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### A Conversation on Becoming Agents for Transformation in Higher Education

*Co-Creating a Regenerative Academic Developmental Learning Space*

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# 6 A Conversation on Becoming Agents for Transformation in Higher Education

## Co-Creating a Regenerative Academic Developmental Learning Space

*Annet Kragt<sup>1</sup>, Mieke T.A. Lopes Cardozo  
and Clara McDonnell*

### Introduction

Dear Reader,

If you're reading this, you likely inhabit an educational space. We, as students, lecturers and alumni at a university, and especially in our roles working in the fields of peacebuilding, education, and international development, believe in the potential for education to work in service of transformation in not only situations of conflict, but also in the broader society. However, we also recognise that for many, the experience of (higher) education is not one that feels inclusive, or nurturing.

Have you ever felt that the values you strive towards in peace education scholarship and praxis are not being upheld in your own academic setting? As students or teachers, have you felt restricted by the ways higher education structures learning and knowledge 'production'? Have you wondered what an educational space, inspired by and working for social transformation, could look like?

All of us contributing to this chapter have felt these things, in one way or another. And for that reason, all of us have sought out spaces, even just small ones, where alternatives were possible. In this (non-traditional) chapter, we present to you one of those spaces in which we (modestly) attempt to translate theoretical contributions made in critical and decolonial peace education into practice. We want to tell you about a critical learning experiment, inspired by principles of peace education and decolonial approaches, that has taken place at the University of Amsterdam, in the International Development Studies (IDS) programme, since 2017. This experiment is called CDDE: Critical Development and Diversity Explorations,<sup>2</sup> and has worked with 32 student members since its inception. CDDE is an open, evolving space in which co-creation, (self-)reflection, and critical thinking are central. This space enables us to explore and develop our own interests, positionalities, understandings and desired ways of (en)acting in response to different issues in the world, through exploration of alternate ways of learning and developing.

But first, who are we? Throughout this chapter, the 'we' speaking refers to the three active co-writers of this paper, Mieke, Annet and Clara.<sup>3</sup>

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Throughout her career, and in her current position as a senior lecturer, Mieke has researched and taught about the potential of education for transformation and education as a potential force for building social justice and peace in multiple places around the world. A turning point was her engagement with regenerative development, through her training with the Regenesys Institute over the past six years.<sup>4</sup> Our understanding of a regenerative development approach is informed by the work of Mang and Haggard (2016) and seeks to enable and harmonise human activities and communities with the evolution of (natural and human) living systems on our planet. This meant a rethinking of (higher) education systems and institutions, including our own university and classrooms, as living systems – and recognising that most university practices are currently misaligned with regenerative design principles. Mieke, while developing her ability to practice the art of regenerative development as an educator, came to recognise the potential to rethink and reshape (higher) education systems. She began to seek out ways to ‘walk her talk’ – one of these being the creation of the CDDE experiment.

Annet and Clara are alumni of the IDS Research Master’s programme, as well as of CDDE. Annet’s fascination with education and its profound effect on society has stimulated her to explore these interests further in CDDE and through her thesis which examined the complexities of education in emergencies. Clara, while pursuing very different research interests (looking at climate change, fossil fuels, and the finance sector), was drawn to CDDE as a space for engaging in deeper, critical reflection with peers, beyond the classroom. We are two of a larger group of nine current and past CDDE students who have stayed involved with CDDE post-graduation through a variety of projects.

*Annet:* Many of our group occupy positions of significant privilege – as mostly (but not all) white Europeans, and with the means to pursue higher education. As we go about creating and occupying a space in which we grapple with questions of inequity and social justice, we have to be consistently careful and continuously reflect on the position from which we do this – something we aim to consistently bring into our work as CDDE. Doing so is important to (do our best to) avoid some of the ways those working for social justice – especially white, privileged people – undermine their own intentions: Assuming we are approaching situations the ‘right’ way, failing to listen to indications otherwise, and being closed or defensive when met with critique (DiAngelo, 2021).

