



## A Reflective Shift towards Student–Staff Partnerships for Inclusive and Decolonial Curriculum Co-Creation in the Global South

Lukhona Leni,<sup>1</sup> Esai Reddy,<sup>2</sup> Xena Cupido,<sup>3</sup> Subethra Pather,<sup>1</sup> Siyabulela Sabata,<sup>1</sup> Tefo Mosienyane,<sup>2</sup> Zwelibanzi Ngculu,<sup>3</sup> Ashleigh Petersen-Cloete,<sup>1</sup> Joe-Dean Roberts,<sup>2</sup> Daniela Gachago,<sup>2</sup> Deidré Johnson,<sup>3</sup> Asanda Ngoasheng,<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic), University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa

<sup>2</sup>Centre for Innovation for Learning and Teaching, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

<sup>3</sup>Fundani CHED, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa

Corresponding author: [cupidox@cput.ac.za](mailto:cupidox@cput.ac.za)

### Abstract

This article offers a reflective account of the forming of the Designing for Social Justice Partnership. The initiative comprised a student–staff partnership to reimagine curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional practice in South African higher education. Grounded in the philosophy of Ubu-ntu and Sentipensante Pedagogy, we sought to unsettle hierarchies, foster inclusivity, and co-create spaces where knowledge is relational, contested, and transformative. Drawing on participatory approaches and Gibbs' reflective cycle, we engaged in iterative cycles of description, analysis, and reimagining, treating tensions as opportunities for deeper learning. A key artefact emerged that anchored the process: the “Knowledge Tree” and “Our Flags.” This served as compass points, prompting interrogation about the origin of knowledge, whose interests it serves, and the shared commitments that shaped our collaboration. Critical questions about role clarity, resource equity, and differing understandings of social justice and decolonisation emerged during the study. Our recommendations for forming student-staff partnerships emphasise intentional dialogue, transparent agreements, regular revisiting of roles, and conditions where dissent is recognised as care for the collective. Key lessons include centering relationships over roles, addressing visible and invisible hierarchies, as well as embracing the “messiness” of co-creation. Furthermore, the importance of grounding partnerships in local philosophical and pedagogical traditions rather than importing Global North models became apparent. This study offers a situated, evolving account of how socially just decolonial student–staff partnerships can be nurtured in post-apartheid South African universities. It invites scholars and practitioners to reimagine student–staff engagement as a continuous, relational process of learning to co-create and transform together.

**Keywords:** decolonial curriculum; Global South; Sentipensante Pedagogy; student–staff partnerships; Ubu-ntu

### Introduction

One of the primary calls emerging from the 2015 #RhodesMustFall and the 2016 #FeesMustFall student-led protests, which started in South Africa but expanded worldwide, was a call for decolonisation. These student movements challenged institutionalised westernised curricula and pedagogies, advocating instead for the recognition and inclusion of indigenous knowledge(s) and for teaching to be more

reflective of context and lived realities (Morreria, 2021; Nyamnjoh, 2017). At the time, many universities adopted an approach that sought to include student voices to help transform curricula in ways that could make them more meaningful and comprehensive. This was considered one of the major pathways to change and transformation in higher education (Ahmed, 2019).

This article offers a reflection on Student-Staff Partnerships (SSP) through the Designing for Social Justice Partnership (DSJP) project, which

was established in response to students' calls for including their voices in curriculum decisions. The DSJP project aimed to develop a context-sensitive, African, decolonial model for SSPs that recognises the impact of historical collective trauma and the need to heal colonial wounds. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the differentiated institutional histories and educational cultures and how these could affect student–staff engagement.

The DSJP was a three-year project that had two broad aims: 1) to develop context-specific, socially just, and decolonial models for SSPs in Africa and 2) to develop an overarching approach/framework to support the introduction and sustainability of SSPs in higher education in Africa. Against this background, this article aims to critically examine the development and enactment of contextually grounded student–staff partnerships within the DSJP in South Africa. Drawing on the philosophical grounding of Ubuntu and Sentipensante Pedagogy, the study endeavours to explore how relationality, reflexivity, and co-creation can be mobilised to challenge hierarchical norms, disrupt exclusionary practices, and advance socially just and decolonial approaches to partnerships in higher education. Through reflective analysis of our collaborative processes, tensions, and transformative moments, the study aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on student–staff partnerships by offering insights that are rooted in the lived realities, histories, and epistemologies of the Global South.

