Reflective practice

Promoting Social Change amongst Students in Higher Education: A Reflection on the Listen, Live and Learn Senior Student Housing Initiative at Stellenbosch University

Munita Dunn-Coetzee* & Magda Fourie-Malherbe**

Abstract

Twenty-two years after apartheid South African higher education is still struggling with challenges around access, success and transformation. Stellenbosch University (SU), as a historically white university, is striving to become significantly better and different in terms of relevance and active role-playing. SU wants to prepare students to become South African citizens who bring about and enable positive change in society. The Listen, Live and Learn (LLL) initiative at SU is a senior student housing programme with the aim of providing experiential opportunities for students to make contact with 'the other'. By being in closer, more regular contact with 'the other', students' stereotypes, biases and discriminatory attitudes should start changing for the better. This article focuses on the evaluation of one of the proposed outcomes of the LLL programme – increased levels of interaction among students in a LLL house lead to reduced stereotyping and diminished bias. A quantitative investigation by means of an electronic survey was conducted. The second phase of the research was of a qualitative nature and consisted of focus group interviews. The conclusion can be made that LLL participants are a self-selecting group and that students who tend to apply for the LLL programme probably already have low levels of prejudice, bias and stereotyping. For the programme to effect social change, it needs to be considerably expanded in order to include more students who may not necessarily share the 'open-mindedness' of this cohort.

Keywords

Listen, Live and Learn initiative; social change; stereotyping; social change model; higher education

Introduction

In 2017, 23 years after apartheid, South African society is still characterised by racial inequalities and social exclusion (Leibowitz, Rohlede, Bozalek, Carolissen & Swartz, 2007; Soudien, 2014). Particularly over the past two years the fault lines in the 'rainbow nation' have been starkly exposed in the higher education sector with student protests in the #FeesMustFall movement becoming ever more violent, destructive and divisive. More

*   Dr Munita Dunn-Coetzee is the Director of the Centre for Student Counselling and Development, Division of Student Affairs, at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Email: mdunn@sun.ac.za

** Prof. Magda Fourie-Malherbe is Professor of Higher Education Studies in the Centre for Higher and Adult Education, Faculty of Education, Stellenbosch University.

than ten years ago Walker (2005a) pointed out that students' lives are still marked "by race, by racialised subjectivities, and by a past of racial separateness" (p. 53). This is now being graphically demonstrated.

Yet, many societal institutions, including higher education institutions, are "striving to make a different present and a new future" (Walker, 2005b, p. 133). Whereas South African higher education in the past primarily targeted and served a minority ethnic group, universities are now striving to ensure equitable representation of all South Africans in their student and staff components. But making a new future is more than widening access to previously underserved groups and appointing black academics; it is also about contributing to "the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens", and "a commitment to the common good" as envisaged in the 1997 White Paper for Higher Education (DoE, 1997, p. 9). What makes this particularly challenging is that South Africans are by no means homogenous in terms of economic, educational or social attributes (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012, p. 20). We shall return to this point later.

This reflective account reports on the evaluation of an institutional initiative to bring a diversity of students together in living spaces in order to break down traditional barriers of race, gender, language and nationality and to achieve some of the goals of the White Paper as noted above. We firstly paint the institutional context in which this initiative was introduced, after which we describe the programme and how it has developed over the eight years of its existence. The second part of the article reports on a programme evaluation that was performed to garner more insight into the effect of the programme. The complexities of such an evaluation are highlighted as well as ways of overcoming them. Lastly, we share some conclusions and recommendations that could be of value to an international audience.

Institutional context of the programme

The positioning of Stellenbosch University (SU) in a rapidly changing higher education context necessitates institutional transformation, the promotion of diversity, and social integration among all students on campus. SU, as a historically white university, was founded in 1918, has ten faculties on five campuses, and currently has 30,305 students of whom less than 40% are students of colour. Approximately 30% of SU students make use of residential housing while the majority are commuting students. Table 1 depicts SU undergraduate enrolments from 2011 to 2016.

