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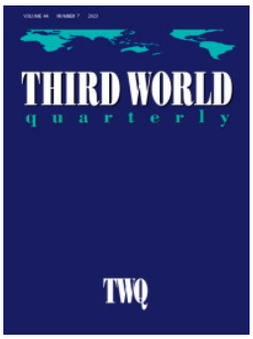

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Walking the talk: autoethnographic reflections on co-creating regenerative education within international development studies

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I reflect on what it means to walk the talk of regenerative forms of education that foster more vitality within the communities, institutions and societies we live in. I discuss my experiences as a lecturer and initiator of a regeneratively designed co-created education innovation project that I worked on with research master's students of international development studies. The project was initiated in 2016 to serve the needs of an international community of learners at the University of Amsterdam. It is designed based on regenerative design principles and serves as a space for students to explore, critique and increase ownership over their educational journeys. Drawing on regenerative, transgressive, social justice, contemplative, relational, creative, decolonising and anti-oppression pedagogies, the project Critical Development and Diversity Explorations (CDDE) aims to co-create a non-hierarchical and more engaged, embodied learning space to develop students' – and my own – critical reflective potential as agents of change. Applying an auto-ethnographic methodology, and drawing on a hybrid-epistemological approach, I aim to illustrate my insights on the cause, purpose and aspirations of the CDDE project and invite you as the reader to bring such reflections alive in your own thinking in a real-life context of your own.

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Introduction – walking the talk, dancing the walk

In this article, I reflect on what it means to walk the talk of developing more regenerative forms of education in support of inclusive development; and, in doing so, to purposefully move beyond operating on an efficiency-driven automatic pilot in my role as an educator and rather move and evolve my being, will and functioning (Sanford 2020) along the way. Recognising there is no one-size-fits-all or linear road to be walked when it comes to exploring the regenerative potential of education systems, at times I even try to dance (Meadows n.d.) through the higher education system. Inviting myself, and you, dear reader, to step into a reflective and creative state of mind as we enter this text, I start by sharing a poem written by Rhonda Magee.

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May the ocean of our healing
Your river meeting mine
Bring peace,
Renew the places and spaces we share,
And strengthen the currents running through us
Of justice
Of just this.
-- Rhonda V. Magee (2019, 338)

This poem brings together a much-needed caring attitude towards others and self, and our connected states of being as learners – students and educators alike. It allows me to visualise my own learning journey in relation to students and colleagues, as a meandering river. It portrays a willpower to understand and work towards social justice, a key premise of an inclusive development approach (Pouw and Gupta 2017). It touches on the potential of regenerating the places and spaces we inhabit as we learn and educate ourselves and co-learn with others in our communities (Mang and Haggard 2016).

In this article, I discuss my role and experiences as a lecturer and initiator of a regeneratively designed education innovation project co-created with students of international development studies (IDS) at the University of Amsterdam. The two-year research master's programme in IDS is part of the Human Geography, Planning and International Development department under the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences. The story I tell represents a learning journey that builds on various earlier international research collaborations, and a desire to (re)connect more to the direct community where I live and work. My university is located in the city of Amsterdam, a place that historically evolved on the banks of the Amstel River and hosts a wide diversity of people. And while the present-day (rather uninspiring) architecture of the university campus is more representative of its nestedness in a neoliberal higher education system, as a learning community it *also* holds a historical and present-day progressive character – which paints a more hopeful image for rethinking and renewing what higher education can be(come).

Our project, called 'Critical Development and Diversity Explorations' (CDDE), is designed as a space for (international) students to explore, critique and increase ownership over their own educational journeys. CDDE is organised as an extra-curricular module, which research master's students can choose to incorporate into their academic portfolio trajectory and in this way obtain study credits for it. While we employ structured (self-) evaluations, there is no grading attached to participating in CDDE.

The CDDE collective – the students and I who have formed the core of the CDDE community since 2017 – are driven by a shared commitment and concern for the emancipatory and transformative potential of education (Mang and Reed 2012; Mang and Haggard 2016; Wahl 2020; Wals 2019). In accordance with the purpose and spirit of this teaching innovation project, this paper presents a critical auto-ethnographic writing style, a method that carries roots in critical theory, critical pedagogy, and critical race study (Cann and DeMeulenaere 2012). When asked by CDDE students in one of our 'narrative workshops' what this project meant to me, as part of our shared auto-ethnographic exercise, I started to reflect that CDDE to me is the result of what it means to try and 'walk the talk' of my various connected roles as an educator, researcher, regenerative development practitioner, yoga teacher and reiki

student who works from a conscious (or contemplative), social justice-inspired pedagogical approach.