*Clara:* It means there certainly will be biases and blindspots in how we speak and write together. One of the key parts of CDDE for me is the openness to considering those biases and blindspots and challenging them in a group setting – a sort of ‘positive form of conflict’ that can be a force for further reflection (Davies, 2006).

*Mieke:* We should also mention the institutional position we work from. The work of CDDE has been conducted within a supportive academic programme – both in terms of institutional as well as more personal moral support. This support gave the space needed to think through, reflect,

and co-create an unconventional space – something that is not often afforded to educators (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Vongalis-Macrow, 2007; Moore, 2008; Connell, 2009; Lopes Cardozo & Hoeks, 2014; Lopes Cardozo, 2015).

Much of this piece mimics the discussions that took place between the three of us, which made up a part of the autoethnographic process informing this piece. At other points, we ‘step out’ of our dialogue to add further reflection and context. We see this form as an extension of our practice in CDDE of acknowledging and privileging student perspectives in the academic space and experimenting with shaping an intuitive collective work from the bottom-up.

In this chapter, we will first explain how we have approached critical autoethnography as a method and theoretical inspirations for this work. Then, we will introduce CDDE, how it has taken shape and evolved throughout its existence, and the impacts we have seen it have on our immediate surroundings. Following this introduction, we will reflect on student experience throughout the project, incorporating reflections from other members of our community, who were active in conceptualising this chapter and contributed their own autoethnographic statements. We hope through this piece to share our experience trying to create and maintain a small niche in the university in which to ‘walk our talk’, and to reflect on some of the dynamics and challenges we have encountered in interpreting a regenerative, critical and decolonial-inspired praxis in higher education.

## Why Are We Writing This Way?

### *Co-Constructed Critical Autoethnography*

Our writing is inspired by co-constructed critical autoethnography, a method with roots in critical theory, critical pedagogy and critical race study (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Discussions held in CDDE have often critiqued current, more or less accepted, standards within the university – including among other things, research and fieldwork practices and the (limited) diversity of syllabi. Critical autoethnography offers an alternative way to approach research and writing.

Critical autoethnography has been used as a tool by those moving against the currents of ‘traditional and generally Eurocentric hegemonic academic boundaries’, challenging ‘master discourses’ in its content, method and form (Brisset, 2020, p. 579). Centring students in the research and writing process, as well as our choice to turn the direction of inquiry back onto ourselves, is part of our modest attempt to construct a work that ‘critique[s] dominant power structures and question[s] the traditional researcher/researched dichotomy’ (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2012, p. 152). It recognises that the construction of academic knowledge is not separate from who produces it, and how it is produced. Autoethnography aims to make these dynamics explicit: ‘[T]elling of our personal experiences is fundamentally important in understanding how we make meaning of the world’ (Brissett, 2020, p. 579). We also find that co-constructed

critical autoethnography aligns with our practice of joint reflection during our sessions, in which we endeavour to counter ‘false consciousness’ (ibid.).

We, as current CDDE members, have written this article by drawing on a collection of written testimonies of CDDE alumni reflecting on their experience, archived materials (notes, agendas, reflections, presentations) from past years and sessions of CDDE, and our own experiences and conversations.

## Setting the Foundations

From its conception, CDDE has been inspired and informed by theories of regenerative, transgressive, relational, and transformative education. Scholars in these fields, in their own unique ways, propose to regenerate (Wahl, 2016; Wals, 2019), transgress (hooks, 1997; Wals, 2021) and transform (Bajaj & Brantmeier, 2011; Bajaj, 2015; Berila, 2016; Zembylas, 2018) existing educational practices towards more relational (Biesta et al., 2004), critical and nourishing learning spaces. The intersection and interaction of these ideas with CDDE practice or ‘praxis’ – how, whether, and to what extent we embody those – has been the subject of much debate, within CDDE sessions, and among the three of us.

In its content, CDDE frequently draws on the work of critical scholars in development and education and critiques of how these fields historically have addressed and engaged with the ‘Global South’ (e.g., Escobar, 2011; Zembylas, 2018). Although CDDE sits within IDS, through Mieke’s influence as a scholar working in development, education, and peacebuilding education fields simultaneously, much of the content and approach taken in CDDE intersects with the field of peace education. The academic critique, specifically around the role of higher education in shaping learning about – and interventions in – (largely) the Global South, can frequently apply to both development and peace disciplines.