Table 1: Stellenbosch University undergraduate enrolments according to race,[1] 2011–2015

Race	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
African	1 297	1 389	1 661	1 922	2 200
Coloured	2 790	2 725	2 980	3 397	3 732
Indian	274	284	327	419	473
White	12 690	12 534	12 325	12 400	12 646
Total	17 051	16 932	17 293	18 138	19 042

Table 1 illustrates that the number of undergraduate enrolments of white students has remained more or less constant over the past five years, and that the growth in student numbers occurred primarily among African, coloured and Indian students, albeit from a very low base. These figures give evidence of moderate success of a variety of recruitment and support initiatives to diversify the student population and to enhance student success, as part of SU's commitment to addressing its exclusionary past, and contributing to building a new just and inclusive society. There has, however, also been a realisation that it is not sufficient to simply widen access for African, coloured and Indian students to Stellenbosch University. Change with regard to the institutional culture and social climate of the institution also needs to be effected. One intervention aimed at achieving this is the Listening, Living and Learning programme, promoting social change among students.

As it is transforming into an institution that is not only significantly different, but also significantly better, SU aims to produce dynamic young individuals who will contribute to positioning the African continent as an important role-player in the global knowledge economy. Change agents are needed to "keep the hope alive" if this effort is to succeed (Kloppers, 2013). If the LLL programme is to realise its aim of having a significant impact within the Stellenbosch student population, this effort must move from being an innovation or an interesting initiative to being a reform. Being a reform requires structural change, rethinking roles and relationships, and generally re-engineering student life so that these learning communities are appropriately supported (Kloppers, Dunn & Smorenburg, 2013).

The Listening, Living and Learning Programme

The Listening, Living and Learning (LLL) programme at SU is focused on senior students, and whilst providing student accommodation, also offers experiential learning opportunities. The LLL houses are designed to provide students with a unique on-campus living environment complemented by an educational, service-oriented programme. It aims to promote listening, living and learning among students, but also between students and external thought leaders so that every house becomes an innovative "think tank" (Kloppers, 2013; Kloppers, Dunn & Smorenburg, 2013). Its core element is bringing together a diversity of students and enabling them to embrace diversity, amongst others, by helping students to identify and adjust their perceptions of 'the other' (those who are different from them).

The LLL programme was piloted in 2008 when it started with one student house. Currently there are 28 LLL houses with a total capacity of 194 students (Kloppers, 2016). A LLL house ideally makes provision for eight students living together, consisting of a diverse group of students who differ in terms of field of study, gender, race, background and nationality. The inhabitants of every house have a specific theme for the year and engage in conversations on the theme for the year they live together. Every house hosts a conversation around the theme inviting academics, civic leaders, experts and other people to join the conversation in the house (Kloppers, Dunn & Smorenburg, 2013).

The LLL programme is based on the premise that students in the houses model 'the different present' and should build 'the new future' of South African society by

demonstrating that living together is possible, healthy and inspirational, and increased contact in physical and temporal spaces allows people to become friends across the boundaries that often accompany diversity. The students share intimate spaces such as kitchen and bathroom facilities, and need to negotiate the house rhythm in the use thereof, requiring them to adapt and find common ground. Lounge conversations, which form the focal point of the initiative, are indispensable to challenge set ways of thinking and to promote a critical stance and open-mindedness. They also act as an inspirational space where academics and students can come together and inspire each other. The project is meant to teach people to not only live together, but also to plan and work together (Kloppers, Dunn & Smorenburg, 2013).

Senior staff members of SU are appointed as mentors ('theme gurus') for the year, acting as catalysts for the creation of dialogue and guiding the students in terms of conversations. Participants have the unique opportunity to form friendships, to engage with experts on the theme of their house and to connect with the mentor of their LLL house (Kloppers, 2016; Kloppers, Dunn & Smorenburg, 2013), and are, in the process, confronted with vastly different perspectives.