In this paper, I aim to reflect on the incremental transformations we have been part of and the larger potential for systemic change this work strives towards, while also reflecting on the various hurdles along the way. In doing so, I hope to motivate the reader to bring to mind the learning spaces and systems that you may be part of, and how insights generated in this piece might serve your own thinking, roles and motivation to (co-)create meaningful transgressive learning places and spaces.

I will start below with a reflection on where our work sits in relation to relevant epistemological debates and approaches, including regenerative development thinking (inspired by the work of authors like Sanford 2020; Mang and Haggard 2016; Wahl 2016), as well as recent debates on the role and challenges of a critical, decolonial, feminist and/or post-development approach to teaching in IDS (Bell 2022; Connell 2014; Harcourt 2017, 2018; Langdon and Agyeyomah 2014; Parra Heredia 2018). This is followed by an elaboration of the autoethnographic methodological approach of this text. I continue by inviting the reader into the context of the CDDE story and how the project came into being and was (co-) designed with students. I discuss the ups and downs of co-creation. Finally, I conclude my reflective story by quoting another powerful poem by Rhonda Magee, to inspire concluding insights and offer a series of reflective questions to guide myself, this project and possibly you as a reader in developing more inclusive, caring, holistic and inspiring learning spaces.

Positioning the CDDE story in relation to relevant debates and epistemological approaches

The initiative to design CDDE as a critical, reflective, and nurturing learning space within IDS, with and for students, was grounded in my own experience as an educator in this field since 2009 and my engagement with regenerative development perspectives. IDS, because of the interdisciplinary nature of the study field, can be interpreted and embodied in multiple ways. As a team of colleagues and in conversation with our students, we reflect on the need for the study field to better understand and respond to its problematic roots in the history of colonialism. While many, if not all, of my direct colleagues adhere to the notion of fostering social justice through their work in IDS, the notion of social justice-oriented *pedagogy*, as an equity-oriented and transformation-driven approach, is perhaps less widely embraced. I find myself in the advantageous, yet ever-challenging, position to be both researching and enacting a field of study. In this section I share the most influential resources that have influenced my thinking, being and acting throughout this project's life so far, moving from (1) regenerative development and design to debates on (2) the politics of education for social justice and social cohesion, (3) the integration of contemplative/mindfulness/consciousness-oriented pedagogies in higher education, and (4) an engagement with debates on decolonial/postcolonial development studies, culminating in (5) a hybrid epistemological approach.

Grounded in regenerative development and design thinking

The idea to design CDDE emerged out of my engagement with and being part of a regenerative development school of thinking, with which I started training in 2016. I am part of

several ongoing co-learning communities which are facilitated by Ben Haggard, Pamela Mang and other colleagues who initiated the Regenesis Group in 1995, and since 2012 offer a range of developmental learning trajectories that work with dynamic living systems frameworks as part of the Regenesis Institute. In the short video series developed by Regenesis Group, regenerative development is defined as 'Working to reverse the degeneration of ecosystems through harmonizing human activities with the continuing evolution of life on our planet'. Being a student in this way of working has formed the basis for bridging and aligning my passion for and research on the transformative potential of education for social justice and peace in different contexts around the world – Bolivia, Sri Lanka, Aceh/Indonesia and Myanmar – with my various other roles as a university lecturer, yoga educator, mother, and reiki student based in the city of Amsterdam, which I fondly call my home. While these various roles already co-existed for a number of years, I came to realise how bringing them together would allow me to evolve my work and experiment with what it might mean to walk my own talk – and even dance this walk (Meadows n.d.) within the complexities of the broader learning ecology (Barnett and Jackson 2019).

Regenerative development design and thinking (Mang and Haggard 2016) helped me to work from a living or whole systems thinking approach (Krone, in Mang and Reed 2012, 30) and see how a relatively small experimental intervention like CDDE might support longer-term transformations at various levels. This has by no means felt like a light or easy challenge I have set, and that we have adopted as a CDDE community. Yet I have started to realise through my work with regenerative development what it might mean to develop myself and those around me as 'agents for change', something quite relevant to being situated within a field of study, educational system and broader society which all call for new ways of thinking and working to better respond to the many complex or so-called 'wicked challenges' they face (Wessels et al. 2022).

Education that enhances (students' and teachers') agency for change from a regenerative perspective requires engaging in both inner and outer development (Mang and Haggard 2016, 202). Regenerative education is about learning to know, learning to do, learning to care, learning to be and learning to transform (Sanford 2018; Wahl 2016). One of the core principles of regenerative development work is a Socratic approach to 'educating' or developing – where an educator supports the collective learning process by inviting the most appropriate questions, rather than providing the right knowledge. A regenerative approach to developmental learning is therefore relevant in terms of the personal and professional development of students and the evolution of their personal agency, their capacity to externally consider others (people and situations), from ethics of empathy and care (Mountz et al. 2015). Rather than reproducing a more traditional, and in some cases colonial, perspective on the educator as a hierarchical provider of knowledge (Harcourt 2017, 2714), a more regenerative image of an educator is that of a constructive disruptor (Sanford 2020) – something I personally feel connected to.