Critical peace education constantly searches for alternatives that enable both educators and students to become agents for peace (Freire et al., 2014; Lopes Cardozo & Shah, 2016; Bajaj, 2019). Critical approaches call for engaging with ‘power, local meanings, and enabling voice, participation and agency’ (Bajaj, 2018, p. 154). Interrogation of power dynamics is critical for social transformation (Novelli et al., 2017). From its inception, CDDE has subscribed to the idea that examination of power dynamics needs to take place not only in the spaces studied by educational scholars, but also be turned back upon ourselves, to understand the power dynamics shaping our own work, and to which we in turn contribute. By questioning these dynamics as a collective, we engage in a form of ‘second order reflexivity’, which interrogates (often uncomfortably!) not only individual engagement with a subject or research field but also the ways in which the broader groups we are a part of – a class, discipline, academy – are complicit in perpetrating the systems or violences they seek to counter (Kester & Cremin, 2017; Hajir & Kester, 2020).

*Mieke:* CDDE allows us, both lecturer and students, to ‘change our minds’ and enhance our experienced sense of agency (see the work of Mang & Haggard, 2016, p. xiii) as we re-envision and re-conceptualise our bonds to and connections with education spaces and systems. For me, training

with colleagues from the Regenesi Institute and developing as a regenerative practitioner and educator has been an essential foundation to be able to rethink my own work as an educator, and together with students, explore what it means to re-imagine and enact alternative practices from the ground up – rather than only ‘studying them’. Education and academia in its traditional form might cast aside the importance of understanding and recognising our ‘selves’ in our work. A more regenerative approach to action-oriented research and developmental learning calls for a (re)connection to our essence, and rather than negating who we aim to be(come), to recognise that systemic changes can only occur when we simultaneously and continuously develop ourselves.

*Annet:* This alternative space of CDDE gives us the (mental, emotional and embodied) space necessary to delve into our positionalities, to explore our respective spaces and motivate ourselves and our peers to critically and constructively question ourselves. We view a deep and critical reflexivity as crucial for confronting the implications of our position and perspective on our research and our field. Unfortunately, this type of reflection is something we see as often pushed to the side amidst the fast-paced demands of the university. CDDE both intentionally creates the space for this and holds us collectively accountable.

Beyond teaching and engaging with these theories, CDDE asks what it means for us, as agents of higher education, to attempt to live and embody these perspectives. Although we continue to grapple with this question, CDDE members strive to do so by questioning the ways that the university system we work and learn in upholds the very systems we critique. By creating spaces that work against these currents, we aim to contribute to occupying and widening the ‘cracks’ which exist within the broader systems (even in our own small ways). In this, we draw inspiration from the approach of Mignolo and Walsh (2018, p. 84), and their emphasis on pursuing praxis in the ‘decolonial fissures and cracks’ we occupy – rather than only considering the overarching systems of power. As Walsh (2021, p. 11) puts it: ‘[T]he praxis of cracking, the praxis that opens, extends, and connects the cracks, and that sows within them, is – again for me – what makes decoloniality a verbality’. Nonetheless, we hesitate to claim CDDE as a decolonial project. We draw inspiration from calls to decolonise, and by returning, revisiting and reengaging with these calls through subsequent years, we aim to develop a space of praxis. Yet, we also find that we (sometimes, often) fall short of our own aspirations, and far short of the true transformations decolonising implies. When we do, learning to welcome critique and conflict and yet reengage and keep at our work becomes part of our praxis.

