
Psychosocial Challenges of Teaching Assistants in Facilitating Sensitive Topics: A Reflective Study at Durban University of Technology

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Abstract: This paper presents a collaborative reflexive autoethnographic study examining the emotional and psychosocial strain experienced by three black African Teaching Assistants (TAs) who facilitate sensitive curricula in the Cornerstone and Equality and Diversity General Education modules at the Durban University of Technology (DUT). These modules, employing transformative learning pedagogies, emphasise self-awareness and social justice, which often expose TAs to complex psychosocial challenges. Using reflective writings as self-as-data and guided by the Rolfe and Freshwater (2001) framework (*What? So What? Now What?*), the authors analysed their lived experiences of emotional labour, secondary trauma, and navigating institutional expectations. Thematic analysis of these reflections reveals that TAs frequently navigate personal resonance with sensitive content while suppressing emotional responses in the classroom. The findings, presented illustratively, highlight the urgent need for institutional support mechanisms to safeguard TA's well-being and ensure effective teaching and sustainable mental health. This paper makes an exploratory, illustrative contribution to discussions on transformative pedagogy within the South African higher education context, offering a context-specific autoethnographic account of TA practice at a University of Technology. This study relies on a limited dataset of three reflective pieces; hence, the findings are illustrative rather than generalisable. However, they underscore the need for larger empirical studies on TA well-being in comparable contexts. The paper also calls for further empirical research on this subject that could inform policy and contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Keywords: autoethnography; psychosocial effects; reflective writing; sensitive topics; teaching assistants

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Introduction

The discourse on the psychosocial effects of teaching sensitive topics remains underexplored in scholarly literature. Teaching sensitive topics in higher education entails facilitating complicated, emotionally charged material. These issues can be complex for facilitators because they frequently provoke strong emotional reactions. In this paper, 'sensitive topics' are defined as those included in the curriculum that may cause students to feel upset, emotionally uncomfortable, or distressed (Hulme & Kitching, 2017; Cebula et al.,

2022). Sensitive topics cover a wide range of topics, such as social identity, migration, stigma, prejudice, discrimination, and HIV/AIDS related stigma. Hence, facilitators, students, and higher education communities at large should acknowledge the psychological impacts of teaching these subjects.

The Durban University of Technology (DUT) initiated a strategic curriculum renewal project to integrate General Education (Gen Ed) into its academic framework. This initiative aimed to equip students with the foundational knowledge and skills necessary for active participation in local, national, professional, and global discussions (Parker, 2016). The Centre for General Education oversees nine Gen Ed modules, two of which, Cornerstone (CSTN101) and Equality and Diversity (EQDV), are the focus of this paper, as the authors facilitate these modules. *Cornerstone* is a compulsory Gen Ed module for all DUT students, designed using a transformative learning pedagogy. This approach fosters critical self-reflection and perspective transformation (Mezirow, 2018), enabling students to engage analytically with contemporary debates while reflecting on issues related to citizenship and social justice. As part of this transformative pedagogical strategy, students are required to produce reflective writing, often drawing upon personal lived experiences, some of which can be sensitive or emotionally triggering.

The Gen Ed curriculum at DUT also includes the EQDV module, an elective designed to meet the learning objectives of various academic programs across the institution. The primary aim of EQDV is to foster an appreciation for diversity, in oneself, others, and society, while equipping students with the tools to promote equality and mutual respect within their communities. Through this module, students engage with critical topics such as prejudice, discrimination, stereotypes, oppression, and privilege, thereby enhancing their awareness of systemic inequalities and advancing social justice. Given South Africa's ongoing structural transformation (Bhorat et al., 2020), addressing these issues remains imperative.

The EQDV module encourages students to critically analyse societal cultures, norms, and practices that perpetuate inequality and discrimination. By doing so, they learn to identify and challenge biases and prejudices embedded in social structures. The module complements CSTN101, as both explore overlapping themes, such as diversity, discrimination, prejudice, stereotypes, and equality, while fostering critical thinking and self-reflection. Together, they aim to cultivate students' understanding of themselves and society, aligning with DUT's ENVISION2030 commitment to developing adaptable, critically engaged thinkers capable of navigating a rapidly changing world.