The LLL programme aims not only to effect personal change in the participants, but also to empower students to facilitate change for themselves, and on behalf of others. In developing them as actors for social change, the programme also provides a form of leadership empowerment. It is expected that students will develop a sense of working toward or serving a greater good beyond themselves. Leadership is contextualised as a value-based, socially responsible process, and as Roberts (2007) indicates, can be defined as 'conviction in action'. The traditional notion of leadership being positional, exclusive and not accessible to all people is discarded. The focus in LLL is rather on raising awareness of their leadership potential vis-à-vis their fellow students, others and society as a whole. As agents of change the LLL students should continue establishing and supporting healthy communities when they leave SU after graduation, and so continue contributing to positive social change. This builds on Freire's (1972) notion that education is a means to change the human condition.

Developing Students as Agents of Change

In addition to the work of Freire (1972), Bandura (2001) and others, this study built on the Social Change Model of Leadership (SCM). The SCM stresses leadership as a process, and is inclusive of all people regardless of their roles (Komives, Wagner & Associates, 2009). An important principle of the SCM is its focus on the strong connection between getting involved in social change and learning leadership. A leader in this context is one who is able to effect positive change, and all people thus have the potential to be leaders (Wagner, 2009). For the purpose of this study, the SCM as theoretical model was not primarily used to conceptualise leadership, but to provide a specific perspective on the social change occurring within living-learning communities. The SCM approaches leadership as a process which is purposeful, collaborative and values-based, resulting in positive social change. The model is congruent with professional values in student affairs and affirming of a social justice commitment to professional practice (Komives, Wagner & Associates, 2009).

Reeler (2007) explains that all social beings during development experience crisis, and transformative change is about freeing the social being from existing relationships and identities to stimulate further healthy development. As the LLL programme aims to develop students as agents of change, transformative change is essential in furthering healthy development and overcoming challenging or crisis moments.

The SCM includes seven critical values which play out at three levels: individual, group and community (Haber, 2011, p. 67). These levels and the values of SCM are represented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Values of the Social Change Model of Leadership (Haber, 2011, p. 67)

The Seven C's: The Critical Values of the Social Change Model	
Consciousness of Self (individual)	Being self-aware of the beliefs, values, attitudes, and emotions that motivate you to take action. Being mindful, or aware of your current emotional state, behaviour and perceptual lenses.
Congruence (individual)	Acting in ways that are consistent with your values and beliefs. Thinking, feeling, and behaving with consistency, genuineness, authenticity and honesty towards others.
Commitment (individual)	Having significant investment in an idea or person, both in terms of intensity and duration. Having the energy to serve the group and its goal. Commitment originates from within, but others can create an environment that supports an individual's passions.
Collaboration (group)	Working with others in a common effort, sharing responsibility and authority. Multiplying group effectiveness by capitalising on various perspectives and talents, and on the power of diversity to generate creative solutions and actions.
Common Purpose (group)	Having shared aims and values. Involving others in building a group's vision and purpose.
Controversy with Civility (group)	Recognising two fundamental realities of any creative effort: (1) that differences in viewpoint are inevitable, and (2) that such differences must be aired openly with civility.
Citizenship (community)	Believing in a process whereby an individual and/or group become responsibly connected to the community and to society through some activity. Recognising that members of communities are not independent, but interdependent. Recognising that individuals and groups have responsibility for the welfare of others.
Since it is a key assumption of the SCM that the ultimate goal of leadership is positive social change, 'change' is considered to be the centre of the model.	
Change (individual, group, community)	Believing in the importance of making a better world and a better society for oneself and others. Believing that individuals, groups, and communities have the ability to work together to make that change.