The politics of education for social justice and peacebuilding

Education both produces and reproduces 'social relations, including class, race and gender, which in turn mediate ongoing income and wealth inequalities' (Robertson 2016, 824). This relates to a growing body of literature on the potential negative and reproductory effect education can have, or the so-called '"negative face" of education' (Bush and Saltarelli 2000),

especially when it comes to formal education institutions and systems (Zembylas and Bekerman 2012). In this light, and with the alarming effects of continuing and growing inequalities in all corners of our globe, I find inspiration in Gramscian-inspired perspectives which recognise educators *as well as* students as important collaborators in co-creating the reproductory *or* transformatory transmitters of political and cultural hegemony (Femia 1975; Giroux 2003; Gramsci 1971).

When purposefully designed, pedagogical approaches or thematic areas in school curricula carry the potential to transform and develop more inclusive institutions – and communities (Gill and Niens 2014). Insights from colleagues writing about education and conflict/peacebuilding – for instance, the notion of interruptive democracy in classrooms (Davies 2006) or educating through dialogue (Gill and Niens 2014) – have been part of my developments of aiming to walk the talk of CDDE's key aspirations in the context of Dutch higher education. Drawing on the work of Davies, a senior and influential scholar in the field of education, conflict and peace, we can learn to see that conflict *can* (and needs to) be a force for reflection, for overcoming passivity and inertia and in some cases towards transformation (Davies 2005). This would require equipping both educators and learners to participate in an interruptive process that necessitates peaceful questioning, dissent and constructive forms of critique (Davies 2006). Education has a potential to (learn to) enact Lederach's (2005) four disciplines needed for moral imagination in peacebuilding practices: relationship (and relational learning), paradoxical curiosity (being able to hold cognitive dissonance), creativity, and risk.

The integration of contemplative/mindfulness/consciousness-oriented and relational pedagogies in higher education

Building on this, I have found complementary insights from regenerative paradigms (above), contemplative and relational pedagogies, and (de)coloniality thinking (below), which allowed me as an educator to move beyond 'teaching the talk' of peace education into taking initial steps to co-create learning spaces where positive forms of conflict are welcomed. In my experience, and based on reflections from and with CDDE students (Atme et al. 2023; Kragt, Lopes Cardozo, and McDonnell 2023), this 'interruptive' process becomes more transformative and holistic – meaning it will have an effect on self, others and the bigger whole or system we work/live in (Pomeroy and Oliver 2021) – when combined with empathic and consciousness-oriented work. There is scope for work on social justice to be 'grounded, public-facing and [guided by] radical compassion – the kind that touches everyone and all things, leaving no one and nothing out' (Magee 2019, 8).

Berila's (2016) call and practical guidance to shape radical, contemplative pedagogy has been instrumental in the design and implementation of the CDDE work with students. Our work in CDDE furthermore connects to contemplative pedagogies (Barbezat and Bush 2013; Palmer 2007) and relational pedagogy, where learning signifies the art of relating – to ourselves, the other and our Earth (Palmer et al. 2010). A relational pedagogical approach to real-life learning seeks to develop forms of teaching in which students' intrinsic motivation is stimulated when engaging in complex societal challenges (West et al. 2020; Walsh, Böhme, and Wamsler 2021). By identifying potential 'transgressive learning' projects (hooks 1994), students learn through experience that they can make a difference, which strengthens a

sense of purpose and agency, which in turn can revitalise their well-being (Berila 2016; Mang and Haggard 2016).

Engagement with debates on decolonial/postcolonial development studies

This project emerged in the context of broader calls and endeavours to decolonise both development praxis and development studies. This entails an exploration of alternative epistemologies and cosmologies to rethink and actively challenge the current reproductions of hegemonic Eurocentric knowledge and logic in the context of power structures. The CDDE project is motivated to explore these dilemmas, and while we humbly acknowledge that we often fail and reflect on our restraints, we are still committed to unravelling what it may mean to engage with decolonised epistemologies, decolonised pedagogies and a simultaneous process of decolonisation of higher education (Bell 2022; Langdon 2013; Sultana 2019; Yan 2021).

