of the status quo. It also captures and reflects on the experience of a group of students and facilitators who employed such an approach in their classroom.

Keywords
communication, education, public discourse, decolonization, ubuntu

Introduction
Amid calls to decolonize the space of education in the global South, where, among other challenges, curricula are often out of touch with the contextual reality of students (Rodney-Gumede, 2017) and classroom or lecture-hall sizes are often too big (Chasi, 2017), reimagining and redesigning educational processes, or aspects thereof, become imperative. This article proposes that cultivating relational models of communication is particularly useful in empowering students to connect with, participate, and actively shape the content and process of curricula and that it does so by casting agency as the freedom to work “with” rather than “against” or independently of the status quo. It also captures and reflects on the experience of a group of students and facilitators who employed such an approach in their classroom.

For this experience, which took place in 2016 at an all-girls high school in South Africa, 30 students and two facilitators came together for a 3-day leadership and life skills workshop. Of particular interest to me was the relational communication strategy participants employed. Termed “deliberation culture” (Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2018), this was consultative and informed by an open-ended, integrative, and participatory approach to communication. For example, the rhetorical focus was to explore matters together rather than to lecture or persuade one another of certain viewpoints, and participants actively cultivated a collective and collaborative sense of unity in diversity. Because it is a recently articulated model of communication, my aim in this piece is to discuss how employing it might (re)distribute power relations among students in the classroom and to complement this theoretical discussion with reflections from a community’s experience with it.

My article is structured as follows. I begin by providing a discussion on “deliberation culture” and its underpinnings before situating it within the spectrum of deliberative and relational approaches more generally. Next, I explore how deliberation culture is positioned in terms of empowerment and agency, enabling those who employ it to shape their own learning and enhance participation. I then outline the context and background of how it was used in a particular classroom setting and present highlights from my records to bring to life some of the theory discussed. I also reflect on these records as someone who is deeply caught up in these experiences.

With this piece, I offer some unique and timely insights into the ways that relational communication strategies can improve the relevance of and engagement with materials studied and suggest that, as a result, agency in the context of social structures can play out as transcendence through mutuality rather than resistance.

1University of Johannesburg, Auckland Park, South Africa

Corresponding Author:
Leyla Tavernaro-Haidarian, University of Johannesburg, Auckland Park 2006, South Africa.
Emails: leylahaid@me.com; lhaidarian@uj.ac.za
Deliberation Culture

Rooted in the harmonious and cohesive notions of human interaction implicit in the African moral theory of ubuntu, “deliberation culture” is a communal and collaborative form of inquiry that has been articulated in the context of media and communication and as a contribution to public discourse (Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2018). On the surface and because of the postcolonial processes associated with both, the term may be falsely equated with the concept of deliberative democracy. Although there is a range of understandings about the latter (see Callan, 1997; Cooke, 2000; Habermas, 1996; Matyni, 2009), generally speaking, proponents of deliberative democracy are looking for spaces where citizens can share commonalities and respect differences as a way of contrasting the interest-based conception of democracy that is driven/beholden by economics (Matyni, 2009). Therefore, insofar as it facilitates a dialogical, reflexive, and “unconstrained exchange of viewpoints, involves practical reasoning and potentially leads to a transformation of preferences” (Cooke, 2000, p. 948), associating deliberation culture with deliberative democracy makes sense. Yet the term “deliberative” also relates to Habermas (1996) and as such to Mouffe (1999), who critically proposes that deliberation suggests a violent process based on conflictual ways of perceiving the world. This is not the case with deliberation culture, which can rather be thought of as an alternative to agonistic pluralism (Mouffe, 1999) and as a process that is deeply relational and harmonious. It draws from the cohesive attitude of ubuntu and the way traditional African democracy functions as a (sometimes very lengthy) “deliberation” (De Lieifde, 2005) known as an indaba, punge, or lekgotla, where members of a community have an equal opportunity to share their thoughts until a form of agreement, consensus, or cohesion is reached (Blankenberg, 1999; Louw, 2001). This process assumes complementarity of interest and thought rather than conflict of such. Therefore, although deliberative democracy may seek diversity through confrontation (Bitzer, 2009) and through distress and belligerence (Callan, 1997), deliberation culture achieves this through exploration and invitation. It extends beyond coexistence (Bitzer, 2009; Callan, 1997) and explicitly works toward harmonious ends.