Teaching Assistants (TAs) employed as part-time staff at the Centre for General Education at DUT are responsible for facilitating the teaching and learning activities of several Gen Ed modules. The primary objective of a TA, as a facilitator, is to support the Centre for General Education by carrying out various tasks to create and maintain a holistic, conducive learning environment, thereby ensuring that students receive the best possible support. Goodwin et al. (2023) also note the importance of graduate teaching assistants in promoting student motivation and engagement in courses. Some of the responsibilities of a TA at DUT include conducting tutorial sessions with students and facilitating discussions on sensitive topics.

The duties of TAs impact their mental well-being and how they interact with others. The focus of psychosocial perspectives is on the nature of self-understanding, interaction with others, and the formation of connections with one's social environment. Given TAs' role in facilitating discussions on sensitive topics, the authors were keen to investigate the psychosocial effects that emerged. This paper focuses on the authors' reflections and journeys as they navigate the teaching and learning environment. This paper explores the psychosocial effects of TAs facilitating at the Centre for General Education at DUT. From a psychosocial perspective, the study explores their capacity to function, which is affected by psychological factors and the social context in which they live and work. The empirical basis of this study is three reflective pieces, one authored by each of the three TAs, written in the last quarter of 2024. Readers should note that the findings are presented illustratively and are not intended to support broad generalisation; rather, they offer a context-specific, exploratory account that signals the need for larger empirical studies on this subject.

Research aims

This paper, framed as a reflexive autoethnographic study, is guided by the following aims:

- To describe the lived experiences of black African TAs in facilitating sensitive topics within the Cornerstone and Equality and Diversity modules at DUT.

- To analyse the psychosocial effects encountered by the TAs during the facilitation of sensitive topics.
- To reflect on the implications of these experiences for TA well-being, institutional policy, and pedagogical practice in the South African higher education context.

Justification of autoethnography

This study employs an autoethnographic approach because the authors, as three black African TAs facilitating these modules, are the primary data source. This approach is explicitly justified, as our insider status and direct personal experiences are the most relevant data sources for exploring the emotional and psychosocial effects of this specific pedagogical task. The reflections of the three authors serve as rich, illustrative accounts, offering context-specific insights into the challenges TAs face at DUT. We acknowledge the limitation that this approach is primarily illustrative rather than making broader empirical or theoretically innovative claims. This paper calls for further empirical research to provide deeper insights into the psychosocial effects of facilitating discussion of sensitive topics.

Literature review

Lowe and Jones (2010) argued that most topics can be sensitive when they evoke an emotional response or when competing ideas arise about how they should be addressed. General Education modules often involve students sharing their lived experiences as a transformative pedagogical approach. Students may disclose lived experiences related to trauma, mental health, violence, or family issues. Such disclosures are very personal and could make students feel vulnerable or prejudiced in front of peers or facilitators (Borshuk, 2017). Furthermore, discussing sensitive topics can evoke strong emotions, such as shame, anger, anxiety, or distress, in both the student and the listeners (Miller & Nambiar-Greenwood, 2022). The classroom is primarily a learning environment, rather than a therapeutic space. Excessive or unmoderated sharing can blur boundaries, making some students uncomfortable or triggering them (Borshuk, 2017; Miller & Nambiar-Greenwood, 2022).

Facilitating sensitive topics places significant psychosocial demands on TAs. The modules facilitated by TAs focus more on students' lived experiences and include topics such as social identity and gender. Emotional labour is a recurring theme in the literature (Conradie, 2023; Faulkner & Thompson, 2023), as TAs often manage their own emotions while guiding students through sensitive discussions. Facilitating discussions on sensitive issues of diversity, inclusion, and equality can be challenging and draining, as it entails examining concepts often excluded from conventional curricula (Obear, 2007; Love et al., 2016). Conradie (2023) also acknowledged the emotional labour that TAs undertake, balancing their own identities and emotions while guiding students through sensitive topics of race and inequality. Modules such as Cornerstone require TAs to facilitate multiple classes per week, covering the same sensitive topics in each class. Hence, TAs tend to experience anxiety and secondary trauma caused by repeated exposure to students' narratives of subordination, abuse, and discrimination, with little or no institutional support (Rivero & Webb, 2024). TAs' emotional toll is further compounded by students' expectation to provide guidance and care, often without institutional resources.