The individual values involve qualities of individuals that contribute to positive group functioning, the group values reflect group skills and processes that contribute to effecting positive change, and the community values focus on the greater community's needs. These three levels interact and together contribute to the overall goal of the model: positive social change. Group interaction is inherent in this model and is particularly stressed in the group values of the model (Haber, 2011, p. 67). The dynamic nature of the model is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Dynamic reciprocity in the Social Change Model

As illustrated in Figure 1, each dimension of the model is in dynamic reciprocity with the other dimensions. If a group is unable to come to common purpose (group dimension), it could point to an absence of commitment by individuals to the group (individual dimension) and the reasons why individuals are exhibiting resistance (individual dimension) should be examined. The SCM can become a diagnostic process model to explore how an organisation functions or an individual assessment model to examine personal capacity building (Chang, Milem & Antonio, in Schuh et al., 2011, p. 361).

Research indicated that students taking part in social change activities reported the following benefits: the establishment of personal connections with the relevant issue and with the others involved in the issue, the development of a sense of interconnectedness, the realisation that by helping others the individual also helps him/herself, and the establishment

of a sense of satisfaction (Wagner, 2009). Despite huge challenges facing many communities across the globe, younger generations seem to be expressing more optimism about social change and becoming more involved in effecting such change. They also are more action orientated and less politically inclined than previous generations (Watson, Hollister, Stroud & Babcock, 2011, p. 28). This points to the potential for the development of a variety of attributes in a co-curricular setting, specifically with reference to social change. Amongst these attributes that will contribute to social change are absence of stereotype and bias, and non-discrimination. The LLL programme deems that by being in closer, more regular contact with 'the other', students' stereotypes, biases and discriminatory attitudes should start changing for the better.

Research Methodology

The research project was done in two phases. The first phase consisted of an evaluation of one of the proposed outcomes of the LLL programme: 'increased levels of interaction among students in a LLL house lead to reduced stereotyping and diminished bias', by means of a survey, and the second phase consisted of the collection of qualitative data through focus group interviews to learn more about students' motivation for, experiences in and effects of the LLL programme. Ethical clearance and institutional permission were granted for both studies, and all the participants signed informed consent forms. Whereas respondents completed the online survey anonymously, the participants in the focus groups were randomly selected and are also anonymised in the reporting of the results.

The hypothesis was that the LLL experience would lead to significant change in students' stereotyping and discriminatory attitudes with regard to five constructs: gender, language, race, economic status and nationality. These represent the dimensions of diversity in South African society referred to above. In order to test this hypothesis a pre-test post-test research design was used, and quantitative data were collected by means of an electronic survey. The entire population of students enrolled in the LLL programme at that time (99 students) was the target population, and a total number of 79 students (the sample) responded to both the pre-test and post-test. The research instrument was a researcher-generated Student Attitude Questionnaire consisting of a linear numerical scale (depicting social distance) and a semantic differential scale (depicting stereotypes). The instrument was applied in January and in May with a view to measuring differences (if at all) in students' attitudes that may have developed during their time in the LLL programme.

The first part of the questionnaire gathered demographic data of the respondents, including field of study, gender, age, home language, race, nationality and socio-economic status. Table 3 provides a summary of the demographic data.

Table 3: Demographic profile of survey respondents

Demographic factor	Percentages[2]			
Gender	Female 69%	Male 31%		
Age	19–20 yrs 11,3%	21–22 yrs 59,7%	23–24 yrs 24,7%	25+ yrs 4,1%
Race	African 21%	Coloured 9%	Indian/Asian 2%	White 68%
Home language	Afrikaans 41,2%	English 20,6%	Eng & Afr 15,5%	African & other languages 22,7%
Years of registration	Two or less yrs 5,2%	Three yrs 17,5%	Four yrs 35,1%	Five yrs+ 42,2%
Parental income[3]	Very poor 2,06%	Poor 15,4%	Middle-income 68%	Wealthy 10,3%
Nationality	South African 94,9%	International 5,1%		

From the above table it is noticeable that there was a preponderance of white, Afrikaans-speaking female respondents, that a small minority of respondents regarded themselves as poor, and that by far the majority of respondents were South African.

