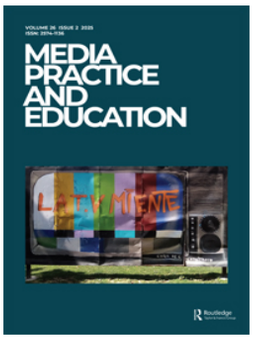

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Media Practice and Education

ISSN: 2574-1136 (Print) 2574-1144 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjmp21

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To cite this article: Hyun-Joo Lim, Bradford Gyori, Samantha Iwowo, Sarah Hillier & Andrew Morris (18 Jul 2025): Allies in action: co-creating cinematic narratives to explore intersectional empathy, Media Practice and Education, DOI: 10.1080/25741136.2025.2534225

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2025.2534225

Published online: 18 Jul 2025.

MEDIA PRACTICE AND EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2025.2534225

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Allies in action: co-creating cinematic narratives to explore intersectional empathy

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ABSTRACT

In times of international humanitarian crises in Gaza, Ukraine and elsewhere, empathy building is a vital concern. Thus, in the spring of 2024, our practice research project Allies in Action empowered students from diverse backgrounds to collaborate in a manner promoting cultural sensitivity and empathy building. It applies a novel conceptual framework that deploys interconnected multiple concepts, founded on the African philosophy, Ubuntu, along with the application of positionality, intersectionality, and reflection & critical reflection to develop empathy and allyship. Methodologically, our project was influenced by and drew on the principles of Participatory Action Research [Stringer, E. 1999. *Action Research*. 3rd ed. London: Sage] and took multi-methods approach that entailed combining practice research with sociological inquiry. Student teams were tasked with making and appearing in short films centring on the theme of empathy. Our findings demonstrate the value of creative practice-based approaches to foster empathy building among university students. Along with theoretical and methodological contributions, this paper aims to contribute to ongoing discourse on empathy-building through a critical practice approach whilst providing a platform to consider how educators can help students develop empathic skills for interacting with one another in inclusive and supportive ways.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 13 May 2025
Accepted 10 July 2025

KEYWORDS
Allyship; empathy; film-making; intersectionality; positionality; reflection/ critical reflection

Introduction

Background and rationale

In times of international humanitarian crises in Gaza, Ukraine and elsewhere, empathy building is a vital concern. Thus, in the spring of 2024, our practice research project Allies in Action empowered students from diverse backgrounds to collaborate in a manner promoting

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cultural sensitivity and empathy building. However, one of the sad ironies of society's growing cultural sensitivity is that this can have a chilling effect on artists attempting to portray stories outside of their limited life experiences. Creatives who want to depict characters who are, in some respects, different than themselves are often nervous about making mistakes. Fear of the Other is replaced by fear of offending the Other. Such anxieties create psychological barriers that inhibit storytellers from attempting to portray characters that do not look and act like the person they see in the mirror. What we call 'the empathy paradox' is the tendency of otherwise well-meaning creatives to resist writing across difference to avoid causing offense. Left unchecked this tendency can foster cultural isolationism and result in the production of sterile and homogenous art. By creating diverse teams and tasking participants with writing about empathy, the Allies in Action project sought to help participants clear the, sometimes daunting, hurdle of the empathy paradox.

Overview of the project

Drawing on the African philosophy, Ubuntu (Mbiti 1969; Tutu 1999), our facilitators stressed the importance of collaborating in a spirit of fellowship and cooperation. We organised four teams with three to five participants each. Each team included stakeholders from different cultures, ethnicities, sexualities, abilities, and ideologies. They were tasked with producing a five-minute film on empathy, undertaking the writing, acting, and filming themselves. This created opportunities to discuss how individuals inhabiting different subject positions might find ways to connect across difference. Our research team featured two 'Creative Leads,' Samantha Iwowo, a filmmaker and critical film scholar, and Bradford Gyori, a television writer-producer and creative writing teacher. Iwowo and Gyori focused on supporting the student filmmaking teams, helping them think through creative and logistical challenges, but also encouraging them to portray their subject matter with candour and sensitivity. Our 'Reflective Leads,' Hyun-Joo Lim, Sarah Hillier, and Andrew Morris brought a social science perspective to the project. They observed the interactions of the teams and interviewed individual participants.

Media practice and pedagogy

This project was grounded in transformational pedagogies, which Mihailidis, Shresthova, and Fromm (2021, 16) define as approaches that:

> … embody shared presence with others, and the pursuit of emancipatory and liberatory social change, grounded in the care for others, imaginative alternatives, and agentive action taking towards positive social change.