A standard approach to facilitating discussions on sensitive topics is to create safe spaces for students to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts without being victimised or prejudged. Creating safe spaces should be about protecting students from harm rather than shielding them from discomfort. (Stanfill & Klean Zwilling, 2023) A facilitator's first step in their first tutorial is introducing a common set of values for the class. These common sets of values help ensure a conducive classroom environment. Once that is achieved, the facilitator should ensure they create a safe, holistic learning environment for students, allowing them to share their experiences without fear of judgment or mockery. A safe space for students is created by implementing ground rules to control students' behaviour, such as respecting others, maintaining confidentiality, accepting diversity, and promoting open communication. Once the classroom is established as a safe environment for students, they begin to trust the facilitator and start sharing their experiences. Creating safe environments was central in higher education (Wagh, 2023). The flipped classroom can be one way to create inclusive, safe spaces for discussing sensitive topics related to racism, inequity, and social injustice (Miller & Nambiar-Greenwood, 2022). Love et al. (2016) also emphasised the importance of creating spaces where students can openly and critically engage with their experiences.

This paper adopted Grandey's Integrative Model of Emotional Labour (2000), a widely cited framework that builds on Hochschild's original concept by incorporating emotion regulation theory. Grandey's (2000) Integrative Model of Emotional Labour reframes emotional labour as a process of emotion regulation enacted to comply

with organisational display rules that prescribe appropriate emotional expressions in workplace interactions. Within this framework, employees employ two primary regulatory strategies: surface acting, which involves altering outward emotional expressions without altering internal feelings, and deep acting, which entails actively aligning internal emotional states with required displays. These strategies are shaped by antecedents, such as job demands and the frequency of interpersonal interactions, while moderators, including individual differences (e.g., emotional intelligence) and job resources (e.g., autonomy, social support, influence), shape their application and impact. The model establishes a clear link between emotional labour and its outcomes, which range from positive organisational benefits, such as enhanced customer satisfaction and perceived professionalism, to adverse consequences, including emotional exhaustion, burnout, and diminished job satisfaction. By integrating sociological and psychological perspectives, Grandey's model provides a comprehensive theoretical lens for understanding the mechanisms and implications of emotional labour in contemporary work environments. The model further aligns with this paper's objectives of analysing the psychosocial effects of facilitating sensitive topics.

While existing literature on transformative learning (Mezirow, 2018) and emotional labour (Grandey, 2000) is relevant, a critical gap exists in engagement with African scholarship on pedagogy, TA roles, and institutional policy. It must be noted that peer-reviewed African scholarship specifically addressing the emotional labour and psychosocial experiences of TAs remains sparse, and the broader body of South African higher education research has paid limited attention to the specific vulnerabilities of part-time, black African TAs in transformative learning contexts. This study explicitly acknowledges this gap and does not claim to fill it comprehensively; rather, it aims to provide an initial, context-specific, exploratory account that foregrounds the issue motivating further empirical investigation. The South African higher education context, marked by ongoing structural transformation (Bhorat et al., 2020), means that themes like racism, xenophobia, and gender-based violence are often live issues that resonate deeply with both students and TAs. This requires a deeper engagement with how these experiences connect to power relations in the classroom, institutional policies, or broader South African transformation aims. This is particularly critical as DUT TAs are often black African (as are the authors), and their experiences are shaped by intersecting personal and structural challenges. This collaborative, reflexive autoethnography contributes an exploratory, illustrative account to this underexplored area. Larger empirical studies are needed to produce the evidence necessary for meaningful policy impact.

Methodology

Research design

This study is a reflexive autoethnography in which the three authors, all black African TAs who facilitated the Cornerstone and EQDV modules at DUT, serve as participants and the primary data source. The data consists of purposively collected reflexive writings authored by the three TAs. Reflections were written *ad hoc*, immediately after particularly challenging tutorial sessions, or after grading a batch of student reflections that contained sensitive disclosures, for example, experiences of discrimination or trauma. A total of three reflective pieces, one from Author 1, one from Author 2, and one from Author 3, were used as data. These reflections were written in the last quarter of 2024. Each reflection was approximately two pages long. Standard questions did not guide the reflections but were retrospectively structured using the model developed by Rolfe and Freshwater (2001) for organisation and analysis. No other data (interviews, field notes, or student material) were used. The Rolfe and Freshwater (2001) Reflective Model was inspired by the work of Borton (1970), who used the reflective prompts "What, So What, and Now What" to develop educational material. The Rolfe Reflective Model helps participants reflect on their experiences, feelings, and actions. The model further seeks to demystify the reflection process by guiding its use. The primary objective of these steps is to surface learning through the stages of describing an event, analysing the findings and implications, and considering future possibilities because of new insights. The three steps are: What? So What? and Now What? as provided in Figure 1 below.