Table 4 lists the five diversity constructs covered by the questionnaire as well as the forms of behaviour demonstrating bias and stereotyping that respondents had to indicate their agreement or disagreement with on a 10-point scale in the second part of the questionnaire.

Table 4: Diversity constructs and form of behaviour demonstrating bias and stereotyping

Constructs	Forms of behaviour demonstrating bias and stereotyping
Gender	Distrust
Language	Making jokes about Using derogatory language
Race	Fearing
Socio-economic status	Regarding as inferior Not associating with
Nationality	Swearing at

The linear numerical scale in the second part of the questionnaire contained 30 items in which every construct was covered by at least five statements depicting the different forms of behaviour in Table 4. Some of the items were put in the positive (e.g. 'I prefer to associate

with people who belong to my language group') whereas, for control purposes, others were put in the negative (e.g. 'I do not trust people who do not speak my language').

The third part of the questionnaire required respondents to rate members of five groups (once again representing the five constructs) on seven traits, ranging from very negative to very positive on a 10-point scale. Examples of traits include trustworthiness, reliability and honesty.

The research results of the first phase of the research, i.e. the pre-test post-test survey are depicted in Table 5.

Table 5: Phase 1 – Survey results: pre-test and post-test mean scores

Construct & Question		Pre-test mean score	Post-test mean score
Gender	(Qu 2)	56.91	49.60
	(Qu 3)	44.68	41.47
Language	(Qu 2)	39.24	37.24
	(Qu 3)	43.03	40.89
Race	(Qu 2)	56.41	56.04
	(Qu 3)	42.97	40.73
Socio-economic status	(Qu 2)	46.14	46.28
	(Qu 3)	40.75	39.37
Nationality	(Qu 2)	43.58	41.91
	(Qu 3)	43.49	40.59

Table 5 shows that the mean scores of responses from the pre-test to the post-test declined, indicating less tolerance and acceptance. This means that our hypothesis that the LLL experience would lead to significant change in students' stereotyping and discriminatory attitudes with regard to the five constructs of gender, language, race, economic status and nationality was not proven. On the contrary, the results of the post-test in May were somewhat more negative, indicating less tolerance for 'the other' after five months of living together. The biggest change occurred with regard to discriminatory behaviour in terms of gender. However, in most cases the differences in mean scores were very small and not statistically significant.

The results of the quantitative investigation left many questions unanswered. We tried to find possible reasons for the changes, but they remained of a conjectural nature. We therefore decided to undertake a second phase of qualitative inquiry where we could 'drill down' into students' attitudes and their experiences of the LLL programme. For this purpose four focus group discussions were conducted with current participants in the LLL programme who had also participated in the online survey. Each focus group consisted of three to four students. The interview schedule aimed at getting a better understanding of the reasons why students choose to participate in the LLL programme, how they would describe the experience and how they believed they were changed by the experience.

Reasons for entering the LLL programme

Most participants deliberately chose the LLL programme because they wanted to live in a more diverse environment than that afforded by residences or other forms of housing.
    One participant said:

> "… what I really also enjoy about it is just the fact that you stay with people that you wouldn't normally choose to stay with. They're not people that are in your normal sort of environment or circle of friends. So it's just being exposed to different people from different backgrounds. It was really nice."

    Another participant commented that "it is about bringing people who are not necessarily going to meet, together", whereas another one referred to the lack of diversity of ideas in other residential environments: "I did not encounter many people in res who are willing to confront bigger ideas, to find a place where I could live where you could debate ideas". This need to be part of an environment where critical debate took place was also reflected in the following extract: "So to find a place on campus where I could live that was kind of built around debating ideas …"
    From the participants' responses it became clear that participants in the LLL programme are actually a self-selecting group as they wanted to have a more diverse experience and therefore applied for the programme. We shall return to this in the conclusion.

