

Preservice teachers' voices from the University of Pretoria in South Africa

Reflection: My personal experience with international collaboration between German and South African preservice history teachers

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2024/n31a16>

The international collaboration between the future teachers from Germany and South Africa occurred on 14 November 2024 about teaching controversial issues. This collaboration was a rewarding, enriching, enlightening, and educational experience. As one of the South African student coordinators, this collaboration offered me a unique opportunity to engage and discuss with other teachers from a different cultural and educational background whilst delving into the complexity of teaching controversial issues in the history classroom. In this reflective piece, I will explore my initial impressions, the journey of development, takeaways from the collaboration and conclusions.

My initial impression upon hearing from Dr Bharath about the possible educational collaboration with future teachers from the University of Leipzig in Germany was a combination of curiosity, excitement, and worry. I was thrilled to learn from the next generation of teachers in a foreign country and participate in this worldwide partnership. I have always felt that teachers are lifelong students willing and motivated to learn from others. My curious side was fascinated in determining what differences there were, if any, in the methodology of approaching controversial issues within the classroom. I was also curious about how histories and experiences could be similar despite the geographical locations of the history classrooms. Past events in the history of South Africa and Germany are different yet controversial, motivating me to investigate their approaches and learn from them.

Whilst excitement increased by the day, worry also manifested. I was afraid that perhaps meaningful and insightful discussions could be challenged by the language of

communication – our English and their German. I was concerned that the language barrier would triumph and lead to a less intelligent and less successful collaboration because good communication and collaboration go hand in hand. Consequently, I cast aside my initial concern and realized the potential long-term benefits this international collaboration could have for me and my professional development. I was determined that this collaboration would be successful for not only myself but also for everyone involved.

The journey in setting up this international collaboration between Leipzig and the University of Pretoria initially brought a few challenges that tested our ability to adapt, communicate, and understand the bigger picture that this collaboration was trying to paint. However, thanks to personal motivation and a determined effort from everyone, we connected and learned. At first, Dr Bharath and I were tasked with getting all the teachers onto the WhatsApp platform. This was easily achieved because of Prof Klausmeier's hard work and dedication. Based on individual choices, the collaboration's participants were split into different groups, each focusing on questions related to teaching controversial issues that they had personally picked. The questions covered a wide spectrum, including how much institutional culture influences contentious issues, comparing thorough accounts of potentially contentious school-related practical experiences, and how educators handle contentious subjects when teaching them. After everyone was on the WhatsApp platform, everything started to fall into place.

For my contribution, I selected the question of how institutional culture influences controversial issues. Our group of 8 (4 from each country) had insightful discussions on platforms like WhatsApp and Google Meets. Despite our physical distance, our virtual meetings became a space for exploring and exchanging educational ideas. As we talked, it became clear that we needed to consciously work beyond our differences to ensure that both German and South African students participated equally.

In our group discussion, we delved into the topic by sharing our diverse perspectives, initially shaped by personal introductions among members who included from the Leipzig side Leonie Gofßler, Gabe Decina, Celine Hanekom, Vincent Ansgar Frisch, Robert Henze, and Elias Hofmann. This rich mix of backgrounds sets the stage for a nuanced exploration of the question. The conversation began with insights from the South African context, highlighting how the unified structure of schools up to the 12th grade, coupled with the government's basic education requirement up to grade 9, influences the emergence and handling of controversial issues within educational institutions. As I explained, this setup creates a broad, somewhat homogenized framework for addressing controversies, which contrasts with the German approach discussed later in the meeting. The dialogue was

marked by a fluid exchange of ideas, where each participant, following my lead, contributed their views and interrogated the implications of different educational structures on institutional cultures and their capacity to foster or mitigate controversies.