Importantly, this form of communication exhibits certain principles: namely, an open-ended (rather than binary or exclusive) way of framing issues, an invitatory and exploratory (rather than persuasive) form of rhetoric, and an all-encompassing (rather than oppositional) identity that embraces a diversity of nested and textured subidentities. It also calls for a facilitatory type of mediation. To cite an example from its practical application, in one of our sessions with students, we considered and explored the subject of euthanasia. Instead of framing the conversation as a debate with proponents and opponents, we formulated a series of open-ended questions—for example, “What is euthanasia?” “When might someone consider it an option?” “Who are the people involved in such a decision?” “What are the principles and values that might guide them?” From there, instead of dividing into camps, students explored the issues as individuals within one and the same panel, taking turns to share their richly textured religious or cultural values and social experiences in a safe space. Facilitation nurtured a collaborative attitude rather than positioning students to persuade one another of a certain viewpoint. In this way, various facets of the theme were shared and explored in a manner that de-escalated what is usually considered a sensitive and divisive topic. Not only did common ground emerge, but new dimensions of the discourse were unearthed, allowing students the opportunity to hold and value simultaneous truths.

Deliberation culture resonates in fundamental ways with the Bahá’í idea of “consultation” (see Kehoe, 1992) and strives for consensus. Eschewing collectivism and any pressure to agree, it emphasizes the desire to agree. Distinguishing it from other ways of communicating, then, is its deeper assumptions around human nature and social relations. It moves away from inherently conflictual ways of perceiving the world to deeply relational ones, assuming that human affairs, while unique and complex, are deeply bound up and that there is special power vested in collective exploration, dialoguing, and decision-making. Listening (Wasserman, 2013) becomes a way of finding meaning or agreement in what others have to share and its process broadens or may even shift a participant’s points of view. It opens the possibility of reaching better solutions to those conceptualized at the outset, cultivates an open mind, and nurtures collaboration and problem-solving. Communicators exert effort to suspend their beliefs and look for strengths in the views of others as they search for a bigger picture.

Although I can and do not measure the extent to which deliberation culture was actually achieved against this “ideal,” I am able to discuss how it relates to empowerment and agency and share glimpses into the experience of those engaged in striving to employ it.

Empowerment and Agency

Because I ultimately consider the ability of deliberation culture to empower students to direct the course of their own learning and enhance engagement, I consider issues of power, the distribution and ab(uses) of which are central for the field of communication and education and which are strongly shaped by Western social theory (see Karlberg, 2005). Its prevalent conceptions are rooted in ideas of domination/submission (Blau, 1964; Boulding, 1990; Bourdieu, 1994; Foucault, 1980; Gamson, 1968; Goldschlager, 1982; Machiavelli, 1961; Weber, 1986; Wrong, 1968), related to individualist ethics (Metz, 2014), and associated with the extent to which an individual or group owns and can leverage material resources (see Ramsbotham, 2010). While other distinctions are made between this idea and, for example, power as capacity (see, for example, Connolly, 1974;
race, class, and gender, de-emphasizing dichotomy and Black feminism also consider the simultaneous nature of potential (rather than actual) actions and conditions. Trends in the capability of individuals to achieve the sort of life they would value (Nussbaum, 2011). Such approaches shift our attention both inwards and toward others. The implication of this is that social change and justice in the space of education do not have to occur as a cessation with what came before but as a process that builds on, yet evolves and reshapes the status quo.

In the context of communication in a classroom setting, what becomes relevant is the way in which the above typically materializes as social practice. Just as in many democratic systems in the West, where parties vie for majority votes and oppositional groups keep those “at the top” in check, legal and economic spaces, media, and the space of academia and education more broadly are frequently characterized by a contest of agonistic and competing ideas—as well as grades and rankings (see Karlberg, 2005; Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2018). Intertwined with this posture, we find conceptions of agency that focus on the individual “versus” the world. For example, Calabrese Barton and Tan (2010) see agency as the possibility of imagining and then asserting a new self in contradistinction to and within a figured world. The dialectic of structure and agency then allows for the possibility of social change (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1979).

