UCL

The Academic Writing Centre and the Academic Communication Centre warmly welcome you to the

IOE Academic Writing Seminar Series

#IOEWritingSeminar

Aim of presentation

- This presentation explores ways of using a range of modes and embodied approaches to develop learning and writing within multilingual and diverse higher education contexts.

- The hope is that this exploration will give us a better understanding of what multimodality has to offer as a pedagogic resource, and how it can be used to improve the teaching of writing.

Outline

- Writing Centres and access to Higher Education

- Materiality of Writing

- Fluid genres in less regulated spaces.

- Embodied pedagogies, including talk, laughter and silence in teaching writing.

UCT Writing Centre

- Coordinator (Arlene Archer)
- Administrator
- Part-time Consultants
  - 10 Postgraduate students
    (5 Masters, 4 PhD and 1 postdoc)
  - Variety of disciplines
    - Anthropology,
    - Biological Sciences,
    - Biomedical Engineering,
    - Conservation Biology,
    - Education,
    - English,
    - Human Biology,
    - Linguistics,
    - Psychology,
    - History
- Externally Funded
- STATS: 75 workshops (5000 students)
- One-on-one consultations: around 3500

South African context

- A long history of educational inequity has resulted in a high proportion of students who are under-prepared for Higher Education.

- In this context, it is important to recognize the diverse resources that learners draw on to express meanings.
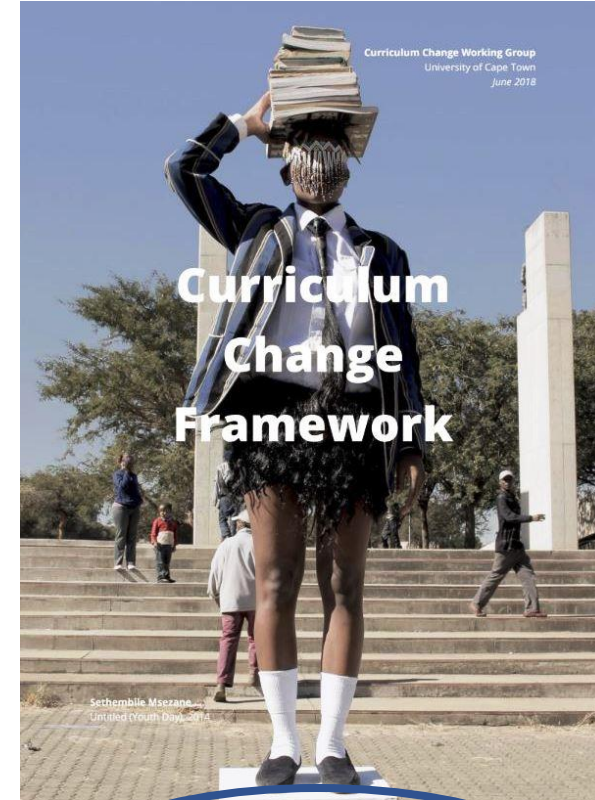
Access

Physical access to an institution

Cultural access to an educational environment

Epistemological access to disciplinary Discourses

Access Paradox

- Success in the dominant discourses and genres of academia means increased throughput for previously disadvantaged students.

- However, socialization into dominant practices contributes can uncritically perpetuate the status quo.

- The essay genre is still often seen as the "genre par excellence for assessment in the academy" (Andrews 2010: 158). However, these standard genres can reproduce inequalities in society.

Critical Access

- The key question in terms of equity is how to provide access to dominant forms, while at the same time recognizing and valuing the diversity of students' representational resources.

- Academic literacy practitioners and writing centres have the role of critically interrogating academic discourse practices.

- Making students aware of these textual codes and enabling them to employ them appropriately in specific contexts are the goals of a writing pedagogy that enables access for students.

Writing Centre ethos

Our work is situated within a desire to understand and **negotiate difference** rather than the institutional need to manage or eliminate it.

Materiality of Writing

In thinking about the materiality of writing, it is useful to consider three aspects.

- Writing is configured differently in different media, such as the page and the screen.

- There are different 'paratexts' that accompany different physical media.

- Writing is a visual entity, also governed by the logics of space.

Changing materiality of writing in different modes and media

Different paratexts accompany different media

- Paratexts: 'accompanying productions' which bind together the reader and a text (Adams 2016 in Gourlay 2024: 6)

- The paratexts of a book have the effect of focusing the reader on what is to come: the cover, title, preface.

- In contrast, the threshold of the digital text contains "multiple doors which, if pushed and entered, lead the reader into alternative pathways, and a multiplicity of labyrinthine passages open up" (Gourlay 2024: 9)

'More-than-digital' meaning-making

- Where the physical book is largely a singular entity when held in the hands, a laptop consists of multiple layers of digital text, which can be present simultaneously, either by having multiple application windows open or simply being present as a possibility.