As the discussion shifted to the German perspective, Robert's introduction of the distinction between high and secondary schools in Germany opened a new dimension to our analysis. This differentiation in educational pathways led to a deeper understanding of how institutional structures can shape the discourse around controversial issues. The German teachers, including Elias, who initially broadened the conversation, shared how these divergent educational tracks influence students' exposure and responses to controversies, suggesting a more segmented approach to institutional culture than the South African model. Throughout our exchange, we learned from each other, uncovering the intricate ways institutional cultures, shaped by national educational systems, contribute to framing and engaging with controversial issues. This cross-cultural insight was enlightening and underscored the complexity of our central question as we discovered the varied approaches and outcomes shaped by our respective backgrounds. The German students' revelations about their educational system, juxtaposed with the South African experience, enriched our understanding and highlighted the significance of context in addressing and understanding controversial issues within institutions.

The most important turning point arose during our first virtual meeting when we realized the importance of visual aids for our German counterparts. After recognizing and understanding this, I took it upon myself to compile an understandable document summarising our discussions, ensuring clarity and accessibility for everyone. During our next discussions on Google Meets, we started using the chat function (a lot more) which allowed for better and clearer communication of thoughts and questions, especially inquiries directed towards our German counterparts.

As our discussions increased, we not only discussed the question at hand but also had a deeper understanding of each other's countries and educational systems. We overcame the language barrier by speaking slowly and using digital tools like Google Translate and the chat function on Google Meets. We were able to overcome the barrier and invest in meaningful discussions. Throughout our journey, I uncovered surprising similarities in teaching methods whilst understanding the difference in emphasis of field trips between Germany and South Africa. Classroom discussions and debates are strikingly similar in Germany and South Africa, as both education systems also prioritize enriching experiences through valuable field trips in their curriculums. These insights enriched our collaborative sessions, highlighting the value of cultural exchange and common perspectives in addressing

historical educational challenges.

During our enlightening final meeting with the German student teachers, I discovered their profound passion and dedication towards teaching their country's complex history, despite its association with controversial issues. Their approach revealed an unexpected level of self-awareness and conscientiousness in addressing sensitive topics, a surprising and admirable trait. The exchange of stories and teaching perspectives was highly informative, highlighting the similarities and differences between our curriculums. It was particularly intriguing to learn from them how our discussions helped unveil new insights into the multifaceted nature of apartheid. They shared how these conversations illuminated the significant role that school culture and atmosphere play in teaching history, especially in approaching, sharing, and sometimes choosing to move past controversial issues. This exchange of knowledge enriched our understanding of each other's educational challenges and strategies and fostered a deeper appreciation of the complexities involved in teaching controversial historical topics.

This international collaboration allowed me to reflect on my pedagogical approaches critically. After hearing from my German counterparts about the value of teaching controversial issues through guided debates and inclusive methods, I have thought of taking on more learner-centred methods. In addition, I have seen directly how crucial communication and cultural sensitivity are when discussing important topics in history education.

Overall, the international collaboration between South African and German student teachers was fruitful in several ways. It promoted cross-cultural learning and gave participants new perspectives on other educational frameworks, pedagogies, and classroom dynamics. This international collaboration shared creative teaching approaches, and student teachers benefited from each other's insights and viewpoints. This valuable collaboration broadened my perceptions globally as it promoted a deeper comprehension of a different context and created friendships and relationships across borders.

In conclusion, the international collaboration between German and South African future teachers on teaching controversial issues was extremely enriching and educational. International collaboration is crucial because it combines a variety of viewpoints, abilities, and resources to accomplish shared objectives more successfully than solo endeavours. Together, people and groups can overcome challenging issues by utilising their skills, exchanging knowledge, and creating creative solutions. Working together increases productivity, encourages communication, develops trust, and stimulates creativity. It also promotes team members' growth, learning, and support of one another. In the end,

teamwork produces superior results, higher productivity, and a feeling of mutual success. Moving forward, I am inspired to incorporate the valuable insights from the various discussions and collaborations into my future practices. I am inspired to create an inclusive environment fostering respect and critical thinking on controversial issues.