So, structure and agency are thought to be diametrically opposed and agency is associated with freedom from (structural) constraint. According to Roth and Calabrese Barton (2004; see also Calabrese Barton, 2003), the best role education can play in this context is it to facilitate awareness/literacy about the problems individuals face in their own lives, rather than those framed by established scientific discourses, and then to address them accordingly. What these approaches to empowerment and agency have in common is the potential to act in opposition to societal forces or at least somewhat independent of them—in the pursuit of social change and social justice (Lampe, 2015, p. 83).

Although this can and has been beneficial, there are many contexts in which oppositional or independent-detached strategies may be prohibitive, for example, where high levels of collaboration and participation are desirable and sustainability is foregrounded. In contrast to the above, deliberation culture offers mutualistic strategies for social change by drawing on alternative understandings of empowerment and agency. Ideas of capacity (see Connolly, 1974; Dowding, 1996; Giddens, 1984; Karlberg, 2005), capability (Nussbaum, 2011), or mutuality, for example, can be found in various strands of feminism (see Brocke-Utne, 1989; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 2015; Miller, 1982; Moulton, 1983). In these contexts, power is thought of as that which is directed toward others in caring ways (Noddings, 1984) and is seen as resting in the capability of individuals to achieve the sort of life they would value (Nussbaum, 2011). Such approaches shift our gaze toward capability/capacity/ability and the idea of potential (rather than actual) actions and conditions. Trends in Black feminism also consider the simultaneous nature of race, class, and gender, de-emphasizing dichotomy and offering an interlocking paradigm “in which all groups possess varying amounts of penalty and privilege in one historically created system” (Collins, 1990, p. 223). And while feminism is varied and complex, many such integrative approaches have emerged from its (sometimes paradoxical) schools of thought, including the idea of empowerment (Arendt, 1969; Hartsock, 1983; Miller, 1982) that enhances rather than diminishes the power of others (Miller, 1982, p. 5).

Even more deeply relational are theories found in the ethical thought emerging from parts of Asia and southern Africa, where community, cohesion, and harmony inform ethnocultural values (Metz, 2014) and such are the underpinnings of deliberation culture. Here, power is associated with force and energy and it favors community and harmony. Ubuntu, frequently associated with the maxim “I am because we are” (Mkhize, 2008; Tutu, 1999), describes an inherent oneness between people and often between people and nature. It lies beyond collectivist or corporatist ideas and foregrounds unity-in-multiplicity (Christians, 2004). Although an in-depth discussion of ubuntu and its caveats and objections remains beyond the scope of this article, it can be said that its “ideal-type” theory provides a valuable basis for rethinking power, namely in terms of agency and the sustainability of human actions (Chasi, 2014, p. 290). It focuses on togetherness and informs an idea of unity in diversity that is deeply bound up (Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2018). Power becomes mutual empowerment and derives from cooperative and concerted effort. “The other” is not fixed but open-ended and negotiated relationally (Louw, 2001). While this does not have to replace traditional ideas of power, it can complement those and provide valuable options for rethinking our relationships, and how we communicate and learn together.

Through this lens, agency is cast as the capacity/capability to act and the room to navigate not necessarily in opposition to or independently of social structures but rather together with them and in ever-growing and evolving ways. It foregrounds the need to limit the influence of structure over the individual and foregrounds the possibility of individuals engaging with it and contributing toward its transformation. The textured idea of unity in multiplicity associated with ubuntu implies that having agency is no longer about individual freedom from social influence but rather about opening the possibilities for action in a direction that is beneficial both to one’s self and to one’s community. This “commitment to humans as participatory beings avoids the opposition between individualism and collectivism” (Christians, 2004, p. 244). It assumes that agency or power derives from immaterial force or “vital force in participation” (see Shutte, 1993, p. 52) rather than from material resources, thereby turning attention both inwards and toward others. The implication of this is that social change and justice in the space of education do not have to occur as a cessation with what came before but as a process that builds on, yet evolves and reshapes the status quo.
Against this backdrop, I now provide some highlights from the process of employing deliberation culture in the classroom to bring this theory to life and refine it.

