

### **Exploring Identity and Disrupting Silence; a transdisciplinary community work module**

Lindsey Nicholls<sup>1</sup>, Vivienne Bozalek<sup>2</sup>, Ronelle Carolissen<sup>3</sup>, Leslie Swartz<sup>3</sup>, Poul Rohleder<sup>4</sup>, Brenda Leibowitz<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Brunel University, London, United Kingdom*, <sup>2</sup>*University Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa*,

<sup>3</sup>*Stellenbosch University, Cape Town, South Africa*, <sup>4</sup>*Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, United Kingdom*

**Introduction:** In post apartheid South Africa (SA) many university students continue to have essentialist views on race and culture (Posel 2001). These perceptions are reinforced by mono-cultural experiences of institutions which do not reflect diverse groups. The SA higher education policy (1997) emphasised the role of the learner as a 'constructively critical citizen' (McKinney, 2007:217) but without the presence of narratives by groups of people who have been viewed as 'other' little real discussion and debate can take place.

**Objectives:** The community self and identity (CSI) project, run as a teaching and research project, created a shared learning module for students from two culturally different universities and three linked professional trainings, occupational therapy, social work and community psychology. Through a mixture of participatory action learning (PAL) and web based assignments students from different class, race, gender and language groups were required to work together to explore concepts of 'community' and 'community work'.

**Methods:** The teaching module included face to face group work, speakers who addressed issues of race and class in the new SA and web based learning using discussion boards and interdisciplinary readings. The module was evaluated through a mixture of assignments including group presentations and individual essays. The research data was generated from on-line submissions, post course interviews (with students and facilitators) and reflexive accounts by the CSI design team.

**Results:** Students reported on learning about the other professional groups and becoming more aware of their cultural assumptions but many denied that race was an on-going area of painful conflict in the 'rainbow' nation of SA. This silence, when analysed, was considered a collusive and damaging dynamic and was consciously disrupted by the 2008 course facilitators - leading to a deeper reflection by many students on their role as future practitioners and citizens.

**Conclusion:** Teachers, like students, carry social / political assumptions and may need to explore these prejudices (alongside the students' views) to engage in an ethically reflexive authentic teaching practice.

**Contribution to Practice:** Boler (2004) suggests education may involve 'troubling speech and disturbing silence' to make it possible for a truly democratic dialogue to take place.