In line with recommendations included in our university's *Let's do Diversity* Report (Wekker et al. 2016), colleagues in development studies elsewhere argue this means an active questioning of Eurocentric norms held by educators and students, reflecting on the politics of language(s) (of instruction, and resources), a representative and non-hierarchical inclusion of marginalised and indigenous voices in teaching resources (Langdon 2013; Spiegel et al. 2017). From a feminist decolonial perspective, this asks educators and students of development studies alike to 'decolonise the self' (Sheik 2020). Connecting our academic studies and work with who we are is unavoidably a contested and disturbing pedagogical process (Langdon 2013), and calls for self-reflexivity (Spiegel et al. 2017) or Spivak-inspired forms of 'hyper-self-reflexive development' (as cited by Kapoor 2004).

Exploring how to reimagine our curricula and resources to become more inclusive and responsive to subaltern voices, I find inspiration in colleagues' work on a decolonising lens, as part of a 'self-reflexive turn in Development Studies' (Langdon and Agyeyomah 2014, 2), which requires development studies practitioners and researchers to move beyond 'adding voices outside of the Western frame and "stir" and hope to dispel Eurocentrism' (Bunch, 1987, 140, as quoted in Langdon and Agyeyomah 2014, 3). Instead, it requires me as an educator and (higher) education course designer to reflect introspectively, and outwardly, on the epistemological grounding and epistemological diversity that is implicated in my work (Bell 2022) – a process which I will now reflect on.

The work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos and colleagues invites us to engage in self-reflexivity, recognise the need for diverse 'ecologies of knowledge' (de Sousa Santos, Nunes, and Meneses 2007) and move beyond hegemonic, mono-cultural and Eurocentric knowledge (as 'modern science') into a diversity of interrelated cosmologies, paradigms and *epistemologies* (in other words: our conceptions of the nature and grounds of knowledge, what it means to know, what counts as knowledge, and how knowledge is produced). Escobar and Harcourt (2018) argue that present-day development studies needs to actively challenge more of the same thinking and doing, and instead cast a more diverse gaze towards – for instance – *buen vivir* as an indigenous, contemporary alternative to modernity as a life-giving project (Lopes Cardozo 2012a, 2012b).

I learned from Bolivian scholars (eg Saavedra 2007) and policy designers that (in their unique context) decolonisation of education was not about throwing away everything colonial or (otherwise) hegemonic, but engaging in dialogical relationships with various forms

of knowledges and becoming conscious of the fact that both dominant and marginalised paradigms are part of how we see ourselves, how we learn and our relationship to the world. Such an 'intra- and intercultural education' (Lopes Cardozo 2011) views Andean cosmologies and relationships to *La Pacha Mama* (or Mother Earth) and various indigenous knowledges as complementary sources of wisdom to complement and enrich present-day, colonially shaped and Spanish – or even English – language schooling. Like any change process, the decolonising education reform in Bolivia has been full of tensions and resistance and has its own challenges (Lopes Cardozo 2015). Nevertheless, having had the privilege to study the (often neglected) case of Bolivia has provided me as an educator with a wealth of inspiration to re-imagine education, and examples of people and communities that functioned as agents of change.

A hybrid epistemological approach

There lies a huge challenge in attempting to meaningfully apply and connect these various epistemological and pedagogical approaches which all share a transformative purpose, firstly because they cannot be interpreted as singular or coherent and, secondly, because of the inherent reflexive attitudes these approaches invite. It has been a creativity-enhancing journey to have both studied and applied some of the methods connected to these approaches, including (yet not limited to) indigenous forms of intra- and intercultural education specifically in the context of Bolivia (Saavedra 2007; Lopes Cardozo 2011), feminist and transgressive education (Chilisa and Ntseane 2010; hooks 1994), anti-oppression, contemplative, mindfulness-based and embodied education (Berila 2016; Palmer 2007), post- and (de) coloniality theories connected to the field of IDS (Bell et al. 2020; Bell 2022; Harcourt 2017, 2018; Langdon and Agyeyomah 2014) and regenerative education including relational pedagogies (e.g. Bovill 2020; Wahl 2020; Wals 2019).

Hence, this work finds inspiration in multiple epistemological and ontological roots. This relates to parts of Parra Heredia's critical realist-inspired argumentation on the role of the educator, and the way that teacher agency is inherently shaped by and shaping the context in which it is embodied/enacted: 'Teachers are experienced students, which means that they, and particularly those who do social research professionally, have trained their capacity of abstraction to navigate across schools of thought unveiling their assumptions and limitations' (2018, 2196). My thinking is further influenced by a range of epistemological, philosophical and spiritual teachings as highlighted in the sections above. Combining these diverse lines and lineages of thinking allows me to reflect on the multiple dimensions – the what, how and why – of walking the talk of regenerative, inclusive education, as an ongoing exploration – rather than a path I have already 'covered'.