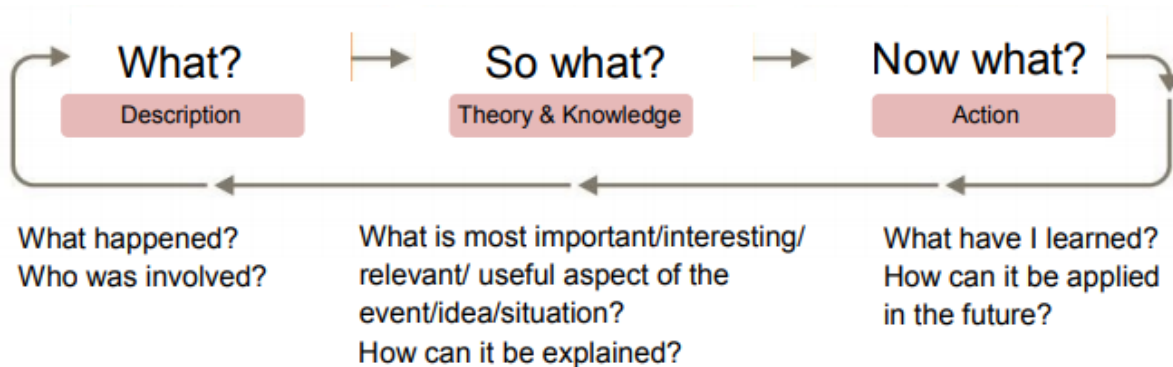


Figure 1. The Rolfe et al Reflective Model (2001)

The first step is ‘What?’ The second Step is ‘So What?’ These steps require you to analyse and evaluate the experience; you can share how it impacted you emotionally and intellectually, as well as what you learned from it. The last step is Now What? - In this step, you are expected to consider the implications of the experience for the future, such as how you can use what you learned should you find yourself in a similar situation. Furthermore, these three steps ensure you can reflect thoroughly by providing the support and questions needed to explore your feelings and experiences more deeply and make sense of them. It further encourages critical thinking and self-awareness by allowing one to learn from their experiences (Bobo & Masango-Muzindutsi, 2022).

Positionality and reflexivity

We, the authors, are black African Teaching Assistants. Our insider status, as members of the same institution and demographic group as many of our students, profoundly shaped our data generation and interpretation. We recognise that our own lived experiences with issues such as racism, gender, and socio-economic challenges in South Africa meant that we frequently experienced personal resonance with the sensitive material shared by students, thereby exacerbating the emotional labour. Our shared identity informed our high sense of empathy but also risked projection and heightened vicarious trauma. Bias was mitigated using a structured reflective framework (Rolfe & Freshwater, 2001) and the collaborative thematic analysis process, which required us to critically cross-check our interpretations against the textual evidence from each author’s reflection.

Analysis procedures

The three reflective pieces were analysed using thematic analysis. The procedure followed a systematic process. All three authors repeatedly read and reviewed the three reflections. Each author independently coded their own and the other two authors’ reflections using NVivo qualitative data analysis software, identifying key experiences, emotional responses (e.g., anxiety, sadness, frustration), and coping mechanisms. Coding was conducted in two rounds: an initial open-coding round in which each author generated descriptive codes independently, followed by a focused-coding round in which codes were compared and consolidated across all three reflections. We convened to compare and discuss our initial codes, resolve discrepancies through consensus, and group related codes into broader themes. Broad themes were inductively derived from the data, including *Emotional Suppression in the Classroom*, *Vicarious Trauma from Grading*, and *Contradictory Institutional Expectations*. Themes were refined through consensus and explicitly linked to the theoretical grounding (Emotional Labour/ Vicarious Trauma). Trustworthiness was ensured through multiple coders (all three authors) who cross-checked the theme derivation against the reflective text using NVivo.