### ***Students as Partners: Origins and Global North Paradigms***

The idea of Students as Partners (SaPs) has become more evident in higher education over the past two decades. Much of the early work comes from the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and the United States. SaPs is described as a collaborative process where students and staff contribute to shaping curriculum and pedagogy in meaningful ways (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014). This approach challenges the traditional idea that all the authority rests with the teachers, and students are merely passive recipients (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; Matthews, 2017).

In the Global North, SaPs often build on liberal democratic values such as dialogue, equality, and reciprocity (Matthews, Dwyer, Hine, & Turner, 2018). Although these principles are valuable, their application assumes stable institutional contexts and a culture of participation (Bovill, 2020). This is not always the case in the Global South, where historical inequalities, political instability, and resource constraints shape everyday realities in universities. Some scholars have also warned that SaPs can risk becoming symbolic if they are not rooted in genuine power sharing (Seale, Gibson, Haynes, & Potter, 2015). This became evident in South Africa with the student-led #RhodesMustFall (2015) and #FeesMustFall (2015–2017) protests. These movements brought the issue of student alienation and curriculum transformation into national focus and called for the dismantling of Western knowledge systems and for valuing African and indigenous ways of knowing (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Morreira, 2017; Heleta, 2016; Mbembe, 2016). Thus, student-staff partnerships in this context need to address the legacy of colonialism and apartheid. Moreover, it must take into account neoliberal pressures that have increased inequalities in higher education (Hlatshwayo & Moloji, 2024; Ige, Doyle, & Pienaar, 2023). Decolonial scholarship reminds us that power differences exist not only between students and staff but also within student groups. These differences are often shaped by race, gender, language, and socio-economic background (Soudien, 2010; Luckett & Shay, 2020).

Student-staff partnerships must go beyond including student voices in token ways if they are to be truly transformative; they must ask who is in the room, whose knowledge counts, and whose perspectives remain unheard (Masuku, Cox, & Willmers, 2024). As Hall, MacDonnell, McConnell, and Jones (2022) argue, this requires partnerships to be deliberately designed to challenge existing hierarchies rather than to reproduce them. It was therefore critical for our project to ground student-staff partnerships in a philosophy that speaks to this need.

### *Ubu-ntu as Philosophical Grounding*

The African philosophy of ubu-ntu provides a profound ethical foundation for student–staff partnerships in South Africa. The concept is commonly expressed as umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu, which means “a person is a person through other people”. It affirms that our humanity is relational and that individual well-being is inseparable from the well-being of others (Ramose, 1999, 2002). In a higher education context, ubu-ntu calls for learning environments to be rooted in collective care, mutual respect, and shared responsibility (Gyekye, 1987; Dladla, 2020). Accordingly, these principles were employed to shape everyday interactions within the DSPJ. Team members worked to create spaces where every voice could be heard, where institutional titles did not determine whose contribution mattered, and where deep listening was valued as much as speaking.

Letseka (2012) argues that the philosophy of ubu-ntu is able to enrich pedagogical approaches by centering human dignity and empathy, underlining its potential to support dialogical and participatory forms of learning. In the context of student–staff partnerships, Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) and Waghid and Davids (2014) have demonstrated how relational approaches and/or ubuntu-informed practices can foster co-creation by reducing hierarchical divides and enabling mutual vulnerability. However, as Metz (2011) cautions, invoking ubu-ntu cannot remain a rhetorical gesture; it must be enacted through practices that actively disrupt exclusion, inequity, and the reproduction of privilege within institutions. More especially in student partnership work, this means creating structures that ensure equitable access to resources, decision-making, and recognition, particularly for students whose voices have historically been marginalised. Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) maintain that when relationality is embedded into the design and governance of partnerships, it can transform not only interpersonal relationships but also institutional culture. For the DSJP, this meant holding ourselves accountable to the ethic of shared humanity, ensuring that care, trust, and reciprocity were not abstract ideals, but lived realities in every stage of the project. To achieve

this, the values and principles of ubu-ntu as a pedagogy were required to guide our practice.