A story on regenerative pedagogies – an autoethnographic methodology

Part of walking this talk is about choosing how to tell my version of this story through auto-ethnography (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010). Reflecting on and sharing a narrative of my personal experiences, reflective journal writing, experienced challenges, felt vulnerabilities (Bhattacharya 2016) and moments of euphoria, in this article I aim to share my version of the CDDE story, believing that 'sharing stories is a way to resist the neoliberal

university and the emotional and physical weight of its deadening and narrow metric-oriented measures' (Black 2018, n.p.). Following a broader counter-movement in the academy to foster 'radical hope' (Black 2018, n.p.; see also the work of Bell et al. 2020) by valuing collaboration over competition, slow scholarship (Berg and Seeber 2013) and working from an ethics of care (Mountz et al. 2015), I reflect on the process and product of CDDE as a small step towards questioning and 'shap[ing] the academy we want, rather than the academy we have' (Black 2018, n.p.).

The choice of a critical auto-ethnographic method is informed and inspired by colleagues who have meaningfully applied this and showed its connections to critical theory, critical pedagogy and critical race studies (Cann and DeMeulenaere 2012) and as a decolonial-inspired inquiry into neoliberal settings, like the university (Bell et al. 2020). I have been further inspired by a regenerative development and design approach to the art and power of storytelling, which was tested through our own CDDE explorations and insights we gained on what it means to develop, share and listen to stories: 'Stories enable individuals and groups to grasp and share complex wholes and collectively imagine the future differently. […] In addition, they can create a collective identity, meaning, and purpose to bridge divides and foster collaboration' (Mang and Reed 2012, 30).

At the same time, I recognise how the mere act of deciding on how this story is being told is a matter of crafting a certain discourse, which inherently is an act of power over (the inclusion and exclusion of) certain aspects of knowledge (Foucault 1980 in Langdon and Agyeyomah 2014, 3) accumulated within the CDDE space. For this reason, student members of the community have been actively involved in the discussions that shaped this text, as well as engaging in its line of argumentation and editing. There is a requirement to acknowledge the need for more critical engagement, as storytelling approaches also carry the danger of co-optation, appropriation and reproduction of (colonising, and other hegemonic structures of) knowledge production (Buckler et al. 2022). In the remainder of this article, I mindfully intersperse my auto-ethnographic reflections and journal passages with insights from the field, relevant excerpts of communication with direct stakeholders, and observed or accounted student responses.

The cause to initiate CDDE: personal motivations meeting student demands

My desire to (re)connect more to the direct community where I live and work has been an organic shift in attention. While earlier on my attention was mainly on collaborations with colleagues in various contexts internationally, more recently my focus shifted to (also) connect more to the university, city and higher education system of the Netherlands. One reason for this shift is that I had a desire to be more home-based because of becoming a mother. Another inspiration has been my longer engagement with a decolonial school of thinking since my (doctoral) research in Bolivia (2007–2011). And, thirdly, my learning about place-sourced and consciousness-oriented regenerative development approaches since 2016 has led me to rethink and redesign many of the roles I play in life (Sanford 2020). This has developed into what I see as a growing uneasiness with my so-called, sometimes externally declared, role as an 'outside expert' in research collaborations in contexts outside of the Netherlands, and hence seeking new ways to engage in both local and international collaborations.

I have struggled with and continue to reflect on the numerous ethical dilemmas connected to finding meaningful ways to deal with insider–outsider dynamics, and hierarchies of privilege and power, connected to being a white, feminist, female scholar (educator and researcher), working in diverse contexts and teams across international contexts in collaboration with the United Nations and other international organisations. And while I deeply cherish these experiences and feel grateful for the learning it has brought me and others with whom I had the benefit of working, I also see this opportunity to walk the talk of an educator for inclusive, regenerative education as a call to pause: to pause and reflect on these issues in tandem with students who face their own and sometimes overlapping dilemmas as they choose their unique paths into or through IDS – a field filled with tensions over past and present hierarchies and privileges (Harcourt 2017).

This self-reflexivity was at the basis of the CDDE intervention and resonates with what colleagues Langdon and Agyeyomah (2014) refer to as critical hyper-reflexivity, or what Bell (2022) refers to as a radical occupation of the classroom, as a crucial approach for (development studies) students to come to understand complexities of societal and classroom change processes. When educators themselves are not conscious of their own power dynamics in a course (or another learning setting) that aims to question power, this could undermine the transgressive intentions. Self-reflexivity then needs to move beyond a focus on positionality and privilege/marginalisation, into the ways in which power moves and operates. When dancing with(in) the education system, it often feels more like an act of improvisation for what is alive, rather than a fixed choreography that can be followed. So, when I invited the first group of students to self-apply for the CDDE project, I likely only partly managed to connect these, and this is a continued exploration.