On being prepared for the LLL experience

The responses to the question whether participants felt that they were prepared for the LLL experience revealed their eagerness to join the programme and the expectations with which they did so, but also gave evidence of some uncertainty of whether they would cope with the experience. Even though most participants underwent some form of training when entering the programme, they felt that nothing could really prepare them for the experience. Some entered with confidence: "… I entered with a certain, like a fair level of confidence."
    Others were filled with trepidation: "I was really scared and intimidated by some of the people in the house." One participant made quite a profound observation in likening the experience to life: "It is difficult to prepare anyone for an experience like this. It's like preparing for life."

Participants' perspectives on their LLL experience

For most participants the LLL experience was a dynamic process, with ups and downs. One participant mentioned feeling overwhelmed: "I was extremely overwhelmed in the beginning …". Most participants reported finding their feet over time: "… things got better over time and in that sense, I think we were more real in our responses or interactions with each other …".

Although it took some time, eventually being more comfortable in the LLL environment led to a greater openness to engage with 'the others: "At some point in time you kind of break through and then you realise you have common interests and common goals and at that point it doesn't need to be intentional any more." Another participant remarked that "… it became more and more organic".

But it remained a process of personal growth as reflected in the following comments: "It was just about challenging myself …", and "You become a lot more uncomfortable with some things about yourself … You are forced to confront it. This leads to inner conflict. I'm not going to be this person anymore. If I don't I'd be stupid." The latter reflections of participants point to the personal changes that resulted from their LLL experience.

Personal changes because of the LLL experience

Participants agreed unequivocally that the LLL experience was life-changing:

> "… I can now also say, I grew exponentially and without which I probably wouldn't …"
>
> "LLL has played a role in how I see people and to deal with conflict and organising your life …"

Reflecting on who they were and what effect the experience had on their lives seemed to have led to greater self-insight. One participant reflected: "LLL did not change me but gave me the freedom to be who I am."

Another participant related LLL to his life experience in the following words:

> "… everyone is thrown into this world and into this journey called life … and … we're always struggling to make sense of it and when you're stuck in a house together with other people and you're intentionally pursuing understanding of one another, you're kind of forced to make sense of it a lot quicker and you're also trying out more ways to make sense of it and I think that's very helpful."

Discussion and Conclusion

The interview data shed light on the survey results as it transpired that the LLL participants are a self-selecting group – students who want to open themselves up to a diverse group of people and new experiences. This means that students who apply for the programme probably already have low levels of prejudice, bias and stereotyping. Therefore their scores would not have changed much from the pre-test to the post-test.

A further implication of this is that, for the programme to effect social change, it needs to be considerably expanded in order to include more students who may not necessarily share the 'open-mindedness' of the cohort involved in the study. As the group becomes less self-selecting, the potential for conflict will probably increase, which will require greater involvement by trained facilitators than is currently the case.

Our study has shown that the LLL experience had a profound effect on the students who participated in the programme, and led to better self-understanding as well as

understanding and acceptance of 'the other'. The programme has also equipped students with critical life skills which they would put to good effect in their role as change agents in a healing society. In this regard this study has broader application for other higher education institutions in diverse societies aiming at preparing global citizens for tomorrow. It also confirms the value added to holistic student development by the out-of-class experience, but such experiences should be based on sound theoretical perspectives, properly planned, sufficient resources should be made available for their effective implementation, and should be monitored to ascertain that intended outcomes are reached.

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Endnotes

1. Student numbers are given according to race, as required by the Department of Higher Education and Training. 'Coloured' depicts students of mixed race. African, coloured and Indian/Asian students constitute 'black' students, compared to 'white' students of European descent.
2. Percentages do not in all cases add up to 100% due to missing responses.
3. According to respondents' own perceptions.