- This multiple, complex, and entangled nature is an important feature of more-than-digital meaning-making.
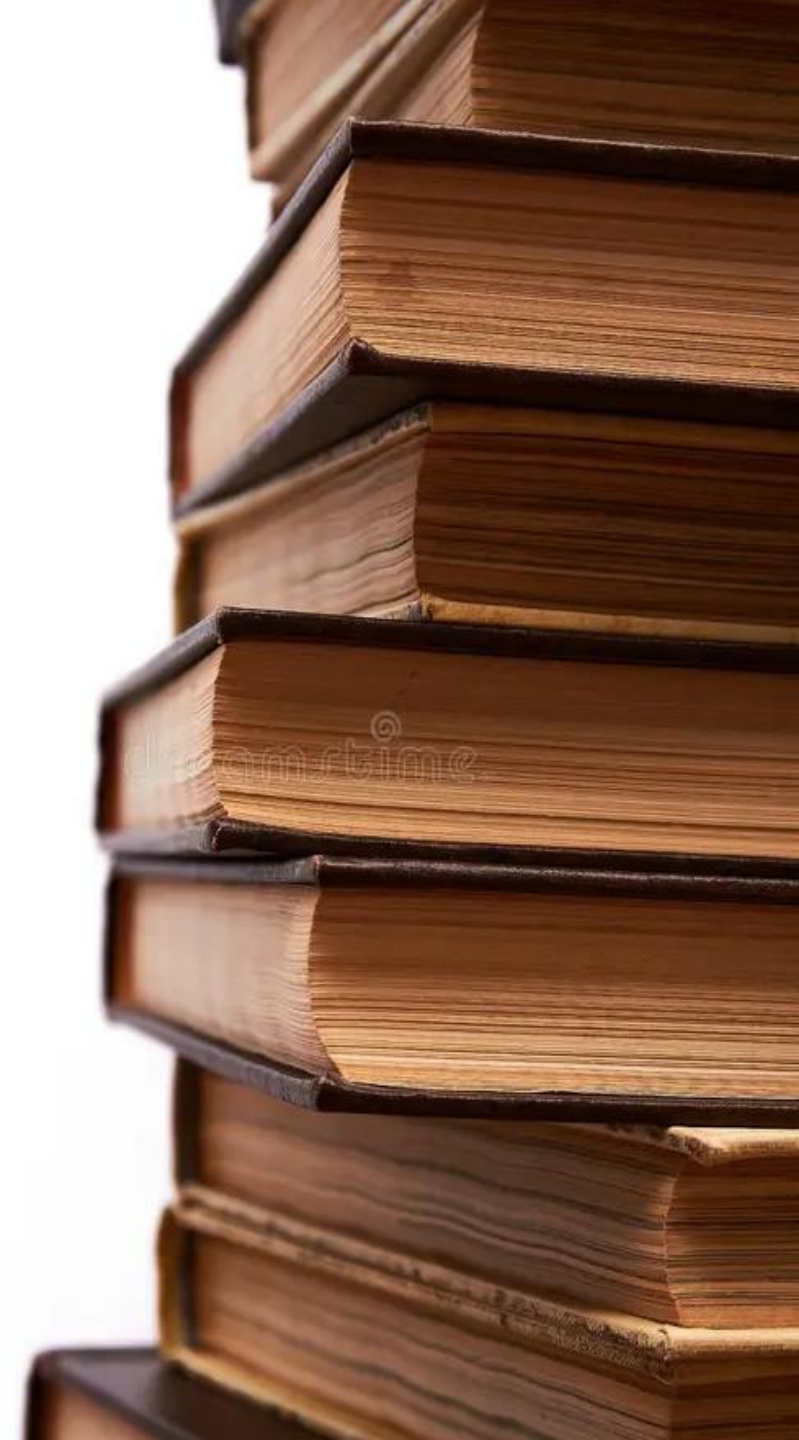
Writing as Visual Entity

- Writing is a visual entity and is often governed by the logics of space where position influences value and sequence of reading.

- van Leeuwen (2004: 14) argues that typography is a "communicative mode in its own right" that draws on colour, texture and movement.