### *Sentipensante Pedagogy: Integrating Intellectual, Emotional, and Spiritual Dimensions*

Sentipensante Pedagogy, developed by Rendón (2009), complements the African philosophy of ubu-ntu and offers a powerful approach to decolonial work in higher education. It calls for a balance between intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth, challenging the Western academic tendency to separate reason from feeling. This pedagogy invites both educators and students to slow down, reflect, and engage with care, empathy, and multiple ways of acquiring knowledge (Rendón & Kanagala, 2014). These ideas resonate with hooks’ (1994) concept of engaged pedagogy, where self-actualisation is central to learning.

In the DSJP, Sentipensante principles informed practices already emerging in the partnership; emotional engagement was treated as integral to academic contribution. This was particularly important during moments of disagreement, when reflection and empathy sustained dialogue. Similarly, Zembylas (2018) observes that integrating emotional and ethical dimensions into learning environments fosters deeper transformation in higher education. Sentipensante provided both language and structure for the educational space we sought to create; one where students and staff could co-create holistically. In addition, it provided a call to balance rationality and intuition, Western and non-Western knowledges, and aligned with our aim to create learning spaces that were relational, reflective, and socially just. In contrast to the performance-driven ethos of higher education, it offered a different set of recommendations: slow down, reflect, and allow emotional and spiritual intelligences to guide engagement (Rendón, 2009).

This alignment with Global South paradigms was striking, like Ubu-ntu, Sentipensante views education as a relational, communal, and spiritual act rather than a transactional exchange. This helped us address both cognitive development and the affective and ethical dimensions of collaboration within student-

staff partnerships. In light of the enduring inequalities and historical violence embedded in our institutions, this was a crucial aspect of our approach. The ethos of *Sentipensante* encouraged actively challenging dominant academic assumptions such as the supremacy of rational knowledge, the individualisation of success, the silencing of emotion, and the relentless pace of academia. Instead, we adopted new agreements that prioritised wholeness, collaboration, wisdom, and social justice. As Rendón (2005) reminds us, this shift also requires reimagining the structure of academic life, valuing rest, recognising emotional labour, and resisting the normalisation of burnout.

### ***Integrating Ubu-ntu, Sentipensante, and Decolonial SSP Practice – Towards Co-creation***

In combination, *ubu-ntu* and *Sentipensante* Pedagogy offer a framework grounded in African contexts while remaining connected to broader movements within educational change. On the one hand, *ubu-ntu* underscores the importance of relationships, shared humanity, and ethical responsibility, on the other, *Sentipensante* ensures that learning engages the whole person: mind, heart, and spirit. These philosophies resonate with the idea of “pluriversality” in learning, where multiple ways of acquiring knowledge are recognised as valid (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). This helps resist the tendency to import partnership models from the Global North without adapting them to southern contexts.

DSPJ, in a South African context, denoted that each participant’s knowledge, background, history, and experience would collaboratively shape the project. Healey et al. (2014) describe co-creation as a process that challenges traditional hierarchies, positioning students as partners rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Bovill (2020) emphasises that genuine co-creation requires intentional practices that foster trust, openness, and mutual respect, ensuring students have real influence over decisions. Similarly, Cook-Sather et al. (2014) argue that co-creation is both a pedagogical approach and an ethical stance, underpinned by relationality and reciprocity. Thus, when enacted well, co-creation can lead to transformative shifts in power relations, greater

engagement, and the development of learning environments that are more inclusive, responsive, and socially just. In the DSJP, using these frameworks meant valuing emotional labour, slowing the pace of decision-making when needed, and making space for different forms of knowledge. It also meant accepting that partnership work would be “messy” and that this was part of its strength.

### ***Situating the Student-Staff Partnership Project***

Our DSJP project team was composed of a diverse team of individuals from various backgrounds: all had lived experiences from both academic and professional environments. Jointly, there were a total of eleven core members: three permanent academic staff members (project leads), five students (postgraduate level and student assistant), one academic/researcher (contract), and two technical personnel (instructional designer and coach). This diversity of roles allowed for a rich interplay of perspectives, shaped by both positional authority and personal insight.

The three senior academics who were project leads, all work in higher education academic development and have a long-standing commitment to student engagement, participatory learning, and social justice which informed much of our foundational thinking. These individuals have held influential positions within national networks and associations, contributing both institutional authority and broader systemic insight to the team. One team member offered specialised expertise in online learning, instructional technology, and digital pedagogy which served as a valuable bridge between practical and conceptual knowledge in the context of innovative educational design.