*Mieke:* It can be difficult to recognise the ways that change and transformation take place. There is something about the slowness of transformation (even at just the university level), it can feel like wading through mud. But we can identify smaller changes around us. Based on our experiences of developing incremental and slow changes within ourselves, and our

smaller community, we have seen changes in our direct ‘nested’ level of the IDS programme. While CDDE is an optional programme for students, for which they can receive course credits, aspects of CDDE have now been incorporated across the mandatory curricula as well. I was invited to redesign one of the core courses in the Research Master’s programme, which is now entirely co-created with students. I have also included aspects of CDDE sessions – creating the classroom setting, co-creating sessions with students, beginning classes with an intentional individual or collective moment of reflection – into how I teach other courses at the university. In our direct environment, we see the potential of radically changing what knowledge and learning mean. I see our work in CDDE as helping students to imagine and create the potential for transformation within the human and natural ecosystems that they (will) engage in as becoming agents for more regenerative futures.

## **Emergence and Mission**

Critical peace education calls for alternatives that create a space for the transformative potential of education where students are stimulated in their agency, participation and voice (e.g., Bajaj, 2018). As Mieke began to increasingly contemplate how her academic practice could reflect the values she teaches, she also considered how to make sense of and integrate values from the other parts of herself – not only university lecturer and researcher – but also yoga and meditation instructor and reiki practitioner.

*Mieke:* While these various roles already co-existed for a number of years, through my training as a regenerative practitioner, I came to realize how bringing them together would allow me to evolve my work and experiment with what it might mean to “walk my own talk”. In a way, it is an evolving journey of recognising the regenerative (transgressive, nourishing, creative and consciousness-oriented) potential of university spaces and together with students, experimenting with actual practices connected to that realization.

Mieke developed a proposal to start CDDE, with the goal to create a space that could redefine the academic experience. In an initial invitation to students to join her, she illustrated her vision of what creating such a space could encompass:

*Mieke:* For me, a meaningful and holistic academic learning encounter consists of respectful yet critical dialogue, personal reflection-building (e.g. through journaling practices) and innovative teaching and examination techniques. These include, amongst others, roleplays, simulation games, student-led studios, engagement with art-based resources and guided meditation – with hopefully many more innovative and creative ways to support learning to be developed in co-creation with students and colleagues.

She explained that CDDE would be a non-traditional space for critically engaging with development studies and education as a field and developing intercultural understanding and ethical standards, while: ‘allow[ing] for a space to develop positionality and enactment strategies that suit with students’ personal talents, backgrounds and aspirations.’ Peace and development studies alike speak strongly to how students understand themselves in relation to societal challenges and pressing ‘wicked issues’, and these teaching innovations call on and expand students’ agency to better be able to respond to them (Lopes Cardozo, 2022).

*Mieke:* While the initial design of CDDE was perhaps more intuitively connected to my own values of education’s emancipatory and consciousness-enhancing potential, combining so-called contemplative with social justice pedagogies, over the years I was able to integrate more structured and intentional approaches including dynamic living systems frameworks, and Socratic-inspired ways of developmental learning as derived from regenerative development and design colleagues (Mang & Haggard, 2016; Sanford, 2020).

### **Student Motivations**

At first, Mieke felt she was taking a ‘leap of faith’ in sending out the invitation, fearing that this rather unusual, open-ended and alternative initiative would perhaps not be understood or embraced by students (or her colleagues) in international development. Luckily, a group of students responded eagerly, with nine students joining CDDE in 2017. Those students who joined expressed a strong desire for an alternative space that would allow for alternative values, teaching methods, or thematic material from what they currently experienced in the university. They felt a need for more diverse ways of learning, even if they weren’t quite sure what those were yet.

*Pauline (joined CDDE in 2018):* I joined CDDE because I felt like there was something missing from the [IDS] program. I believe that I joined because I needed to embrace a deeply reflective approach to my academic life.

*Dani (2017):* I joined CDDE because not only did I feel that the content of the education by the university but also the way it provided the education was insufficient. In particular, I feel that there is a lack of diversity of knowledge in the curricula. I feel that the university is not an inclusive environment for learning, but in fact (re)produces oppressive structures and hierarchies.