The use of reflective pieces (labelled by the authors) in the findings section ensures that the data support the interpretation. As black African TAs, the authors’ approaches to facilitating discussions of sensitive topics were influenced by both personal and institutional experiences. These positionalities also informed our interpretations of classroom dynamics and student responses. This study acknowledges a limitation that the coding and theme derivation process was conducted exclusively by the three authors, without external peer debriefing or independent verification by a fourth reviewer. This insider-only process carries the risk of confirmatory bias, as all coders

share the same institutional context and lived experience as the data source. Future studies adopting a similar autoethnographic approach should consider incorporating external credibility checks, such as peer debriefing, co-coding or member checking, to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis.

Discussions

What? – Description of experiences

This section presents a rich set of reflections from Authors 1, 2, and 3, offering a nuanced and emotionally resonant analysis. Using the Rolfe and Freshwater (2001) framework, Author 1 reflected on her experiences of facilitating CSTN101 and revealed that the themes she facilitates are both exciting and challenging at certain times. Author 1 further shared that when facilitating, one can observe the students' behaviour through their participation, emotions, body language, and written activities. Author 1 also shared valuable insights into the challenges and complexities of facilitating CSTN101, noting that the module is not only academically but also emotionally challenging, often resulting in vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue Figley 2013 for both students and the facilitators. For example, some students may have a strong emotional reaction when discussing issues of identity, inclusion, and equality, which makes it challenging to maintain a safe and respectful learning environment. Some students may be reluctant to participate in these discussions due to their personal experiences or beliefs.

Author 2 further elaborated that they did facilitate one of the sensitive topics and saw that the atmosphere was no longer the same, not only for students but for her as well. The emotions were high in class, and most students were sad. Author 2 kept asking themselves questions, and amid all that, she had to try to put on a calm, strong posture. Author 2 then decided to conduct an icebreaker to calm everyone and refocus their attention. Furthermore, the author shared a few recommendations with the students on how to address stigma and discrimination should they encounter them at the university level.

Author 3 also shared a scenario where they were facilitating a class. After the tutorial ended, a student approached the author and said they could not participate in class because the theme triggered them. The student was experiencing gender-based violence at home. The student further shared how they were a secondary victim of such trauma, and the lesson was too much to comprehend. Author 3 suggested that the student contact the student counselling department for assistance.

Author 2 stated that as they prepared to teach a sensitive topic in class, they sometimes felt anxious and uncertain about how it would be received. However, the author did their best to create a safe and supportive learning environment. Author 1 also ascertained that although a theme might sometimes cause discomfort, they also sometimes feel a sense of pride in their ability to handle a sensitive topic with care and compassion. It is always a valuable learning experience for both the facilitator and the students.

Furthermore, Author 2 said that while facilitating Cornerstone, they noticed that one of their students was particularly affected by the discussion. Students seemed very upset and tearful, and unsure how to respond. However, Author 2 gently asked the students whether they would like to discuss the topic, and the students said they were overwhelmed by the subject and the emotions it evoked. Author 2 then listened, offered support, and encouraged students to care for themselves. From this experience, Author 2 learned that it is vital to be prepared for students to react differently to sensitive topics.

Nevertheless, Author 3 also noted that topics can affect facilitators and have a profound impact. This occurs when a facilitator is unaware of their own emotional response to the material and works diligently to create a safe and supportive environment for their students. They used respectful language, provided appropriate resources, and allowed time for reflection and debriefing afterwards. Despite taking these precautions, they still found themselves emotionally affected by the topic and the students' reactions.

So what? – Analysis and interpretation

The following step presents the experiences the teaching assistants encountered while facilitating the Cornerstone module. It provides a detailed account of how these experiences emotionally and intellectually affected the teaching assistants. It will also discuss the lessons learned from these experiences.

Analysis of experiences

Being a teaching assistant for a Cornerstone module has been one of the most valuable opportunities, as it provides TAs with valuable experience in the academic environment. Facilitating a Cornerstone or EQDV module at Durban University of Technology can be both rewarding and challenging. Thus, these experiences can vary depending on the themes that are covered in the course, the institution, and the students. As a TA, it is their responsibility to foster skills development, promote social awareness and encourage self-understanding among students. A TA's responsibility is to manage classroom dynamics and create a positive learning environment, thereby making it conducive for students to participate in and engage with classroom discussions. This applies to various activities, including group discussions, class activities, and pair work. Therefore, this helps students better understand the information.