The addition of students as early-career researchers consisted of three postgraduate students and one student assistant. The postgraduate students were drawn from diverse fields such as gender studies, linguistics, anthropology, information systems, and religious and social justice studies. This introduced lived experiences and disciplinary perspectives that enriched the project’s design and evaluation. Their insights proved to be integral to the project’s

success, since they provided a deep understanding of student realities. This was illustrated by their suggestion that the gap between theory and practice could be bridged by facilitating peer engagement, co-developing tools and resources, and offering critical feedback on processes and outputs. Furthermore, their active participation ensured that the project's approaches were relevant, inclusive, and grounded in the diverse realities of higher education learners. The student assistant was helpful in the administration and coordination of the project while also being actively engaged in linking the logistical processes with the project's collaborative ethos.

The team was further enriched by three mid-level academic staff with backgrounds in the arts, digital learning design, educational technology, and visual communication, which amplified the project's reach and accessibility. They proposed visual storytelling, digital course design, and multimedia resource production to make complex ideas engaging, accessible, and adaptable across varied learning contexts. Their contributions which ranged from research and coordination to administrative roles, helped to operationalise the project as well as deepening its theoretical foundations.

In addition to the above, two non-core members: an external facilitator and a visual artist, participated on an ad hoc basis. The facilitator managed our research and led the development of our theory of change while providing essential support in navigating challenges, diffusing tensions, and providing space for transformative dialogue. The visual artist in turn documented the project's journey, using creative illustrations and transforming discussions and ideas into compelling visual narratives that foster shared understanding. The diversity of our team in terms of seniority, role, and identity, amongst others, inevitably created potential power differentials. These dynamics are reflected on in the following section where methods of managing positionality and privilege were explored and negotiated within our shared space.

### Methods

The 11 core project team members collaboratively reflected on the experience of

forming the SSP. The team members involved in this project were from three historically differentiated higher education institutions in the Western Cape, South Africa. These are: a university of technology, a relatively young institution founded on mergers; a historically disadvantaged university catering to largely underserved students and showcasing a long history of resistance during and after Apartheid and, lastly, a historically white, advantaged liberal university that has experienced many transformation challenges in post-Apartheid South Africa. One such example was when this institution was at the epicentre of the first wave of student protests, centred around the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes on its main campus, sparking the #RhodesMustFall movement in 2015 (Ngoasheng et al., 2019).

Our methodology comprises the sharing of our experiences in the form of a critical reflective (Fook, 2011) account of the DSJP. Fook (2011) argues that critical reflection can be developed as a research method because it enables deeper understanding of practical experience. Using this approach, we have endeavoured to offer a situated and interpretive narrative of practice. The reflections that resulted from the project, and from the perspective of all the team members, draw on lived experiences, observations, and collective sense-making processes that took place over the course of three years. The analysis is guided by Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle, which offers six stages for structured reflection: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action planning. This framework allowed the authors to move beyond simple storytelling to a deeper examination of meaning. The cyclical nature of Gibbs' model encouraged returning to experiences more than once, each time with a sharper lens and greater understanding.

While Gibbs' (1988) model provided the structure, the reflection was infused with the fundamental philosophies of *ubu-ntu* and *Sentipensante Pedagogy*. *Ubu-ntu*, as an African ethic of relationality, shaped the way experiences were interpreted and emphasised how human connections, mutual respect, and shared responsibility influenced the partnership (Ramose, 1999; Letseka, 2012). The lens of *ubu-ntu*

reminded the authors that knowledge in this project was collaborative and that individual contributions were always seen as a collective effort. Sentipensante Pedagogy (Rendón, 2009) complemented this by highlighting the integration of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual dimensions in the reflection.

The reflective process acknowledged not only what happened but also how participants felt, what they valued, and how meaning was made through dialogue. This meant that both cognitive and affective responses were seen as valid sources of insight. The reflections were informed by a range of data sources which included project meeting notes, workshop artefacts, participant journals, recorded dialogues, and visual facilitation outputs created during the DSJP. These materials were revisited collectively and individually, allowing for both shared and personal interpretations to emerge. The writing process itself was collaborative and iterative; drafts were circulated among all the team members, with feedback sessions focusing on whether the accounts felt authentic, balanced, and aligned with the principles of *ubu-ntu* and Sentipensante Pedagogy. The aim was to produce a narrative that was both transparent about the tensions and challenges that emerged during the development of the SSP while also recognising the growth and transformation that took place. By combining Gibbs' (1988) structured framework with the relational ethic of *ubu-ntu* and the integrative stance of Sentipensante Pedagogy, the methodology ensured that the reflection was both systematic and deeply human. It allowed space for complexity, discomfort, and multiple perspectives, which are essential in critically examining socially just partnerships in higher education.