- In addition, the visual design of writing includes aspects such as spelling, emphasis and layout.
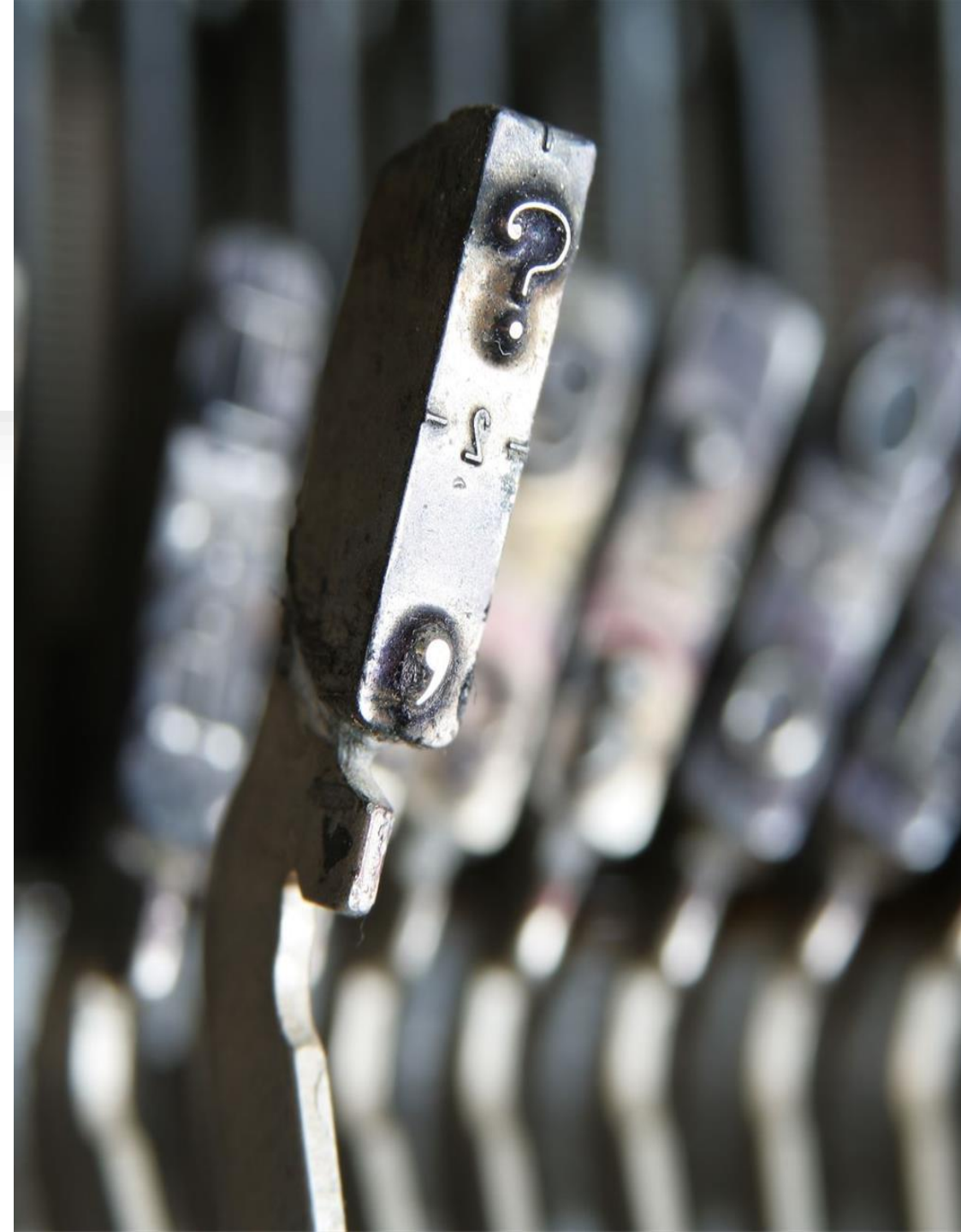
Reclaiming Writing as Embodied Practice

- Some Western epistemic traditions can position knowledge as non-corporeal, as separate from the body, neutral and context-independent.

- In doing this, they potentially suppress alternative epistemic traditions.

Decolonizing academic writing

- Mbembe (2016) and Dolmage (2012) show that academic writing practices mostly still adhere to colonial traditions and assume a disembodied, product-focused writer.

- Decolonization involves questioning and reevaluating dominant narratives, power structures and practices that have been shaped by colonial histories.

- One of the broader goals of decolonisation is to "bring the human out of an imprisoned object" (Reddy, 2016: 69).

- Dolmage argues that traditional forms of writing assume a disembodied writer, and "if a body is envoked, it is through a normative filter" (2012, p.3).

- It follows then that academic writing will be most accessible to those who 'fit' a heteronormative standard and whose writing process is that of "progression towards perfection and away from all evidence of struggle and labour" (2012, p.3).

Less regulated genres

Less regulated genres and unconventional approaches to writing in academia can lead to a sense of 'play' - a dialectic between spontaneity and constraint.