To support empathy-building, the project also drew on critical pedagogy, which highlights how systems of domination and subordination shape social structures (Nagda, Gurin, and Lopez 2003). The integration of these frameworks aimed to foster learning spaces where participants could connect across lines of difference through mutual recognition, dialogue, and empathy. A collaborative ethos positioned students as equal contributors, working towards a shared goal while drawing on their diverse identities and backgrounds. To support this, and to foster an anti-racist pedagogical environment, participants were encouraged to critically reflect on their worldviews and identify internal and structural barriers to empathy. As Alemán (2014) notes, UK higher education often

reflects dominant white, middle-class norms, implicitly demanding assimilation and marginalising students of colour. This project sought to subvert these dynamics by cultivating a supportive and inclusive space where participants could express their lived experiences (Saunders and Kardia 1997). Underpinned by a constructivist approach, students had autonomy to define the content and direction of their contributions. Olsen (2024) describes such approaches as enabling learners to pursue their own inquiries without imposed constraints. This allowed participants to produce work that was authentically their own. Finally, creative media served not just as a mode of expression but as a pedagogical strategy that supported deep reflection, meaning making, and empathy. Its use in exploring identity and difference is increasingly recognised in both educational and community-based contexts (Buckingham 2019; Goldfarb 2002).

Contributions of the paper

This paper converges the different strands of our experience and expertise to analyse the project's processes and outcomes, using the interrelated concepts of Ubuntu, empathy, positionality, intersectionality and reflection/critical reflection. Drawing on interactionist theories related to empathy building and allyship (Livingston and Opie 2022), we consider how such an initiative can foster dialogues about sensitive topics in a productive and collaborative manner. This paper contributes to ongoing discourse on empathy-building through a critical practice approach and considers how educators can help students develop empathic skills for interacting with one another in inclusive and supportive ways. This paper pursues three objectives: (1) highlighting the value of co-creative cinematic narratives in fostering empathy and allyship among Higher Education (HE) students, drawing on our filmmaking example; (2) outlining the challenges of practising and developing empathy; and (3) contributing methodologically and theoretically to HE educational practice and co-creative research.

The conceptual framework

Our project is founded on the notion of 'Ubuntu,' along with the application of positionality, intersectionality, and reflection/critical reflection to develop empathy and allyship. The diagram, below, encapsulates our conceptual framework (Figure 1).

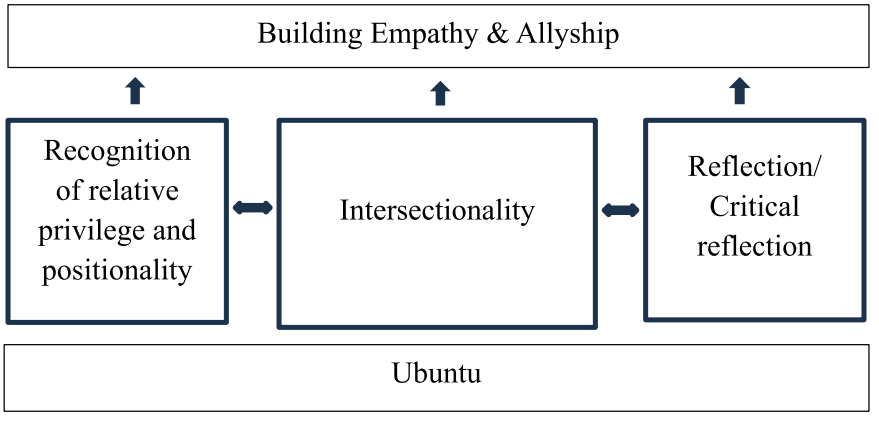

Figure 1. The conceptual framework.