In conjunction with the above, our methodological approach embraced the artful and interpretive component of the thematic analysis spectrum, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis orientation. This positioning reflected our commitment to socially just, decolonial inquiry, where meaning-making is inseparable from the philosophical grounding of *ubu-ntu* and Sentipensante Pedagogy. Our analysis was positioned within a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm where co-constructed

understandings were adopted over purely descriptive accounts. Our analytic practice unfolded as a dialogic process, where multiple voices and ways of knowing were integrated to generate meaning-based, interpretative stories rather than surface-level topic summaries. This required harmony between our research values, theoretical assumptions, and methodological choices. Divergences from conventional thematic practice, such as integrating visual artefacts and collective sense-making sessions, were intentional and theoretically grounded, enabling us to include complexity and nuance within the analysis. Reflexivity was not treated as a technical safeguard against bias but as a deeply relational practice, shaping how we engaged with the data and each other. Themes emerged through iterative cycles of engagement, reflection, and re-engagement, honouring both the intellectual and the affective dimensions of knowledge production. The resulting thematic structure, visually represented through the “Knowledge Tree” and “Our Flags,” reflects this layered, interpretive process and stands as both a methodological outcome and an artefact of the partnership's relational ethos.

## Findings and Discussion

The findings and discussion are framed using Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle to provide a structured, yet iterative account of our experiences in the DSJP. This approach enabled a layered interpretation of events, integrating the descriptive, affective, evaluative, and analytical dimensions of our journey. In line with the project's grounding in *ubu-ntu* (Ramose, 1999) and Sentipensante Pedagogy (Rendón, 2009), reflection was embedded throughout, rather than reserved for *post-factum* evaluation. This structure allowed for a critical engagement with both the practical enactment of SSPs and the philosophical frameworks that shaped them, revealing the relational processes, tensions, and transformations that emerged.

### *At the very beginning: Anchoring the SSP*

From the outset, we anchored the Designing for Social Justice Partnership (DSJP) in three interlinked principles: relationality (a fundamental principle of *ubuntu*), reflexivity, and

co-creation. Relationality was cultivated through openness, genuine curiosity about one another’s perspectives, and making spaces for dialogue where all voices held equal weight (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Matthews et al., 2018). Reflexivity required both staff and students to examine their assumptions, positionalities, and the power dynamics shaping their interactions (Bovill, 2020). This iterative self-awareness helped ensure that our collaboration remained authentic rather than tokenistic, aligning with calls in the literature for partnerships that move beyond symbolic participation towards meaningful co-creation (Healey et al., 2014; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).

As Bovill (2020) reminds us, co-creation in higher education draws on students’ knowledge, skills, and experiences to inform and shape educational processes. In systems where educators traditionally hold decision-making authority, it often falls to academics to take the first step in inviting students into these spaces. From the outset, we knew that the DSJP could not be approached with a transactional mindset. Instead, we sought to create a partnership where staff and students could contribute their whole selves; their histories, emotions, and aspirations, to the project. This required dismantling academic hierarchies

that often marginalise voices. We entered into the process with care, curiosity, and a shared desire to imagine more equitable and inclusive academic practices.

Rather than prescribing fixed goals or rigid outcomes, we embraced an emergent, iterative approach to co-design (Brown, 2017). This reflected our belief that the potential for transformation lies in moving with one another, rather than ahead of one another. This orientation aligns with broader movements that position student–staff partnerships as an ethical response to the dehumanising, “students as consumers”, model (Healey et al., 2014; Cook-Sather, Matthews, Ntem & Leathwick, 2018). We therefore envisioned an educational system that emphasised connection, care, and co-creation.

**Surfacing Shared Values: Voices in the Field**

Our first workshop served as a generative starting point for articulating the values and commitments that would underpin the SSP. Guided by the philosophical grounding of ubu-ntu and the integrative ethic of Sentipensante Pedagogy, we worked collaboratively to create three artefacts that would anchor our engagement: Voices in the Field, The Knowledge Tree, and Our Flags (represented in Figure 1).