"In institutional settings in which constraint is amplified and experienced as distorted, conflict ridden or contradictory, people may seek more spontaneous outlets to provide a sense of play, creativity or flow"

(Thesen, 2013: 117).
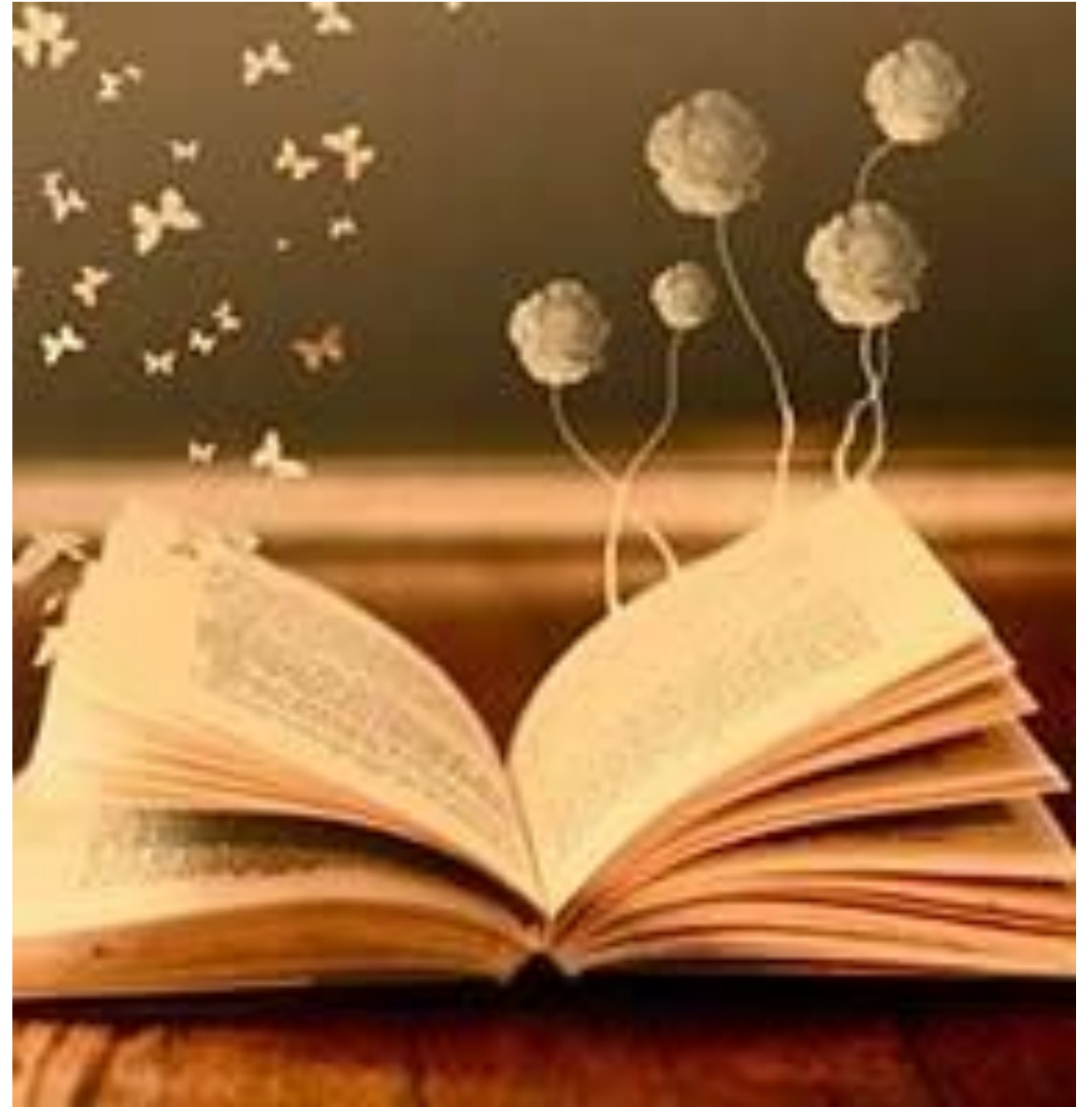
Fluid genres and discursive play

- Freewriting where students are encouraged to write without stopping.
- Constructing a short fairytale type genre beginning 'Once upon a time …' describing a research project, which can then be re-worked into an abstract.
- Force a connection between one's research and a chosen object.
- Writing within certain constraints, either word limits or time limits, or a particular shape on the page.
- Mind-mapping or visualization

Less regulated genres for both writing process and product

- These less regulated genres are important as part of a writing process.

- However, the ideal is also to work towards assessed assignments with more inclusive topics.

Circumventing ChatGPT

- First-year anthropology assignment: students to observe a site in their environment that they are familiar with and describe and critique the site in the voice of an anthropologist from a particular perspective.

- They then reflect on what the activity allows them to understand about the origins and history, possibilities and limitations of the discipline of anthropology.

- One student wrote about the "culture of the Niart Regnessap in Cape Town" (the 'Passenger Train') describing the 'magic token' (ticket) which allows them to "partake as a verified member of Regnessap tribe".

The token transaction occurs inside the token bearer's dimly lit dusty chamber, which contains two arched doorways: one leading to the outside world, through which the Regnessap will enter, and the other leading onto the holy ritual ground, the Noitats.