Excerpt from my positionality statement for first groups of CDDE students:

> I realise that who I am is part of what I bring into my teaching and research, consciously or unconsciously. I was born in the Netherlands in a non-religious-oriented family yet carrying a non-Dutch surname, reflecting my ancestors' migrant and Jewish past. I have been raised with implicit and explicit stories of my ancestors' experiences of the Second World War in the Netherlands, and as a teenager I developed a deep curiosity for both histories of the resistance movement, as well as the experiences of the war for (self-identified or involuntarily appointed) Jewish communities – reflecting my mother's and father's sides of the family. Being a white, university educated female scholar who has had the privilege of working in various societies around the world and coming from a family with grandparents, a mother, father and two older brothers who enjoyed higher education, likely influenced my perspectives on what education can mean. It shaped my conceptualisation of ways in which education governance, curricula, pedagogy and interpersonal interactions in (non-)formal learning settings can either help to address, or in contrast reproduce or even exacerbate societal tensions and conflict-triggers. (December 2016)

A source of inspiration and encouragement for engaging with the work of CDDE as described here was the 2015 student-led occupations and demonstrations that became known as 'The New University', which ignited a staff mobilisation and collective demonstration under the name of 'Rethink UvA'. It allowed like-minded students and colleagues to get together and mobilise collectively against the neoliberalisation, marketisation and management-driven tendencies of our university. It gave me, and several CDDE student members, an increased sense of willpower and engagement with this university context.

The purpose of CDDE – its co-design and evolution

In 2016, I submitted the project proposal to a funding call by the Dutch Ministry of Education and Culture, which was initiated to support educational innovation in higher education. I felt very privileged to receive this grant. Developing this proposal also meant that I needed to actively search for institutional support, which I received from the programme director at that time, as well as the head of the department and the head of the graduate school; I even received a signature from the university central board. The reduction of some of my regular teaching activities that this scholarship brought was decisive as this allowed me to dedicate the required time and energy to developing CDDE. This initial financial support and the consequent creation of time and space for me as an educator has been a crucial enabling contextual factor for my sense of 'agency to initiate change', which is a rare occasion in a globally emerging educational context in which standardisation, accountability measures and deprofessionalisation mostly limit teachers' sense of agency (Connell 2009; Lopes Cardozo 2022; Hood 2019; Vongalis-Macrow 2007).

Rethinking my role as educator

When I took up the challenge of designing CDDE, I already sensed that it was not a lightweight 'project' that would be easy to conduct. In that sense, CDDE has very much lived up to these expectations. At the start, I was not sure even *if*, and if so, *how* students would want to engage with this work. It felt like a leap of faith to send out the initial call for motivation letters. In addition, I also was not sure what it would mean to become more explicit about bringing my background as a trained yoga teacher and regenerative development practitioner into the academic world. I remember expressing to some of my closer friends and colleagues how I feared that I would not be taken seriously anymore as a scholar. However, although of course not everyone I have met along the way so far is equally enthusiastic about the potential of contemplative and regenerative practices for academia, in retrospect I am grateful that I dared to take this step, as I feel that it has enriched my teaching and interactions with students and colleagues, and will likely continue to inspire and broaden my research and writings. I can still recall a sense of anxiety as I sent out the personal statement below to the first group of (potential) CDDE students in 2016.

Excerpt from 'Personal statement – why I want to work with you on this'

> In my view, academic learning should entail the development of intercultural understanding and empathy, and to develop students' awareness and responsibility to take care of their own professional ethical standards, and develop ways of interacting with peers, various groups of professionals and communities (of practice) in the field of development. The mere theme of international development aid is not without its controversies, and this course therefore aims to allow for a space to develop positionality and enactment strategies that suit with students' personal talents, backgrounds and aspirations. This entails experimenting with techniques such as personal journal-writing; integrating mindful listening and contemplative, embodied techniques into (personal, collaborative and inclusive) development; and engaging with visual ethnography and the role of arts and artistic expression (photography, documentary-making, expressive arts) in pedagogical realms and development praxis. Finally, setting onto this journey of critically exploring what diversity and development means is an exciting, yet also slightly scary and uncertain undertaking, and I look forward to jointly travel along with those students that are up for it.

To illustrate what has really changed in my daily work-life is that I noticed how I started to change the way in which I describe this work to colleagues. Rather than the usual and more commonly expressed 'see you later, I am off teaching', 'I need to prepare my class' or 'I am bogged down with marking', instead, I experienced myself expressing to colleagues how 'I am working together with students this afternoon', 'I had a really inspiring conversation about the [text/video/piece of art] that students shared', and 'I am preparing our session with students'. A colleague even commented on how I seemed to look quite 'radiant and energised' when she asked how my morning was, as I came out of a CDDE session.