Figure 1: Designing for Social Justice Partnership Values and Commitments

The Voices in the Field activity highlighted those whose perspectives had historically been excluded from decision-making spaces in higher education. Informed by the maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (Ramose, 1999), we deliberately prioritised the voices of vulnerable communities, marginalised student groups, and those positioned outside institutional power. This was not an abstract gesture: instead, it was a deliberate commitment to a policy of inclusion and critical listening that would underpin all subsequent activities. During these discussions, several statements emerged from students and staff that became enduring reference points. These were:

*a need for engagement, not monologue (Student);*  
*uncomfortable conversations (Staff); and*  
*an awareness of our own complicity (Staff).*

These were not merely observations; they were provocations that continually challenged us to examine how we spoke, how we listened, and how we allowed ourselves to be changed by the partnership. They also echoed Rendón's (2009) Sentipensante principle of balancing intellectual rigour with emotional and relational depth. The call for *engagement, not monologue*, speaks directly to the importance of reciprocal dialogue in SSPs. Relationality in this sense requires moving away from one-way dissemination of ideas to the co-construction of meaning, where both students and staff actively contribute to the conversation. This is consistent with Matthews et al. (2018) who conceive partnership as a collaborative process that disrupts traditional hierarchies, and values diverse forms of knowledge.

For the DSJP, this translated into designing processes that deliberately invited contributions from all participants, ensuring that dialogue was not dominated by institutional authority but shared across the partnership. The recognition of *uncomfortable conversations* acknowledges that relationality is not synonymous with the absence of conflict. Instead, it requires creating conditions where complex issues can be addressed openly, whether they relate to power imbalances, inequities, or divergent worldviews. In the DSJP, embracing discomfort as part of relational practice meant resisting the urge to

prematurely resolve tensions, instead viewing them as opportunities for deepening trust, fostering mutual understanding, and practising the critical reflexivity necessary for social justice (Zembylas, 2015).

An *awareness of our own complicity* added an ethical layer to the practice of relationality. It underscored that the partnership itself was embedded in the systemic inequalities it sought to challenge. Furthermore, participants needed to reflect critically on their own roles, privileges, and the ways they might be perpetuating patterns of exclusion, even unintentionally. Rendón's (2009) Sentipensante Pedagogy affirms this need to balance intellectual engagement with emotional and ethical self-awareness. For the DSJP, this meant creating structured opportunities for reflexive practice, where staff and students could examine how their assumptions, positionalities, and actions shaped the partnership.

As the student-staff partnership evolved, tensions emerged that required careful navigation.

One student reflected that:

*Staff members took charge in one group, which steered the direction of the process.*

A staff member observed that:

*Students spoke up when they needed to speak up, especially when they disagreed with staff.*

Another student noted that:

*Student partners feel like they are jumping between being a staff member and a student. It's like a relation to power. Sometimes feels like code switching. Even in meetings, sometimes we answer questions as a student and sometimes as a staff member. Perhaps we consider things a little more intersectionally?*

These reflections raised questions on role clarity, equity, and power. Despite a shared commitment to the DSJP, differences in the interpretation of key concepts such as social justice and decolonisation became evident. However, these tensions were not seen as setbacks, but rather as invitations to pause, reflect, and reimagine alternative ways of working together.

This was a reminder of the messiness of partnerships.

Several shared priorities emerged from these dialogues which included: the need for ongoing conversation about ways of working and transparency; the importance of speaking up when discomfort arises; striving for parity of resources wherever possible; questioning whether equity is being achieved and returning regularly to discussions about roles and responsibilities. Taken together, these provocations and priorities reframed relationality in the project as a living practice, continually shaped by openness, critical engagement, and mutual vulnerability. In addition, they reinforced the understanding that the depth of relationships in socially just partnerships is inseparable from ethical and political commitments.