**Experience**

While the nature and purpose of the educational program that set the stage is constantly evolving, I participated in its initial phase as a supplementary leadership and life skills program for high schools in Johannesburg. In this phase, it consisted of 3-day workshops facilitated at various public high schools during school hours and/or on weekends. The program unfolded through four manuals that served as starting points for the curriculum. In other words, they were designed by the founder with the purpose of being shaped, refined, and reshaped by the students who studied them in a group process. The main topics covered by these manuals reflected the South African national “life orientation” curriculum requirements and were titled “finding purpose,” “leadership and gender aspects of leadership,” “understanding strengths and capabilities,” and “diversity.” As a traveling educational program, it targeted an average of 30 students per school, aged 14 to 17, who often had leadership roles they fulfilled within their communities. The curriculum was initiated by the founder of the program based on her experiences as a pedagogue of over 15 years. My own involvement resulted from my interest in studying the consultative approach to communication she had begun cultivating.

In 2016, the founder and I facilitated a workshop for 30 students at an all-girls public high school in Johannesburg. This took place in the assembly hall and began with a get-to-know-each-other session, where we all introduced ourselves and discussed how we would be communicating with each other throughout the process. We then began exploring the manuals we had brought. The main approach was to have students take turns reading passages from the manuals, to discuss these, and then collectively explore the guiding questions at the end of each section. In an effort not only to engage with the content but to also reshape it. In encouraging everyone to change the seating arrangement, in searching for what was creating a chasm between “us” and “them,” many referred to the values their parents and teachers shared, which they felt didn’t incorporate their own: A lot of today’s conversations revolved around not being respected by elders, being told to shut up and sit still in class, not being asked what it is they want in life but rather what is expected of them [. . .]. They don’t feel like they are driving their own future [. . .]. (Leyla Journal)

This lack of agency was reflected in their initial seating arrangements and attire:

We’ve asked the students to sit in a circle. The girls are reluctant to restructure the hall and push tables to the back. It’s unusual to them or they feel like they are breaking a rule? But the more noise we make [. . .], the more smiles emerge and the energy picks up. Soon we are all sitting in a circle. Some of the girls take off their school blazers [and] we feel closer, less “apart.” (Leyla Journal)

In collectively searching for the source of this disconnect, in searching for what was creating a chasm between “us” and “them,” many referred to the values their parents and teachers shared, which they felt didn’t incorporate their own:

In encouraging everyone to change the seating arrangement, we hoped to turn toward each other, to create more intimacy and immediacy. Once in circle(s), we shared manuals and took turns reading a paragraph each, clarifying any comprehension issues and then opening the floor up to the questions presented at the end of each section: What does it say? What is the point? If the next person doesn’t care because all they think about is [. . .] I’m young, I’m lazy, what else can I do? Because they expecting less of us and instead they should be encouraging us. (Kim)

In collectively searching for the source of this disconnect, in searching for what was creating a chasm between “us” and “them,” many referred to the values their parents and teachers shared, which they felt didn’t incorporate their own:

This lack of agency was reflected in their initial seating arrangements and attire:

We’ve asked the students to sit in a circle. The girls are reluctant to restructure the hall and push tables to the back. It’s unusual to them or they feel like they are breaking a rule? But the more noise we make [. . .], the more smiles emerge and the energy picks up. Soon we are all sitting in a circle. Some of the girls take off their school blazers [and] we feel closer, less “apart.” (Leyla Journal)

In encouraging everyone to change the seating arrangement, we hoped to turn toward each other, to create more intimacy and immediacy. Once in circle(s), we shared manuals and took turns reading a paragraph each, clarifying any comprehension issues and then opening the floor up to the questions presented at the end of each section: What does it say? What is the point? If the next person doesn’t care because all they think about is [. . .] I’m young, I’m lazy, what else can I do? Because they expecting less of us and instead they should be encouraging us. (Kim)
Throughout our interactions, this communal space of conversation and deliberation was constantly renegotiated. There were moments of closeness and those of dissonance. For example, we shared an obvious identifier as “girls” or “women”—which included females with various sexual orientations. We were also perceived as allies in transforming the classroom protocol. Throughout the workshop, students quickly began opening up to us and sharing personal stories. Yet sometimes they fetishized our positions as professionals, as married women or mothers. We had, in contrast to them, achieved some of our goals in life and exercised agency over the clothes and hairstyles we chose each morning. In my specific case, an ethnic distinction (as “other”/“Middle-Eastern” and/or “European”) coupled with a confusing American accent, which I acquired at an international school, may have contributed to this.