A TA faces many challenges, such as classroom dynamics, because students come from various backgrounds. In this case, some students lack respect towards others in class. Various factors, including cultural and socio-economic influences, can contribute to a lack of respect among students in a classroom. These factors can influence students' behaviour by placing greater value on competition or individualism, leading to less emphasis on respectful behaviour. Another aspect is that a TA may encounter talkative students in class, while others remain quiet, and sometimes students do not get along, particularly when working in groups. For example, conflict may arise from differences in opinions, misunderstandings about course content and assignments, and clashes in personality.

Emotional and intellectual impact

There was a recurring theme of emotional labour, with facilitators having to manage both their own emotions and those of the students. Emotional labour is defined as managing one's own emotions while managing others' emotions. (Faulkner & Thompson, 2023) A facilitator experiences a range of emotions while teaching, such as empathy for students' challenges. TAs may develop a deep sense of empathy as they engage with students who share personal stories of discrimination, stigma, or struggles related to the classroom themes. Facilitating discussions on sensitive topics like prejudice, HIV/AIDS, and stereotypes can be emotionally challenging, often resulting in vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue (Figley 2013; Grandey, 2000) for a TA because they also experience discomfort and stress. Author 2 shared their experience:

"I had to try and put on a calm, strong posture for the class... I sometimes also feel a sense of pride in my ability to handle a sensitive topic with care and compassion." (Author 2)

Meanwhile, facilitators are expected to maintain professionalism and composure while teaching sensitive topics and managing classroom dynamics. Grandey's Integrated Model of Emotional Labour refers to these expectations as display rules, which require individuals to regulate their emotions despite personal distress (Grandey, 2000). Author 2's account above is a vivid illustration of surface acting, one of the two regulatory strategies in Grandey's (2000) framework, in which the facilitator consciously altered her outward emotional presentation (projecting calm and strength) while her internal emotional state remained distressed. Her internal questions and the heightened sadness in the classroom were suppressed behind a composed professional exterior, precisely as display rules demand. Author 3's reflection similarly demonstrates surface acting. Despite still finding themselves emotionally affected by the topic and the students' reactions after the session, they maintained respectful language and a supportive environment throughout the tutorial. As Author 3 reflected:

"Despite taking these precautions, I still found myself emotionally affected by the topic and the students' reactions" (Author 3).

This sustained gap between internal experience and outward display is the defining characteristic of surface acting, and it is precisely the kind of emotional regulation that Grandey (2000) identifies as most associated with exhaustion and burnout over time. In contrast, Author 1's reported sense of pride in managing sensitive material with care and compassion reflects deep acting, the second regulatory strategy in the framework, in which the facilitator actively worked to align her internal emotional state with the positive, supportive role her position required. This aligns with the findings of a study conducted by Heath et al. (2017), which highlighted that sensitive content poses risks for both students and teaching staff, particularly those who may be vulnerable or have personal connections to the subject matter.

Vicarious trauma from grading student reflections

TAs often experienced vicarious trauma from grading student reflections that contained sensitive material. Such exercises often led to a lot of anxiety and depression, particularly when reading and grading the students' reflections at home. This anxiety began to disrupt sleeping patterns. Author 1 revealed that:

“Facilitating sensitive topics often led to a lot of anxiety and depression, particularly when reading and grading the students' reflections at home. This anxiety began to disrupt sleeping patterns. The depression started to affect my family and my work performance... So, all of these were now threatening my income and livelihood.” (Author 1)

The depression started to affect Author 1's family and work performance. This resulted in a facilitator falling behind on administrative duties, such as marking. These psychosocial effects were now threatening their income and livelihood. Author 2's reflection similarly reveals the cumulative toll of repeated exposure to students' distressing disclosures:

“When I got home after that session, I could not stop thinking about what the students had shared. I kept asking myself whether I had done enough and whether they would be okay with it. It stayed with me for days” (Author 2).