### ***Deepening Our Epistemic Commitments: The Knowledge Tree and Flags***

The “Knowledge Tree”, based on an activity inspired by indigenous communities (Battiste, 2002; Kovach, 2009), emerged from a set of generative questions that we formulated as a group. These are: *How do we know what we know? Where does knowledge come from? Who owns knowledge?* By exploring these questions collectively, we confronted the reality that knowledge is neither neutral nor universally accessible. It is relational, historically situated, and profoundly shaped by social, political, and cultural contexts (Odora Hoppers, 2002; Smith, 2012). The visual representation of the tree reminded us that knowledge is not neutral but is instead collaborative, sometimes painful, and often shaped by histories of exclusion. One student reflected that:

*It’s not just about what we know, but who we listen to and who we have not been listening to.*

Engaging with the Knowledge Tree helped underscore the emotional aspects of our work (Andreotti, 2011). We affirmed that unlearning is itself a form of learning, a principle that became a powerful influence in our work. It also confirmed the reality that knowledge-making can be painful, especially when it requires confronting historical exclusion and erasure.

As one staff member reflected that:

*The discomfort of confronting exclusions was real, but so was the joy of co-discovery and the vulnerability of unlearning.*

This orientation resonated with the principles of *ubu-ntu*, which remind us that knowing is always relational and that “a person is a person through other people” (Ramose, 1999; Letseka, 2012). It also aligns with *Sentipensante Pedagogy*, which affirms the integration of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual ways of knowing (Rendón, 2009).

From these conversations, a set of collective agreements emerged, which we represented visually as “Our Flags.” These agreements reflected our intention to actively dismantle hierarchical norms and cultivate an environment where equity and mutual respect were central to our process. Statements that emerged from this engagement led to the following agreements/flags being collectively crafted by students and staff:

- *Problematising language – to critically examine the words, metaphors, and concepts we use, recognising their role in shaping epistemologies and power relations (staff).*
- *Leave titles behind – to remove hierarchical barriers in dialogue, enabling authentic exchange between students and staff (student).*
- *Nurture resistance – to create space for questioning dominant narratives and practices as a legitimate and necessary part of learning and transformation (staff).*

For the DSJP, these shared commitments became crucial to how we engaged as a collective. Recognising discomfort as a precursor to growth encouraged us to accept uncertainty, embrace tension, and remain open to the vulnerability that deep relational learning demands. It also encouraged us to remain cognisant of the ways in which language shapes thought and power (Freire, 1970). Leaving titles behind helped to dissolve unnecessary hierarchies between students and staff, while fostering authentic partnerships and mutual respect (Healey et al., 2014). Moreover, nurturing resistance legitimised the act of

questioning as a form of care, strengthening our collective capacity to challenge inequities and protect the integrity of our work (hooks, 1994). Together, these attitudes emphasised the fact that transformation is seldom comfortable; rather, as Mezirow (2000) reminds us, it is through the productive tensions of dialogue and critical reflection that genuine change emerges.

In practice, these agreements became both anchor and compass for the DSJP. They signalled a commitment to hold one another accountable, to create space for critical reflection, and to ensure that our processes were as important as our output (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). As one staff participant observed:

*This tree is not just about knowledge; it's about how we want to be with each other as we make knowledge.*

This grounding in shared principles helped us navigate the inevitable complexities of collaboration, allowing Ubuntu's ethic of interconnectedness and Sentipensante's call for wholeness, to shape not only what we did, but how we did it.

The "Next Steps" path developed from these discussions symbolised our shared commitment to translating values into action. This included co-designing curriculum in ways that embedded principles of inclusion, rethinking research methodologies to feature marginalised voices, and developing institutional practices that reflected our ethical and philosophical commitments. As one participant noted, "*we committed to work slowly and intentionally, allowing space for emergence and holding space for different rhythms*". The visual artefacts became both anchor and compass for the partnership, holding us accountable for our stated values and offering a tangible reminder of our shared purpose. Moreover, they anchored our work in values, explicitly co-constructed by students and staff, while also charting a path for how those values could be translated into practice. These artefacts also served as a blueprint, affirming that trust, empathy, and care are not peripheral to co-creation but are integral to it (Healey et al., 2014). By drawing on the relational ethic of ubuntu and the integrative orientation of Sentipensante, we positioned affective engagement as a legitimate

and necessary dimension of transformative partnership.