This brings me to reflect on our use of English in the classroom, which some would relate to the violence of colonial domination enacted through language (see Fanon, 1967) and the prescription of language itself (see Flores-Rodriguez, 2012) and which the students felt contributed about:

What does it help if I say ngicela ukhulume nami ngesiZulu (“speak to me in Zulu”)? [. . .] Where can I get a job? Let’s be real girls. (Thabisile)

I understand that they saying we losing our language, we losing our identity. It is true. (Kim)

How are we going to speak together? It’s not about being colonized anymore. It’s about how can I survive? How can I live in this world if I don’t speak English or French? (Anastasia)

We can’t pretend it didn’t happen [. . .]. It all happened. It shaped us. Made us who we are today. (Elba)

I use vernacular when I want. It’s my choice. (Kim)

In being aware that we were mostly using an auxiliary language, which is associated with colonialism but which brought us together, we consented, accepted, and consciously integrated it into our process. Whether this constitutes a true choice or not (especially in view of the greater “system” that framed us) can only be answered in light of the conceptual lens one applies. When considering traditional Western notions of power associated with material resources and domination/submission, such acquiescence is likely to be viewed as a defeat, a yielding to the project of colonialism. When framing the choice from energy-based, immaterial notions of power that are relational and cohesive, attention is drawn on the inner dimension of (self-)empowerment and becomes a victory through reconciliation (see Mandela, 1994).

Against this ambiguous dialogue on language, we then continued exploring the idea of “them” to whom students were often referring. What did it encompass? This is where the notion of “society” became more apparent in our conversations. It included the media and the values perpetuated through it:

We have a lot of challenges because technology is advancing every day and we, we are tempted to do a lot of things, like we want to be seen, we want to be known. Like, if somebody puts a picture on Facebook you’d be like “I want to take that picture as well! I want to get likes, I want people to see that I’m beautiful.” Yeah. And there’s a lot of peer pressure, [. . .]. (Elba)

There was a perceived pressure to be a certain way, to fit a certain picture, and to fulfill a specific role dictated by “them” (society). To have access to those images and to be able to cast yourself in that socially acceptable light meant having power, and this was problematized. The girls also felt they had so far lacked the ability to enter the discourse that sets these norms, created the rules, and shaped their reality:

The main theme that is emerging from our conversation is a lack of reciprocal communication between the youth and those who create and set the “curriculum”—the class curriculum, the social curriculum. (Leyla Journal)

As facilitators and in many ways part of this “them” that sets curricula and shapes those discourses, we were keen to really “listen” (Wasserman, 2013), to allow the students to enter this discursive space “with” us:

If they would just talk to us, get to know us better, they would see that, we have, we have our own thoughts and goals! (Thabisile)

**What the True Potential of Youth Is**

In view of the sentiments expressed above, we took time to uncover how students saw themselves and their potential. Because this was one of the questions presented in the manual, it afforded us an in-depth discussion. Many of the students shared their life goals with the group:

The plan I’m working for right now [. . .] is get done with high school with good grades, firstly, then [. . .] law school [. . .]. So I’m planning to study law for four years after high school and then besides doing academic stuff I would also want to do poetry as a job, like something I do every day, and continue with skateboarding and modeling. (Kim)

Negotiating my role as someone who is there first and foremost to help facilitate, invite and explore, yet someone who is also a “mother” in another context, various thoughts began crossing my mind:

All these kids have grandiose dreams [. . .]. I struggle between preaching “realism” and allowing the girls to just “be.” I am
actively suppressing my urge to share my “own journey” as a cautionary tale. (Leyla Journal)

Dealing with these thoughts required restraint on my part. It was important to privilege open discussion, and while this might have looked different were we all of a similar age, in this context, it meant backgrounding my own “voice of authority” and foregrounding that of those who, in their own words, had felt unheard and misunderstood. Now these students were taking the reins and began deliberating on how they could regain their vision for the future:

We need to stop looking at the past and move forward [. . .] I want to study psychology, simply because I feel like what I went through I’d like to share with someone else and help someone else out there [. . .]. I want to touch someone’s life out there. (Elba)

Building on what the previous person said, each student added their voice and introduced new dimensions to the discussion:

I want to do industrial engineering [. . .] I want to give back to society. I’m a feminist. I believe that females can do what males can supposedly do [. . .]. (Anastasia)

Probing the underlying motives of one another, the students had soon taken ownership of the process. To delve into some of the material more thoroughly, we broke into smaller groups where one student would take the role of facilitator. An important insight emerged:

Here I am battling with my need to steer the students [. . .] and we stumble upon a solution. The girls deliberate among themselves. There is no need for us to always act as facilitators. That is the beauty of the process. Once it is internalized, anyone can facilitate [. . .]. (Leyla journal)

At other times, discussions got more passionate, especially when students wanted to express their frustrations. In those moments, we had to moderate the time each student took to talk and who was next. A deeper level of understanding emerged through frank, open yet invitational inquiry as students reflected on questions of identity based on a question in the manual:

You know the thing that’s really driving this world is classification and if we could just stop classifying each other and learn to see each other from the same level, then we wouldn’t have so much division in this world [. . .]. Our purpose as youth is to bring love [. . .]. (Anastasia)

**Reflections on Identity**

As we continued with our workshop, our conversations began reflecting a change in rhetoric, particularly on the theme of identity. The insights highlighted here reflect this shift from the us/them rhetoric evidenced in the beginning of the workshop to a more relational conception of the self toward the community/society and even specifically toward parents/teachers:

What stands out was consultation [. . .], showing your creative side, teamwork [. . .] when we actually worked together to accomplish one thing together. We can do this with our teachers. (Kim)

The above insight reveals a move toward collaborative, relational conceptions of power that strive to integrate the I/other dichotomy rather than entrench it. This also became apparent in the interaction between students:

There’s been one Muslim girl in our group since the beginning [. . .]. As a Bahá’í, I’ve always been the “other” myself, the “anomaly” among Christian kids in Austria, so I identify with her and I look out for her in particular. Today she’s been giggling away with the other girls. In fact, there is not one student who hasn’t shared her thoughts with us today. (Leyla Journal)

In reflecting on their role in the bigger collaboration, some of the quieter students began acknowledging the significance of their own voice/contribution:

I love working with people and that it’s not only about you but others as well. So we need to stop living in this box and come out and live with others as well. (Elba)

Some of the more vocal students, in turn, reflected on the value of listening to others:

My views aren’t only important but other people’s are too. That really helped me and how we should communicate. (Yolande)

We studied new parts of our curriculum employing a similarly reflective approach. Students would read a segment or paragraph from our manual, discuss it and offer their views on the exercises in a consultative manner, each building on the next and each introducing new dimensions:

We are able to overcome many challenges [. . .] We [mustn’t] shut ourselves out [. . .] we [must] focus on the problem and not the solution. I think that older people, like our parents and our teachers, can see the potential in us [. . .] and can embrace that. (Elba)

This willingness to include parents and teachers in the discourse about their future appeared to be a general theme as the workshop progressed.

**Reflections on Communication**

The following are excerpts from conversations about how we communicated, that is, on deliberation culture itself. These took place toward the end of our time together. Students
As part of the rapidly developing and now much more co-generated curriculum, my co-facilitator gave an introductory session on religious diversity, which the students helped us refine. This also proved important for the underrepresented members of the group and thereby strengthened us as a unit:

“We got in little groups and you’d be shocked ’cause a girl you thought that never spoke actually had the brightest ideas and [. . .] that just goes to show how we are not complete when we are alone, [. . .], we need one another in order to cooperate and work [. . .].” (Yolande)

A relational, invitational approach to facilitation was deemed instrumental for eliciting this much-desired diversity of thought:

“The facilitation, it was very different, very, if anything I’d prefer the way we learned here than at school, ’cause [. . .] at school it’s not much of a choice [. . .]. And you come and sit, paper and pen, and the teacher talks and you have no say in it. You can’t be like “well sir, this and that,” you know? Here we were able to voice our opinions and they won’t criticize. Instead you understood us and you leveled with us. Something we don’t get much from school or home. [. . .] I felt that encouraged us and we felt like we’re, we’re not alone. And that other people really do care about what we have to say. I learned so much from a lot of the peers and like one, Karabo, for instance, she’s very opinionated and has so much to say and I’d be shocked ’cause most of the girls younger than me too, I learned a lot from them. When they’d speak I’d be like, “Wow. I never even thought of that” [. . .]. And you never thought what she might say might brighten up or spark my idea too but it always does.” (Yolande)