The Regnessap and token bearer will stand on either side of a transparent screen, to ensure that they do not make any physical contact (again, a sign of their distrust). Into a silver dish, the Regnessap will carefully place their gift, and utter a string of words, which indicates to the token bearer how they would like to experience the Niart ritual.
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Embodied Pedagogies

- In multimodal and embodied pedagogies, "there is a conscious awareness of the relationship between modes, learning and identity" as learners engage with different modes in different ways.

- They have "different relationships, histories and competencies in relation to modes" (Stein 2008: 122).
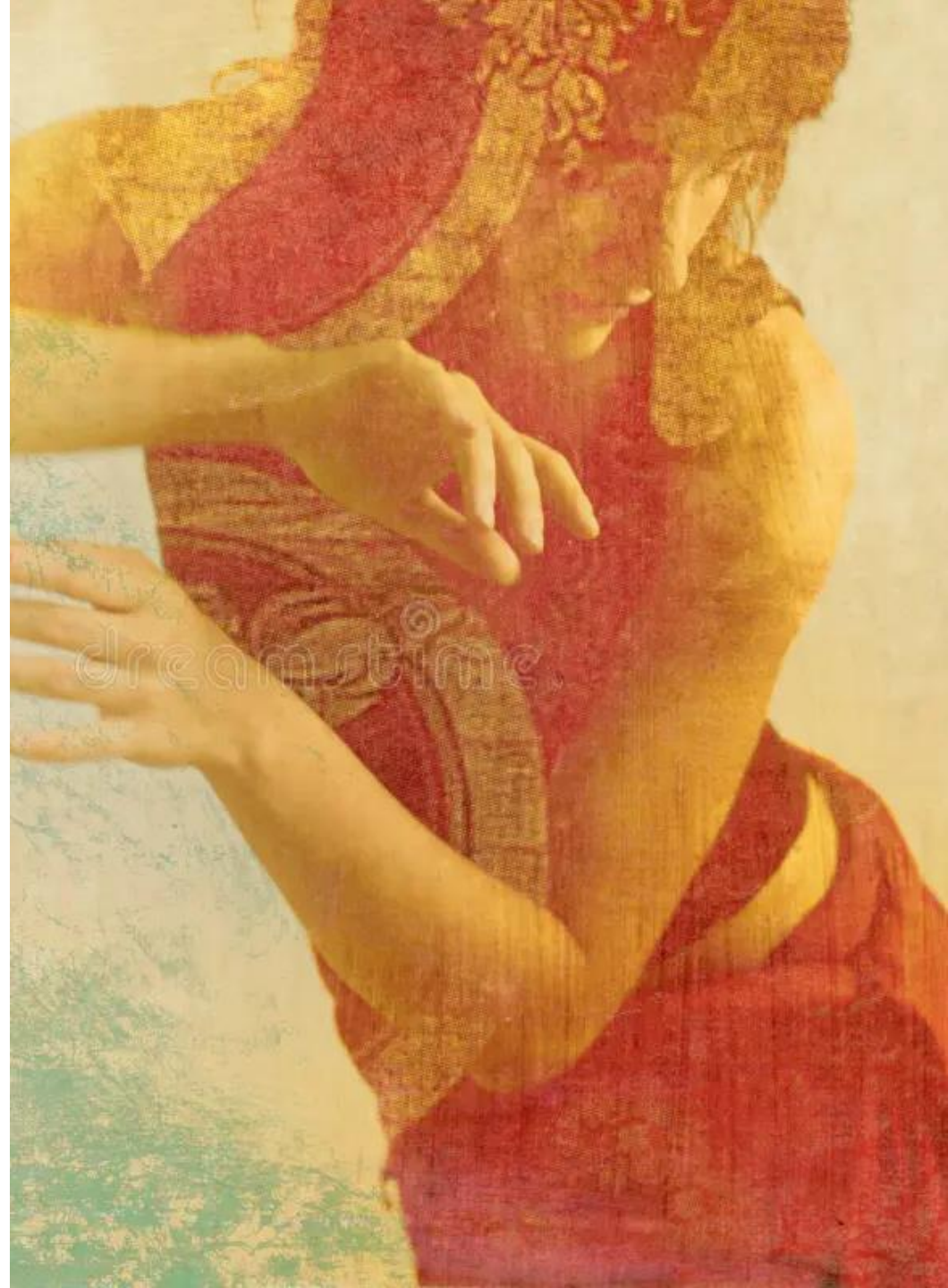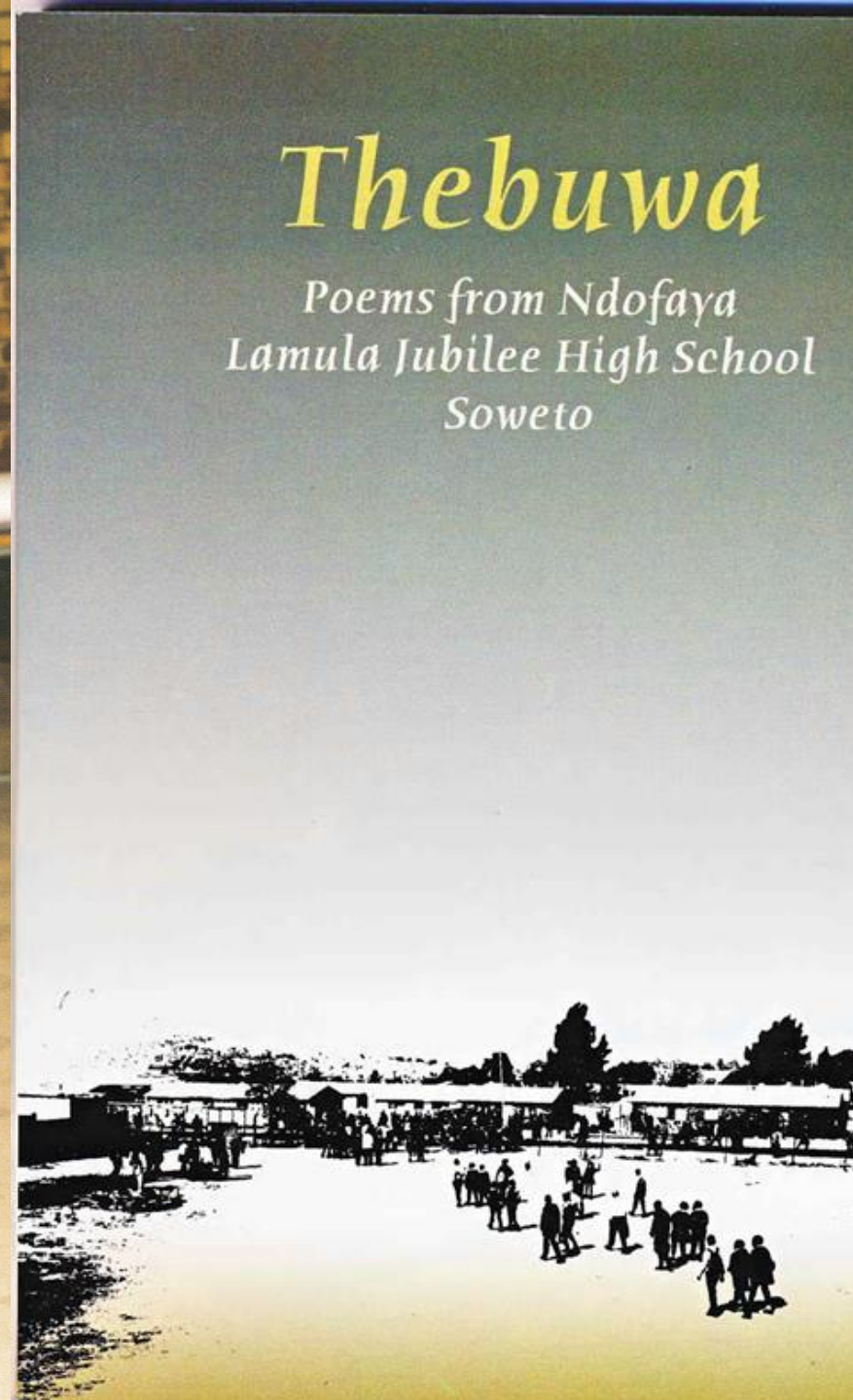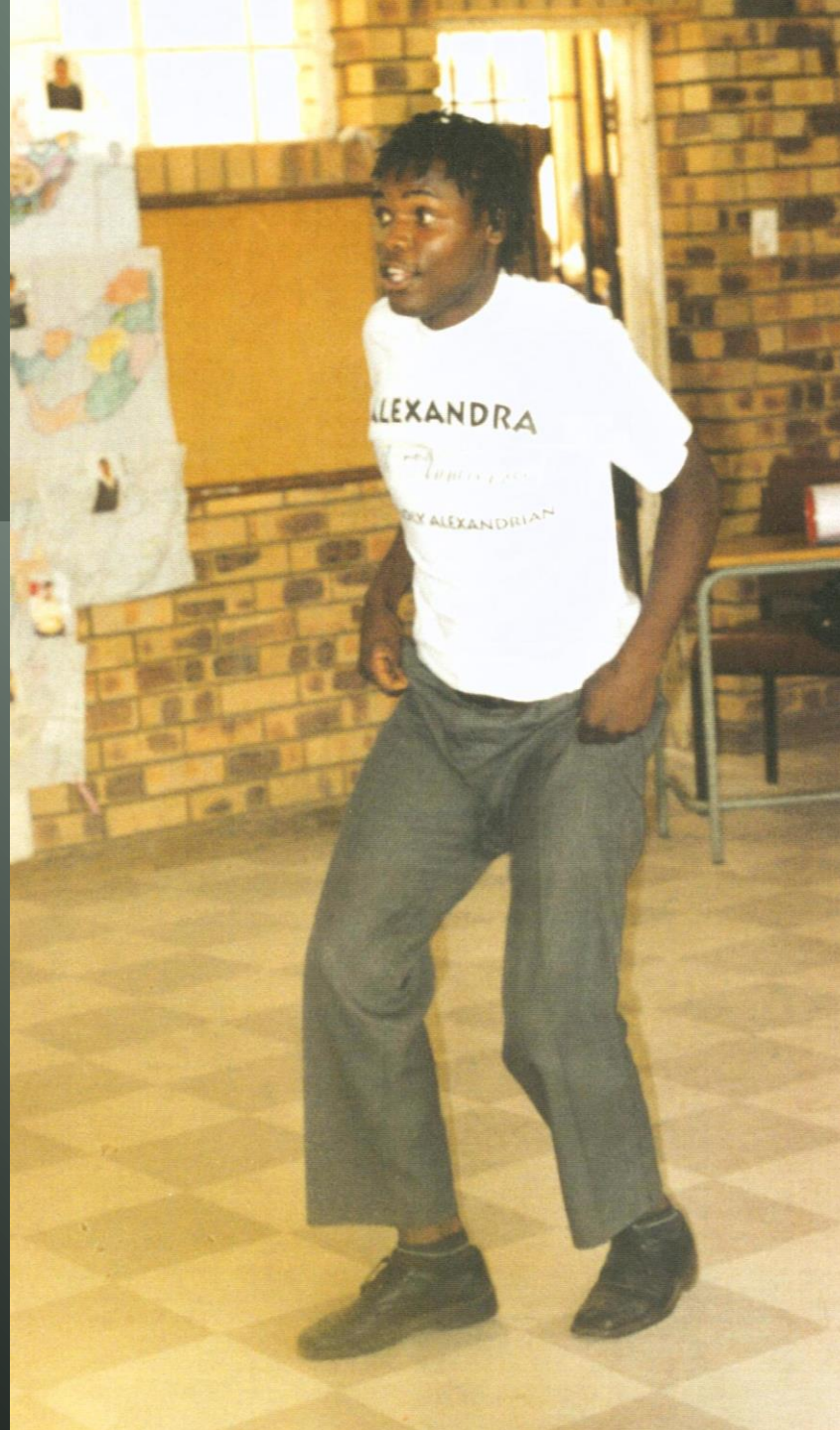
Spoken word and poetry as embodied writing