A key feature of the DSJP was its iterative and evolving nature, which extended beyond the initial workshop commitments, values, and knowledge tree exercises. While these early activities provided a foundation for shared language and orientation, the process was marked by ongoing renegotiation and adaptation as voices entered, priorities shifted, and contextual realities surfaced. For example, several of the initial "flags" identified by participants, were redefined or expanded upon as the project progressed, particularly in response to institutional and community dynamics that challenged earlier assumptions. In some cases, next steps initially identified were achieved, while others required rethinking, reviewing of institutional priorities, or coming to terms with the complexity of embedding socially-just practices. This evolution reflects the "messiness" inherent in collaborative and justice-oriented work, where negotiation of power, voice, and direction is continual rather than fixed. Instead of progressing along a linear path, the DSJP unfolded as a dialogical process in which tensions, renegotiations, and adaptations were as significant as the outcomes. Capturing these shifts underscored the relational and dynamic character of the project, demonstrating that the journey of co-creation was itself a critical site of learning and transformation.

### ***A Reflective Shift: From Students as Partners to Student-Staff Partnerships in the Global South***

This article has reflected on our journey of shifting from a Students as Partners (SaPs) framework toward a more contextually grounded practice of student–staff partnerships (SSPs) in the Global South. Research on SaPs in the Global North offered valuable insights into collaboration, reciprocity, and co-creation (Cook-Sather, 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Matthews et al., 2018), but our experience underscored that these models, often shaped by democratic liberalism and neoliberal institutional cultures, required adaptation to southern contexts. This is because the Global South is marked by structural inequality, linguistic diversity, as well as the legacies of colonialism and apartheid (Ige et al., 2023; Hlatshwayo & Molo, 2024; Masuku et al., 2024).

The DSJP demonstrated that authentic partnership in South African higher education demands more than the transference of established frameworks. It requires a relational, humanising, and decolonial approach that honours local histories, philosophies, and ways of knowing. Our project drew on the philosophies of Ubuntu (Ramose, 1999; Letseka, 2012) and Sentipensante Pedagogy (Rendón, 2009) to centre relationality, interconnectedness, and the integration of cognitive and affective domains in learning and teaching. This enabled us to reimagine SSPs not simply as a method for curriculum and pedagogical development, but as a way of collaborating despite the intersectional and political nature of higher education spaces.

We learned that partnership is not a fixed model, but a generative process that thrives on trust, reflexivity, and openness to discomfort. Building trust required intentional practices of care, mutual recognition, and shared decision-making (Dianati & Oberhollenzer, 2020). Embracing discomfort became essential to confronting privilege, bringing marginalised perspectives to light and challenging deeply embedded institutional assumptions.

From our reflections, we offer the following recommendations for those engaging in SSPs in similar contexts:

- **Start with relationships, not roles:** Prioritise building trust through care, listening, and mutual recognition before establishing processes.
- **Acknowledge and address power:** Make hierarchies visible from the outset, using strategies such as rotating roles, co-authored outputs, and shared facilitation to make power negotiable.
- **Create spaces for reflexivity:** Embed structured opportunities for individual and collective reflection through journaling, retreats, and dialogue as core components of the work.
- **Embrace discomfort and difference:** Treat tension as a generative space for growth, where contestation can lead to deeper understanding and transformation (Mezirow, 2000).

- **Ground the work in context-specific frameworks:** Critically assess models originating from the Global North before applying them by drawing on local philosophies and decolonial pedagogies (Smith, 2012; Kovach, 2009).
- **Let the work remain emergent:** Resist the urge to over-engineer; allow partnership practices to emerge organically through repeated interpersonal engagements (Brown, 2017).
- **Secure institutional commitment:** Ensure that partnership work is resourced, recognised, and embedded within the institution's strategic agenda for equity and transformation.

This article has shared our ongoing journey towards the co-creation of knowledge, capacity development, and the formation of a socially just and contextually grounded student–staff partnership in South African higher education. Drawing on the principles of ubuntu and Sentipensante Pedagogy, our journey affirms that socially just partnerships in higher education are not created through policy statements or static frameworks, but through the slow, intentional labour of building relational trust, engaging in critical reflexivity, and remaining open to transformation. This work is never complete; it is an ongoing practice of becoming, together. Each collaboration brings new challenges, insights, and possibilities, reminding us that transformation is less a destination and more a shared journey of co-creation, mutual care, and collective imagining.

### Disclosure of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the initiative reported on in this article. Generative AI (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used as a writing and editing support tool to assist with structuring, refining language, and synthesising literature; all content was critically reviewed, verified, and edited by the authors to ensure accuracy and originality. All the authors contributed to the conceptualisation, research, and writing of this article, and have approved the final version for submission.

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