## Co-Creation and Evolution of a Project

From the beginning, Mieke suggested implementing shifts from the more traditional classroom setting (e.g., working in a circle), that, while relatively minor, go a long way in changing the tone of the group setting. Disrupting student-teacher roles and hierarchies (physically and mentally) can encourage students' voice, agency, and participation (as suggested by Bajaj, 2018). Time for contemplative and centring exercises is built into each session and often facilitated by Mieke. In the co-creation process, attention is often given to how the right atmosphere can be set for the session, for instance, bringing in music or visual art to support our work environment. Students actively construct the spaces they wish to work in – whether by rearranging classrooms, sharing food, holding meetings outdoors or while walking through nature, or inviting the group to their homes for sessions. Students also collectively determine the terms by which they will engage, meet one another, and continue to co-construct the CDDE space and sessions over the course of the season. While some of these pedagogical strategies might sound rather familiar to like-minded peace educators, much of these were rather novel approaches for participating development studies students in Amsterdam.

*Annet:* It's a lot about paying attention to the space we're working in and putting in the time and effort to actively build a space – both physical and emotional – which can in turn become a space we can draw comfort, a sense of purpose and energy from.

*Clara:* Since these are not things we are accustomed to paying attention to in academic settings, I've learned it's not something that you can expect to happen automatically – we have to consciously build and keep building the setting we want.

*Mieke:* And as we do so, to make explicit the design choices we collectively make, and for what (learning) purpose we do so. This meant including small or whole group discussions about the pedagogical design we developed for each session while including a consistent practice of self-evaluation and reflection.

Much of that first season of CDDE in 2017 was dedicated to exploring and defining what they as a group hoped to be and hoped to achieve. We read literature exploring decolonisation and the production of knowledge in universities, alternative learning and teaching styles, and the role of academic activism (e.g., Grosfoguel, 2013; Connell, 2014; Berila, 2016; among others). These readings informed group discussions, which were supplemented by more experimental activities, such as (forum) theatre or story-telling. These also fed into ongoing discussions about the role that CDDE should play in enacting some of the changes to academia students were reading about and discussing. Many of the initial student members were engaged with or knowledgeable of student and staff

protests at UvA in 2015, which called for democratisation and decolonisation of the university, and ultimately resulted in the implementation of a Diversity Office.<sup>5</sup> Thus, they were actively engaged in critically examining the IDS academic programme and considering the ways that a group like CDDE could be a forum through which to begin to enact the changes they sought.

Since its inception in 2017, the group discussed how CDDE could be a place where alternative knowledges and pedagogies could be explored mindfully with the aim to learn from them and ultimately introduce these to the broader programme. It could be a place to focus on topics or skills students felt were missing in the standard academic programme, including greater emphasis on ethics in research and specific research situations. It could also be a space for exchanging and nurturing ideas for change. Using this space to collectively reflect on what decolonisation means for the discipline, programme, or university, allowed students to think through and articulate their views, before bringing critiques and suggestions to professors or programme staff.

Over the years, CDDE members have (as a collective and as individuals) been involved in pushing the programme to take the mandate to decolonise more seriously – both through putting forward critiques and by being involved with the efforts to put those critiques in practice. The ongoing (and intergenerational) involvement of students in CDDE has kept decolonisation on the agenda of the programme year after year. In addition to redesigning certain courses, bringing concerns to the programme committee (which oversees the educational quality of the study programme) resulted in this body spearheading a ‘Diversity Scan’ of the syllabi of all courses in the programme, an exercise which is being repeated now several years later to assess progress. In 2020, in the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests, CDDE students collectively drafted an open letter to the programme, which challenged among other points, the lack of attention to race and racism in the field of international development, a prioritisation of research practices and topics which involve sending students from the ‘Global North’ to the ‘Global South’ to conduct research, and a limited diversity of both knowledge and staff and student bodies. Following meetings with staff regarding this letter, a student group was established to work in collaboration with the programme director on an ongoing basis to make attention to decolonisation a permanent part of the programme. While CDDE doesn’t take full credit for these changes (the efforts of other motivated staff and students cannot be ignored) – and we don’t consider the results to be ‘decolonising’<sup>6</sup> – it has been a constant presence, and sometimes catalyst for conversation and small actions.