This account illustrates the classic trajectory of vicarious trauma as described by Figley (2013): a progressive emotional absorption of the distress of those supports, which spills over into private life and disrupts ordinary functioning. Critically, both Author 1 and Author 2 continued to carry out their professional duties, including marking, facilitating, and supporting students, while simultaneously experiencing significant psychological strain. This sustained discrepancy between internal distress and professional performance represents surface acting in its most demanding and costly form (Grandey, 2000). TAs may also feel frustrated when faced with resistance or pushback from students who hold different viewpoints or are unwilling to engage in discussions. Having students who lack attendance, do not submit reflections or assignments, or do not participate in the classroom can further compound the stress; the pressure of meeting curriculum goals and deadlines, while managing one's own emotional residue from sensitive facilitation, can result in emotional and physical exhaustion. According to Grandey's (2000) integrative model, when facilitators experience anxiety, depression, or frustration but still present calmness and encouragement in class, they engage in surface acting (masking true feelings). Additionally, finding satisfaction in student progress reflects deep acting, in which facilitators genuinely strive to align their internal emotional state with the positive, caring role their position demands.

Despite the challenges a facilitator may encounter, being a teaching assistant offers valuable opportunities for academic growth. TAs gain valuable experience by learning how to facilitate discussions effectively, manage diverse viewpoints, and promote respectful communication in the classroom. This aligns with the research study conducted by Anderson (2017), which acknowledges that facilitating discussions on complex topics enhances facilitators' critical thinking skills as they engage with diverse perspectives and promote critical analysis. It also improves their ability to facilitate discussions effectively. By facilitating discussions on privilege and power, prejudice, and discrimination, TAs become more aware of their own biases and work to address them, thereby gaining deeper insight into themselves and their growth. The themes covered by TAs also encourage them to engage in research to deepen their understanding of the subject and facilitate their intellectual development.

Lessons learned

This section will discuss the valuable lessons learned through the challenges experienced. We have learned the importance of clarifying the module's content. This helps students connect theoretical concepts to real-world applications. This also helps students better understand the discussions, making it easier for them to engage in class and apply the correct information when writing reflections and assignments. We have learned the significance of delivering content in a manner that resonates with students' comprehension. This is because we discovered that language barriers can hinder students' understanding of the content. Therefore, it is crucial to convey subject matter using language that students can easily understand.

We have learned that we need to encourage problem-solving skills. If conflicts arise in the classroom, TAs must help students understand the importance of adhering to a set of common goals and working together. This includes encouraging them to participate in discussions and ensuring that everyone is treated fairly and equally. Omodan and Skosana (2023) highlighted the importance of fostering open dialogue and establishing

clear guidelines and expectations, which provided undergraduate students with the tools to manage conflicts. Furthermore, Omodan (2023) revealed that collaboration and teamwork resolved university students' conflicts. Facilitating discussions of sensitive themes can sharpen a TA's critical thinking skills as they deal with complex issues, analyse different perspectives, and encourage students to think critically about societal structures and norms. This critical engagement with knowledge production and power dynamics is central to developing advanced critical thinking (Moodley & Chetty, 2024).

Now what? – Implications and recommendations for future practice

In this step, the authors consider the implications of their experiences for future use, such as how they can apply what they have learned in similar situations. The recommendations for future use are as follows.

Ensuring a safe environment

This is one of the most significant aspects to consider when facilitating modules such as Cornerstone. This is because if the facilitator cannot create a safe learning environment, students will not engage in discussions, and they will fear sharing their experiences. The Cornerstone module places greater emphasis on lived experiences than on statistics, promoting the importance of creating a comfortable classroom environment where all students feel at ease and can share their own experiences. Creating a safe space can involve developing a shared set of values that students can uphold, such as respect, confidentiality, empathy, and integrity. Wagh (2023) stressed that creating safe environments was central in higher education. Stanfill and Klean Zwilling (2023) also argue that creating safe spaces should be about protecting students and staff in this context from harm rather than shielding them from discomfort.

Peer consultation sessions

The authors' reflections revealed that they experienced some emotional and psychosocial effects after facilitating certain topics. Therefore, they commend the use of pilot discussions between colleagues; this will enable facilitators to share their thoughts about a specific topic with another colleague, who will also share their input. This will make it easier for facilitators to know what to expect from students and how to handle discussions that may arise from a particular theme. Jennings (2018) mentions how peer relationships act as a stress buffer and reduce anxiety and trauma caused by exposure to sensitive material. These peer consultations could take place before classes, during which TAs could share best practices for facilitating discussions on sensitive topics. Classes tend to have different dynamics and characters. However, TAs could apply lessons learned from previous classes to improve their practice moving forward.