The facilitation, it was very different, very, if anything I’d prefer the way we learned here than at school, ’cause [. . .] at school it’s not much of a choice [. . .]. And you come and sit, paper and pen, and the teacher talks and you have no say in it. You can’t be like “well sir, this and that,” you know? Here we were able to voice our opinions and they won’t criticize. Instead you understood us and you leveled with us. Something we don’t get much from school or home. [. . .] I felt that encouraged us and we felt like we’re, we’re not alone. And that other people really do care about what we have to say. I learned so much from a lot of the peers and like one, Karabo, for instance, she’s very opinionated and has so much to say and I’d be shocked ’cause most of the girls younger than me too, I learned a lot from them. When they’d speak I’d be like, “Wow. I never even thought of that” [. . .]. And you never thought what she might say might brighten up or spark my idea too but it always does.” (Yolande)

The impact of our experience also reached a wider social circle, including family members. In the following case, Yolande relates that her brother had applied some of the principles of deliberation culture in his daily interactions:

“We need to learn how to communicate. I feel like that is the best way ever and well funny thing ’cause my brother is really, well we’re Christians, and so my brother likes to interact with people and “Can I talk to you about Jesus?” kind of thing and so what he’s doing recently is he’s learning more about other cultures and other religions and he calls it “engaging culture” where he learns about the Muslims and the Jewish people and what makes us different—really there isn’t much that does!” (Yolande)

What these thoughts led toward was a general consensus to integrate religious diversity education into the curriculum. Another student relayed,

[. . .] if we could see [that] the values that we all hold is, are not different. We’re all trying to achieve one thing, which is love and peace and, um, if we can learn to embrace one another for who we are, if people can just accept who we are and not “what” we are, then the world would be so much happier.” (Anastasia)

As part of the rapidly developing and now much more co-generated curriculum, my co-facilitator gave an introductory session on religious diversity, which the students helped us refine. This also proved important for the underrepresented members of the group and thereby strengthened us as a unit:

“We spoke about Islam today and the Muslim girl was beaming. It might have been the first time she’s been able to have the group understand more about her background and witness others being supportive and appreciative of what they are learning.” (Leyla journal)

While as facilitators we had introduced the principles by which we were to communicate and relate in this workshop, the students had driven the process and generated insights, ideas, and materials that we were able to take forward. It was a collaborative effort that yielded something tangible, namely, a co-generated curriculum that can be constantly refined:

“At school, [. . .] in the classroom, we just sit, and listen and nod and listen, where[as] here, we were open to say whatever. [. . .] I could feel like, okay, this is what freedom feels like.” (Thabisile)

If adults can [. . .] find the right way to communicate to us about how to make the world a better place, we have that power in us, we are capable of doing it.” (Jocelyn)

To evaluate the experience from a point of retrospect, we also came back after several weeks to chat about the process as we remembered it. The following captures some of these thoughts and revolves around (re)defining freedom, identity, complementarity, diversity, and collaboration:

“Nobody is self-sufficient, nobody has everything. And we complement one each other, which is why I don’t see the point of competing with each other because what you have is maybe not what I have. So by us identifying what we don’t have and what the other person has we are able to complete each other [. . .].” (Kim)

“Teamwork [. . .] talking about our heart, our mind, our spirit [. . .] I learned more, I learned more about myself. I think a lot [. . .] I should use my heart, be more sincere.” (Thabisile)

“Teamwork [. . .] I need people around me to help me grow. Now I’m able to communicate with people much better, able to work with people and consultation as well.” (Jocelyn)

Although there are many elements worthy of analysis emerging from the above, including gender, age, or cultural
dimensions of communication, the intention here is not to produce an exhaustive survey or conclusions about any of them. The purpose instead is to provide glimpses into how deliberation culture was experienced in a classroom and to facilitate some further reflection on possible conceptions of empowerment and agency as they relate to this discursive approach.