Later seasons continued to engage with decolonial approaches and alternative pedagogies, while also building upon them and expanding the scope to include other areas of student interest. The 2018 season, in which students took full ownership during Mieke’s maternity leave, included sessions on the role of the arts in development studies and mental health for students, as well as attending external activities as a group, such as the Amsterdam Black Heritage Tour,<sup>7</sup> which examines the city’s colonial history.

In 2019, student-led sessions included experimenting with methods like collective mind mapping, counter-visualisation exercises, and creative writing and

storytelling. The group invited the programme director and other programme staff to one session to specifically discuss how the ideas and methods used in CDDE could be integrated across the master's programme. This session ended with a proposal from the programme director to integrate core aspects of CDDE – namely, co-creation, an emphasis on reflexivity, and a critical reading of development studies – into a redesign of one of the mandatory programme courses (as discussed earlier).

The 2020 and 2021 seasons were profoundly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in the CDDE group sessions being moved completely to online spaces. While the content of the sessions became more varied, some of the richness of connection suffered in the online setting.

*Annet:* On the other hand, I think the online CDDE space was still important for students, especially in the early days of the pandemic, to have a space dedicated to connection in a time when so much connection was lost.

*Mieke:* In addition, the rapid shift to online learning during the height of the COVID pandemic led to the expansion of the CODE-inspired co-created education design to collaborate with colleague researchers and educators in Myanmar and Sri Lanka (based on prior collaborations in these contexts) in an existing undergraduate course. This allowed for mutual learning amongst colleagues across contexts, while it also enabled a richer engagement of (aspiring) development studies undergraduates to learn from place-based expertise and evolving debates on what decolonising development and education means from multiple perspectives and lived experiences.

## **Learning from One Another**

As part of their reflective practice, CDDE members initiated this autoethnographic exercise by writing down and sharing their personal experiences with CDDE – what it meant for them, the role it played in their academic experience, and their hopes for its future. As we returned to these reflections, we could see some common threads emerge. We saw how CDDE can function as a space that serves at least some of the varied needs of students, beyond those met in more traditional classrooms. It also became a place for students to discuss and consider change-making within and beyond the CDDE space – how they, individually and collectively, negotiate spaces to become agents of transformation. Naturally, many challenges arise alongside these processes, which also feature in students' reflections.

### *Let's Be People, Not Machines*

*Clara:* I found it striking how many students really were (and are) hungry for an alternative space within academia. Somewhere where they don't have to be the 'professional', competitive, academic individual that students often feel pressured to be in classroom settings.

- Annet:* Exactly! And I think students' experience shows that CDDE offers a space of relief from these demands by expanding the scope of what is allowed into this alternative academic space. It maintains the academic nature and purpose while allowing space for a wider range of emotions and needs to be present.
- Pauline (2018):* CDDE is a space where I can express and address both the challenges, expectations and aspirations/hopes that I encounter both in my personal and academic life. More than a space, CDDE is a community that I can rely on when I feel that something is not right in both my academic and personal life. I consider it as partly an activist space and partly a support network to explore all matters intellectual and academic.
- Dani (2017):* I like the holistic approach of blurring the lines between 'the personal' and 'the academic' spheres as a way of community building and care. These aspects make CDDE for me a more inclusive and safe learning environment.
- Mila (2018):* It is a space where I am learning to find joy in my education and in the space of university. I find a lot of meaning in my research on queer activism and I am a strong student. At the same time, I often experience difficulties with enjoying the process. CDDE helps me to ground my academic life in a safe, critical and creative environment.

### *One Step at a Time*

- Clara:* In addition to building and valuing a regenerative space, CDDE members often focus on the transformative potential of this work. Many were inspired to join CDDE to work on broader curriculum or programme level changes, and throughout their experience with CDDE, continued to believe in its potential to make change.
- Eleonore (2018):* I think CDDE so far has pushed the IDS programme to be more aware of ethical issues in development research, reflections on positionality, and has been pushing for decolonization of the curriculum and syllabi (although there is a lot still to be done). It is also paving the way for more interactive, alternative ways of teaching and learning methods, by providing examples of how to do so.
- Pauline (2018):* One of my main aspirations for the future is the creation of a broader network of students and alumni that can help redefine how to do education and include the CDDE approaches beyond the IDS community.
- Annet:* While CDDE itself does not have an explicit, defined activist purpose – part of the point of CDDE is that it is constantly