Shifting the curriculum focus from analysis, to composition, enabled the students to 'modalise' poetry in different ways – as a spoken form, as performance, and even as embroidered cloth.

Poetry classroom: Shift from reading to speaking to writing

Thebuwa

Poems from Ndofaya
Lamula Jubilee High School
Soweto

Talk as embodied mode for improving writing

- A critical way of being develops through discussion and argument.

- Writing centres thus embrace the complex relationship between the spoken and the written.

Affordances of Talk

- The tutor's task is to help students acquire a 'metalanguage' to talk about their writing and develop self-critical practices.

- Tutors often get students to articulate how they felt the consultation had helped them.

- This is an important metacognitive activity as it helps students to become conscious of aspects of their own writing.

Talk and Multilingual resources

- Students discuss their writing in any language before writing in the language of instruction

- Students do free writing exercises in their first languages, as a way of getting ideas out without having to worry about the form.

- Those who theorize translanguaging talk about a semiotic 'repertoire' that communities have developed to meet their social needs.

- From a multimodal viewpoint, this repertoire encompasses not only verbal elements but also resources like gestures and images.

Laughter as embodied mode

- Laughter is both audible and visual and combines different modes: vocal, facial expression and body movement such as the shaking of the torso.

- As such, laughter is both paralanguage (e.g. loudness) and body language which suggests a larger meaning potential for laughter as mode.

'Silence' in co-presence

- Silence is a "flexible mechanism for different types of content (memories, feelings, beliefs, etc.), or different forms (verbal, auditory, visual, etc)" (Adler and Kohn 2021: 3).

- Silence is not necessarily 'absence' and also need not be passive.

- In a pedagogical context, it is important to hear and interpret silence, to pay attention to students' gaps, pauses and hesitations.