Courage and co-creation

Drawing on relational pedagogy and connected agency-oriented forms of pedagogical practices, the CDDE initiative applied a co-creative approach from its foundation onwards. This is how Roxana Dumitrescu, a student CDDE member, and I reflected on this process of co-creation in an email to our programme director, in which she asked us to formulate the purpose of co-creation for our teaching programme's self-assessment re-accreditation report.

Email communication to programme director, 29 September 2020:

> The aim of co-creation is to collectively design, implement and reflect on an engaging, agency-enhancing form of teaching and learning. Co-creation approaches allow students to develop their agency over their own desired learning process. Educators can facilitate the process, guide the content and hold an inclusive space where responsibilities for the learning process are meaningfully shared. Co-creation entails collaboration, negotiation and learning from and with the students as the classroom hierarchy is diminished.

An important challenge is that the co-creation process takes considerable time. Concretely, having gone through several co-creation processes and cycles multiple times now, a crucial factor that minimises a (collective) sense of uncertainty and unstructuredness seems the timely preparations *before* the actual start of the work with a group prior to the first meeting. For instance, an online preparatory phase in which all members of the classroom can contribute by sharing their intentions and preferred topics, ways of working, or assessment forms are part of this (for an impression of the ways of working and themes addressed, please visit the project webpage).

Furthermore, I have found it useful to design for a collectively agreed rhythm that includes a short design-meeting which then results in co-created inputs from a small team of students (for instance, three weeks prior to a session), followed by a shared discussion and a second design session (no later than two weeks before the session), resulting in a collectively prepared session outline and preparatory materials for the entire group (which are then shared no later than one week before the actual session). This shared design and timely preparations have allowed us to play with moving past the automatic student–lecturer interactions, by creating a shared sense of responsibility and agency over the content and form of the upcoming session. At the same time, some sense of chaos and uncertainty cannot and probably should not be avoided completely and it is actually a useful starting point as it questions a sense of automatic hierarchy or automatic behaviour in classrooms and the way we develop or accept course design and curricula. In addition, it requires me as a lecturer to have the courage to step back from a leading role, and have a sense of trust that the initial, usually chaotic, process will turn out for the better. At the same time, having engaged in co-creation

processes over a number of years now, I realise that this act of letting go, to some extent, is crucial for increasing levels of commitment, creativity and engagement thereafter, and aligns with our attempts to decolonise our ways of working.

Reflecting on having worked on co-creation processes within CDDE, while simultaneously integrating co-creation into my teaching in the master's (20–30 students) and bachelor's courses (70–90 students) on IDS, I can see that there are various benefits to this process. Firstly, the co-creation process both requires and establishes a sense of community and a more fruitful learning environment for introspection, empathetic learning and personal development to happen. Secondly, allowing for a sense of community building to take place shifts the more traditional format of classroom attendance – where students need to account for their absence to a lecturer – to a more shared sense of commitment and holding each other accountable for 'being there'. Thirdly, co-creating the content of courses yet also the ways in which we work together, we started to develop shared 'codes of conduct' (usually called 'shared values for collaboration/learning') in each group. Being an often-used technique in diversity-sensitive or inclusive pedagogical approaches, I also experienced how in CDDE and other courses, the design of such shared values enables groups to establish an open and respectful learning space, which does not shy away from discomfort. Fourthly, the co-creation process allows me as a lecturer to engage with a broader range of themes, pedagogical approaches, and resources, which we decide to work on as a group. Fifthly, I personally feel more inspired, enriched and energised in engaging with students through co-creation, which for me counterbalances the sense of vulnerability and uncertainty of my role as a lecturer in these processes. It seems we all leave the CDDE sessions in a more inspired, energised and connected manner than the ways in which we entered.

Purposeful education design

In line with Bovill's (2020) argument, while CDDE was a needed and valuable breeding ground to explore and test co-creative approaches and alternative pedagogies, this was done with a selective group of highly motivated, international students. Thus, moving the CDDE experiences into a co-creative process for courses at bachelor's and master's levels has been part of an attempt to make these approaches more inclusive for a bigger group of students – also those that would not self-select to join a rather radically different and experimental teaching innovation. A key approach to inviting groups (of students, co-workers and so forth) into a more present and purposeful state of mind, being and (inter)action is to intentionally direct the field of attention you aim to work on (Scharmer 2016), as I further illustrate in the journal excerpt below.