What could be discerned in particular is a relationship between agency and identity. Moving from a conceptual and discursive “us/them” toward ever-expansive notions of “we” that were bound up in others and cooperative in nature, participants were able to use deliberation culture to (re)direct their energy/agency as the workshop progressed. They began by referring to parents, society, the media, and others as “them” and “they” and gradually integrated these elements into a more expansive “we.” This does not mean that they did not exhibit strategies of resistance and confrontation but rather that strategies of integration and collaboration eventually foregrounded the resisting and confronting of elements. As their engagement with deliberation culture progressed, they outlined, planned, and even engaged in actions and outcomes that were geared toward benefiting and improving the well-being of their newly articulated “we.” This collective or overarching sense of identity was not homogeneous but marked by layers of diversity and complexity in complementarity. This resulted in respectful yet frank and critical engagement with the curriculum at hand, which was, in time, refined. Various facets of power and agency (even agonistic ones) were to be discerned during this process, sometimes even simultaneously, but overall the process was predominantly carried by a sharing of power, which allowed the individual to exercise both choice and restraint. Through this fruitful and primarily harmonious and cooperative process, agency formed a symbiotic relationship with the curriculum rather than (chiefly) resisting it.

This has vast implications for social practice. When identities become richly textured yet entwined, social and political issues can be conceived of as bound-up, rather than inherently conflictual. Then, related processes can be reimagined along nonpartisan lines and, importantly, the idea of freedom takes on new meaning. In contrast to Western individualist democracy, which “insists on negative freedom, that is, freedom of the sacred self from intrusion by others,” here, “a person’s freedom depends for its exercise and fulfillment on personal relationships with others” (Christians, 2004, p. 243). In other words, freedom ceases to be defined in terms of individual constraint but rather in terms of collective empowerment.

**Conclusion**

My aim with this piece was to explore how cultivating relational, deliberative forms of communication in the classroom could empower students to connect with, participate, and actively co-shape the content and process of curricula and that it would do so by casting agency as the freedom to work “with” rather than “against” or “aside from” the status quo. I also provided insights into and reflected on the experience of a group of students and facilitators who employed this approach.

Practically, deliberation culture formed a reciprocal synergy with its curriculum. It encouraged participants to communicate freely and engage in informed, probing, and critical analysis while using care and moderation in how they spoke. Participants cultivated an open mind and actively considered the views of those that differed from their own, thereby negotiating a joint cultural experience. They considered diversity of perspectives as an asset and actively solicited the views, concerns, and insights of those less vocal. The group’s ideas became a collective resource for the curriculum, rather than being static or belonging to any individual, group, or even the institution. It became clear that the mutual empowerment of educational elements (i.e., learners, teachers, institution) contrasted how power is traditionally operationalized. Importantly, it became possible to consider social structures as enabling rather than inherently constraining of individual/collective freedom, and freedom could be perceived of as that which is realized with and through others, rather than in opposition to them.

In many ways then, notions of interdependence, inclusion, and cohesion were able to transcend historic hierarchies, violence, and domination—outcomes frequently associated with decolonization (see, for example, Biko, 2004; Booyzen, 2016; Fanon, 1967; Maldonado-Torres, 2011; Mbembe, 2016; Mignolo, 2007; Mkhize, 2015; Mudimbe, 1988; Ngugi, 1989; Smith, 1999; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Power was realized through collaboration and integration—even of the colonial. In that sense, we could witness a culmination or fulfillment of mutual energy that “becomes a process of maturation rather than struggle. If it [were] conceived of as a struggle, it [would] simply reinforce[...] the culture from which it [sought] to distinguish itself” (Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2018, p. 393). What this suggests for the project of decolonization is that it can be thought of less as an affront and more as an evolutionary process of transformation. In this way, the violence of colonial domination, its structures, and conventions are overcome. By co-authoring language, process, and curriculum, collaborators create agency, authenticity, relevance, and participation, thereby reframing liberation as an effort to “reevaluate” and “reimagine” (see Isaacs De Vega, 2017).

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
**ORCID iD**

Leyla Tavernaro-Haidarian [iD](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3860-4737)

**References**


**Author Biography**

**Leyla Tavernaro-Haidarian** is a senior research fellow at the University of Johannesburg. Her areas of expertise include media, communication, leadership, education, development and governance. She is a member of the South African Communication Association and the South African Young Academy of Science.