co-created and re-created by its members, which sometimes makes maintaining a consistent purpose difficult – I think we can see an ongoing relationship and interchange with activist work. In my own experience, I have seen how engaging in reflection and critical exchange with peers on a chosen topic frequently turns to discussion of activism and exchanges on the possibilities of turning to practice – walking our talk – even if the action itself sometimes takes place outside the CDDE space. This reminds me, Mieke, you have previously described your vision of CDDE as a ‘fertile soil’ which helps to germinate seeds (of ideas, motivation, practice, activism). One former CDDE member described how she has seen this take place in her own life:

*Cybele (2018):* I carry the ideas about education that we talked about in CDDE everywhere, I am also vocal about it and am constantly seeking opportunities to make these changes. For example, during my teaching position as a junior lecturer in the political science department, I tried to integrate “CDDE-like” sessions, to break the hierarchy between the students and the teacher. Students were leading sessions in the classroom and were encouraged to be creative with their assignments . . . I am not saying that I necessarily succeeded in transforming the classroom, but my experiences with CDDE taught me how to talk about issues in education and development, and more importantly, it taught me very practical tools to make small, even microscopic, changes.

Other members, after engaging with certain topics during CDDE sessions, decided to take on activist work outside the group, through local climate activist groups or student associations working for change at the university level.

### *Change Is a Bumpy Road*

Of course, there are difficulties and frustrations along the way:

*Dani (2017):* Although I saw elements of CDDE adopted by courses in the programme, I often felt these were cherry-picked based on what suited them in the moment. I continue to feel a sense of resistance and skepticism from the programme. On the other hand, I learned to value the CDDE community space. Based on my experiences, I feel that sustaining the CDDE community is more important than transforming the whole program.

*Mieke:* I think there is a constant awareness of the slowness of educational and institutional change processes, which resulted in feeling quite

frustrated and stuck at times, in contrast to also having experiences during our meetings leaving us feeling incredibly energised and full of hope. On the frustrating side are considerations of what happens to CDDE after the initial sources of funding dry up and how we will manage to continue to create the unique, safe space of CDDE, while also working on expanding its insights and approaches into broader learning spaces.

Students also question what their critiques of the status quo and calls for decolonising the university and adopting a decolonial approach to development studies mean when they come from mostly European students.

*Eleonore (2018):* I saw limits to [the approach of CDDE] as the group itself does not necessarily appear very diverse, and therefore some of our discussions may be limited (see for example our discussion on intersectional feminism in 2019, and whether this issue can be discussed by a group of (mostly white) women).

While we don't always have ready answers for how to navigate these complexities, we continue to find value in intentionally returning to them – and encouraging subsequent cohorts of students with fresh and alternative perspectives to unsettle us anew.

Finally, time, or rather the lack of it, was one of the most commonly referenced struggles students identified in achieving the ambitions they held for CDDE.

*Pauline (2018):* The time commitment and accountability to the rest of the group is sometimes a challenge in the co-creative process. Some members of the group have had to be the timekeepers and commitment keepers of the rest of the group. In my experience applying a co-created/democratic process has been time-consuming, with all the discussions and the decision-making. But I also believe that it is a benefit of the co-created process. Because there are so many discussions, the decisions taken are grounded in meaning. And without those endless discussions, I don't believe I would have learnt so much from CDDE.

Taking the time to slow down, reflect, and build connections contradicts much of what the university system demands of us in terms of productivity and results. Sometimes carving out different spaces and trying to work in different ways can feel like one more demand on our already overloaded plates. While it presents challenges, Black (2018) still argues for the necessity of pausing, reflecting, and resisting these currents, if we ever can hope to exist in an academia that nourishes – and regenerates – rather than drains.

## Back to Our Notebooks . . .

*Mieke:* Annet, Clara, as more recent CDDE members, I wonder what tracing the steps of CDDE to its roots in peacebuilding-inspired, regenerative transformative and transgressive education, and witnessing how these have played out in practice, has brought up for you?