- Additional language speakers tend to produce "more pauses of longer duration and in mid-clause position" (Kosmala, 2019: 1).
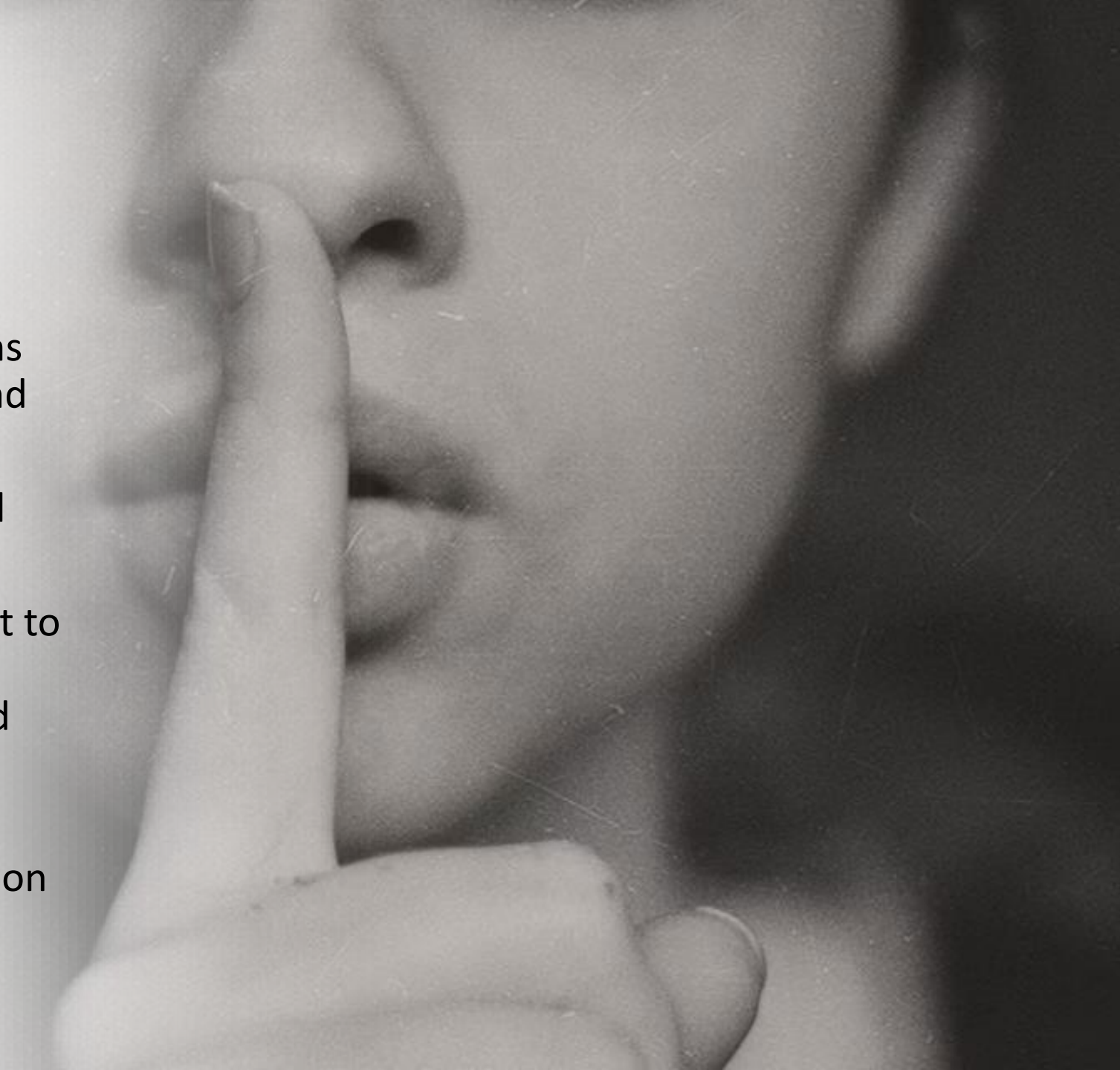
Face-to-face engagement involves:

"embodied human subjects, co-presence, happenstance, serendipity, unpredictability, materiality, and all the physical and particular aspects of being in a room with people, sharing air, light" (Gourlay, 2022: 8).

Final Comments: Embodiment and access in HE

- The explicit utilization of multimodality can enhance writing production and enable writers to actively explore different modes for constructing meaning.

- A range of resources can be harnessed to disrupt conventionalized norms in academia, including monolingual, monomodal and hegemonic structures that may marginalize particular groups.

- We need to question Western perspectives of humanism and anthropocentrism, which position the cognitive as separate from the embodied.

- The academy needs to shift to accommodate, recognise, and value diverse epistemologies and methodologies.

- This links to the student call to decolonise education, which is not just about changing the focus of curriculum content, but also about what meaning making practices are valued and recognised (Mbembe 2016).

Final Comments

- As a learning space that embraces its sense of liminality, writing centres are in a unique position situated on the fringe of the university, whilst at the same time functioning as an integral part of the university's centre of academic activity (see Archer & Richards, 2011).

- Writing centres are empty of a fixed content – there is no curriculum and no assessment, and the commitment is thus to a space rather than a particular agenda.

- For this reason, writing centres can function as change agents, contributing towards changing the dominant attitudes to language and culture by shifting authority.

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