Journal excerpt: creating an energy field in learning settings

> I find that starting a meeting with a short moment of facilitated reflection (sometimes referred to as meditation, and in some cases intentionally called centring or breathing techniques) can make a difference for the way in which that respective group, and the individuals within it, interact and work thereafter. I often prepare and design these short meditations and connected mind-awakening journaling questions or small group reflection exercises based on the theme or purpose of the session or meeting, something which I learned to do within CDDE. This gives people a chance to set an intention and get focused on the work ahead and how they can best serve the collective purpose of why we are all there that day/hour/meeting, while being mindful of whatever state of mind and being they bring into the meeting that day. As one regenerative teacher has often reminded me, the aim is to start a

meeting/session/class the way you want to end it – which I find valuable advice. (October 2021)

Sharing out these short intentions in the group, often using popcorn style (speak up if and when you feel ready), can be a useful technique to create a sense of mutuality in a group. Nevertheless, it remains a continuous exploration and balancing act to co-design learning environments that invite people to move out of their automatic habits and comfort zones while also allowing space for learners to learn at their own pace (by allowing for different moments and ways of engaging in the co-creation process) and experience and express resistance or discomfort. And while several students over the past few years have reported moving from a strong sense of resistance to guided meditation practices in university classrooms, many of them reflected in time how this had been a beneficial learning experience. Nevertheless, it (perhaps obviously) does not mean that meditation practices are the only way to enhance consciousness in learners, nor do I think that any educator can introduce such contemplative pedagogies into a learning setting without embodying such a daily practice (or education) themselves. Nor does it mean that all university courses need to engage in, for instance, decolonising theory and pedagogy – yet as a CDDE community we have seen clear added value for disciplines such as IDS to continue to evolve the ways in which the field of study and practice works.

Concluding: aspirations for inner and outer change

Poem by Rhonda Magee, from her book The Inner Work of Racial Justice : Healing Ourselves and Transforming Our Communities through Mindfulness (2019)

If the path could speak
Beneath these words rests the awareness of generations.
And of generations.
And of generations that have come before.
The awareness that each of us is a vital part of the earth we call home,
Is of the wind, the rain, the fire.
And so inherently belongs.
If the path could speak, it would say:
'We must assert that which exists deep within us,
Namely, a sense of kinship with all those with whom we share the earth'.
On Repeat.
In every language.
Unceasingly.
-- Rhonda V. Magee (2019, iv)

Every time I read this poem, I feel the need to take a moment to pause, and let it sink in (perhaps, as a reader, you wish to do the same?).

In this paper, I reflected on the incremental transformations our small-scale teaching innovation project developed, both within the inner landscapes of the various cohorts of CDDE student-members and within me as an educator and initiator of the initiative. As a collective, we have often reflected on the outer changes – the larger potential for systemic change our work aspires to – while reflecting on the various hurdles along the way, and we continue to do so as I write this piece. When reflecting on the impact of CDDE in the IDS

programme, and the broader university context, 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 and, at the other end, feeling incredibly energised and full of hope. Writing this piece allowed me to reflect on both activating and restraining forces at work in the institutional setting of the university, and to become more discerning about the potential to reconcile these by bridging contemplative/mindful/consciousness-oriented pedagogies with social justice-inspired teaching – as a way to enhance agency in students and in me as an educator. And in doing so, to recognise that 'deep within us' [there is] 'a sense of kinship with all those with whom we share the earth' (Magee 2019, iv).

As we – you, dear reader and me as a writer – are landing at this last part of the text, rather than offering a more conventional list of key conclusions, I extend an invitation to pause and reflect. After telling my version of the CDDE story, I now intentionally aim to bring this way of working alive by developing some reflection questions for you – a moment to reflect on the learning spaces and systems that you may be part of, to reflect on your own *thinking*, your *roles* – as a student, educator, education-designer/planner and/or researcher and so forth – and your *will* to (co-)create meaningful transgressive learning places and spaces, with whom, and why.

The following set of reflective (journaling) questions are designed with inspiration from the dynamic living systems frameworks which I learned to work with through the regenesis school of regenerative development. I use these and related questions continually to reflect on my own ways of thinking, working and being. I often do so in collaboration with colleagues and students, in order to become more purposeful in our inner (introspective) and outer (societally and planetary engaged) work. Please take a moment to find your preferred (paper or digital) space to capture your written reflections on the following questions:

> *If – inspired by Magee's poem – we paint a dynamic image of each of our learning journeys as paths, meandering alongside the various rivers of knowledge we come across, then what does this mean for how you see your unique learning path? And zooming out a bit farther, what image comes to mind if you reconsider the potential of what the education institution(s) and system(s) you are nested within could be, and become? What would these look like?*
>
> *What would need to be developed in yourself, and in the people/communities/institutions you aim to engage with, so that together you might develop a shared sense of direction?*
>
> *What potential for transgressive changes (in your own way of working/being, and within the groups/communities you work with) do you observe, what challenges do you foresee, and how (and with whom) might these be reconciled?*
>
> *Can you develop a word, image or short sentence to capture your intention for how you aim to 'walk your talk'? What is the effect of developing a clear aim for the work (and change) you wish to bring into the world, and what is the value of doing so?*

Thank you for taking the time to engage with my work, and feel free to reach out to me.

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