*Clara:* Something I find interesting is that some of the tension and dynamics we can see, between the reflective and the practical, between making change and making a separate 'safe space', were present from the very beginning of CDDE. Something I thought had emerged after several years of existence was actually a characteristic of this group from the beginning. Reading the notes from one of the very first CDDE sessions, I can see this tension play out. In this session, where the students were discussing decolonisation of our own development studies programme, and the role of CDDE in this work, one student argued:

I would like us to be a more transformative and practical course rather than being a self-reflective add-on course. While I do think self-reflexivity should be in everything that we do, don't we need to be more pragmatic and practical?

In that same session, another countered:

I worry that if we just focus all our efforts on making changes to the university classes and our programme, then we may lose the ability to create a safe space where we can talk about our own or other issues in the outside world.

*Clara:* It's clear from these first meetings, that the conceptions of what CDDE should be, and what it means to different people is very different, something I see reflected in the years I participated in CDDE. However, after looking back like this, I find myself wondering if maintaining an attitude of redefinition and contestation, while sometimes feeling worryingly aimless, is actually fundamental to the work we are trying to do?

*Mieke:* I think it is! Building a space that stimulates these necessary collective reflections on understanding, redefining and contesting power dynamics, inspired by peacebuilding interventions, gives students freedom to imagine alternatives. Building their agency in this way can create the space for working in our own ways towards transformation.

*Annet:* And questioning, evolution, and growth are central to the principles guiding CDDE. However, sustaining a space that allows and encourages such self-questioning and sometimes conflicting dynamics, while necessary, is often not easy. I think it has been some of the tools we work on building in CDDE – whether that is contemplative practice, self-reflection, or even just a focus on slowing down and connecting, which allow us, if not to fully reconcile differences, at least to sustain a space which allows these tensions to exist.

This CDDE journey began by asking how we can translate the critiques and suggestions from critical and decolonial peace education into our own academic settings – those which we embody daily. How do the same power structures that these fields critique play out in the offices, classrooms, and communities in which we work? Can making a space to grapple with these questions and trying to *be* differently have an impact beyond ourselves, and how do we sustain such transformations?

This piece illustrates one modest attempt to take on these questions. We hope, dear Reader, that it can serve as inspiration or a jumping-off point for your own interpretations.

## Notes

- 1 Representing the co-created nature of this work, we follow alphabetic order of authorship for the three leading authors, while recognising that this work is also indebted to the contributions and reflections of the wider CDDE community, including Cybele Atmeh, Pauline Bon, Mila de Graaf, Dani Haudenschild, Melina Merdanovic, Eleonore Nouel and Nils Simonsen.
- 2 When we started CDDE, we were explicitly looking for an exploratory space for critical development of ourselves as students and scholars. Diversity explorations refers to our aim to diversify the ways we understand ourselves and our positionalities in the field of development studies (and the world); and to diversify the knowledge resources and pedagogical approaches we (do not) engage with, to foster incremental changes within ourselves, our learning community and the broader programme and system we are embedded within.
- 3 In the following, we will highlight excerpts from our collective narrative by mentioning our names when one of us ‘speaks’ in the text.
- 4 Regensis Institute, web page [www.regenerat.es](http://www.regenerat.es)
- 5 The decision of the university to focus narrowly on diversity, while neglecting to discuss decolonisation and the systematic changes that would be required to engage with it, has been much critiqued by activists (see, e.g., Afrifa, 2020). While increasing diversity (of students, staff, readings, thought, etc.) would need to be a part of decolonisation, addressing diversity alone is insufficient to address the systemic and historical power dynamics that decolonisation hopes to disrupt.
- 6 Decolonising requires systematic confrontation and dismantling of the myriad oppressive structures, within ourselves, our society and globally. The changes we have seen may be tiny steps along the way, but could equally end up working alongside the power structures they aim to disrupt. We consider the maintenance of a space to challenge, critique and revise as crucial to counter these tendencies.
- 7 [www.blackheritagetours.com/](http://www.blackheritagetours.com/)

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