Debriefing sessions

Debriefing sessions, aligned with trauma-informed pedagogical practices (Carello & Butler, 2014), are discussions that take place after a learning activity and are mainly used when a sensitive theme or material may cause discomfort to some. Gardner (2013) defines debriefing as a post-experience analytic process that analyses an experience, evaluates, and incorporates lessons learned into a person's cognition. Crookall (2023) noted that debriefing is a strategy for emotional processing, professional growth, and burnout prevention. To facilitate discussions on sensitive topics, it would be crucial to include debriefing sessions after each theme is explored in class. Debriefing will help facilitators process their reactions to sensitive themes and explore their thoughts and feelings in the presence of a trained psychologist.

Training

Addressing the challenges teaching assistants face while supporting student learning in the Cornerstone and EQDV modules requires a combination of strategies and approaches. Strategies include fostering emotional intelligence by developing empathy and active teaching and listening skills. TAs can then better understand and respond to students' emotional needs. Another strategy is to take advantage of professional development opportunities offered by the university or other educational institutions, such as teaching workshops, conferences, and webinars. This approach can benefit TAs by helping them gain valuable skills in managing challenges in the academic environment. Hall (2020) also emphasises the importance of institutional support in ensuring that those affected by sensitive topics are adequately assisted. According to Grandey (2000), such resources and institutional support reduce strain and improve well-being, and buffer the adverse effects of emotional labour. That said, the university needs to recognise the adverse psychosocial effects of addressing sensitive topics and

provide adequate training and support for its staff. Such approaches require the enactment and implementation of institutional policies.

Contribution to knowledge

This study adds new, context-specific knowledge by providing a rare, in-depth reflexive autoethnographic account of the psychosocial challenges faced by black African TAs in facilitating sensitive curricula within a South African University of Technology. Unlike existing studies that focus on the student experience or general staff (Borshuk, 2017; Cebula et al., 2022; Conradie, 2023), this paper highlights the vulnerability of part-time TAs, whose professional precarity is exacerbated by the emotional labour and vicarious trauma inherent in their duties. The findings move beyond general challenges to detail the specific impact on professional duties (e.g., marking backlog) and personal life (e.g., disrupted sleep, family impact), thus offering a strong evidence base for policy change at DUT. However, a more comprehensive empirical study is needed to provide significantly deeper insights that could influence policy change and contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning at a university of technology.

Conclusion

Facilitating sensitive topics in transformative learning modules, such as Cornerstone and Equality and Diversity, presents profound psychosocial challenges for Teaching Assistants (TAs). This reflexive autoethnographic study reveals that TAs frequently navigate emotional labour, vicarious trauma, and institutional expectations while striving to maintain safe, inclusive learning environments. These experiences underscore the dual vulnerability of TAs, both as educators and as individuals whose identities often resonate with the sensitive content they teach. The findings underscore the pressing need for structured institutional support, including trauma-informed training, peer consultation, and debriefing mechanisms, to safeguard TAs' well-being and enhance pedagogical effectiveness. By situating these insights within the South African higher education context, this exploratory autoethnographic study makes an illustrative contribution to discussions on transformative pedagogy and equity, offering a context-specific perspective that foregrounds the emotional and structural dimensions of teaching sensitive curricula. Given that the study draws on three reflective pieces by the authors themselves, its contribution is intentionally exploratory rather than generalisable. It is best understood as a foundation for future empirical inquiry. Future research should extend these reflections through empirical studies to inform policy reforms that prioritise mental health sustainability and inclusive teaching practices in higher education.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This paper draws on educational studies, psychology, organisational behaviour, and sociology. It integrates transformative learning pedagogy and reflective practices frameworks from educational research with psychosocial theory and occupational health psychology to analyse the lived experiences of Teaching Assistants. The study is further situated within a sociological and critical race framework, engaging with questions of structural transformations, institutional equity, and the intersecting personal and social challenges facing black African TAs in the South African higher education contexts.

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