Ubuntu

The ideas underpinning the concept of Ubuntu were significantly articulated by John S. Mbiti in his 1969 landmark book, *African Religions and Philosophy*. By introducing the phrase 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore, I am', he capsulises the African communal worldview of interconnected existence. Ubuntu emerges from Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), offering a deeply rooted African epistemology of relationality, communal ethics, and collective humanity as foundational to knowledge creation and social organisation (Chilisa 2012; Letseka 2012). The term itself originates from the Bantu languages, especially of Zulu and Xhosa, and conveys a viewpoint implanted in reciprocal care, shared humanity, commonwealth, and relational being. Problematising individualism and abstract reasoning, it prioritises lived experiences, shared narratives, and interdependence among people (Mungai 2015). It submits that 'a person is a person through other people' (Tutu 1999, 31), positioning human dignity, empathy, and reciprocity as essential to understanding and acting in the world (Mbiti 1969). As such, Ubuntu challenges Eurocentric paradigms by validating communal ways of knowing and being, asserting itself as a rigorous, contextually grounded, and morally attuned Indigenous framework for inquiry, education, and collaboration (Iwowo, Iwowo, and Forrest-Sleight 2023). It is in this light that it was mobilised to our current conceptualisation of allyship. Ubuntu offers a set of affordances for rethinking allyship through the lens of mutual humanity, shared responsibility, and reciprocal care, rather than as a one-sided act of support from the privileged to the marginalised. In contrast to several Western models which frame allyship through hierarchical power dynamics and static identity categories, Ubuntu invites us to appreciate that subject to the conducive contexts all individuals possess some value relevant to society. Such consciousness can help to offer an ethic grounded in solidarity, humility, and ongoing accountability rooted in the preservation of each other's dignity. Similarly, Ubuntu offers a lens for inserting empathy within a relational ethic. This means prioritising authentic connection and mutual recognition over detached understanding. Ubuntu gestures towards a deeper, embodied sense of being with the other (Molefe 2019). This Ubuntu affordance is often missing in Western constructions of human relations, thus indicating it could be explored as enriching layer to how allyship is constructed. On this foundation, what can emerge is a proactive support system in times of need. This challenges the isolation, abstraction, and hierarchisation often found in dominant frameworks. The mobilisation of Ubuntu for conceptualisation of allyship from macro contexts, such as nation-building in post-apartheid South Africa, to micro contexts like teamwork in Higher Education, highlights both its flexibility and complexity. In HE, where intersectional identities are densely layered and time for relational labour is often limited, the challenge of practising Ubuntu-based allyship becomes even more pronounced. Yet, it is precisely in these conditions that Ubuntu becomes most necessary: as a compass for rehumanising collaboration and resisting reductive, transactional models of working together.

Allyship

Allyship has been defined as an ally identity adopted and expressed by individuals from a dominant group (Anzaldua 2000) and/or that accompanies concrete action taken by these individuals to challenge social injustice, oppression and inequalities faced by the

oppressed group (Bourke 2020). The criticisms against an identity-based definition are the static and 'performative' characteristics of allyship that involve 'easy and costless actions that do not challenge the status quo and are motivated primarily by the desire to accrue personal benefits' (Kutlaca and Radke 2023, 9). Thus, genuine allyship should be 'an action-oriented practice' motivated by 'egalitarian goals' (De Souza, and Schmader 2025, 3). Bhattacharyya (2024) also criticise the static and unidirectional approaches to allyship studies and conceptualisations, emphasising the importance of a relational lens, taking integrative perspectives that include both allies and disadvantaged groups and their relative power differences, recognising the intersecting axis of power and its impact on the effectiveness of relational allyship. Consistent with this, Kutlaca et al. (2020) propose a multiple perspectives approach to allyship research that takes account of both dominant and subordinated groups' motivations and behaviours, which allow researchers to interpret different meanings, causes and consequences of allyship attached to different groups involved as well as enabling an active role of less powerful groups in allyship. The position of this project aligns with these multi-perspectives approaches to allyship that recognise the plurality of systemic power differences between different social groups and relational power dynamics and privileges endowed to members of different social groups. However, this project adds a further dimension to these frameworks in the sense that it refutes that power flows unidirectionally from one person to another due to the manifold subject positions an individual holds. Its intersectional allyship focuses on a situation where different individuals from diverse backgrounds with multiple subject positionalities and positions work together to achieve a common goal of empathic storytelling.

Empathy

Empathy refers to an individual's ability to understand other people's feelings by putting themselves into other people's positions (Jones and Dawkins 2018). For Ricoeur (1976, 128), one can experience the pleasure and pain of others through what he calls 'imaginative transfer.' Empathy leads to 'understanding, sharing and creating an internal space to accept the other person' (Cunico et al. 2012, 2016). Thus, it reduces prejudice, improves understanding of the context, motives and thoughts of others, allowing more supportive relationships and better communications (Damianidou and Phtiaka 2016). It enables people to acknowledge that there are other points of view different from their own (Zembylas 2012), which is important in social relationships and collaborative working. Damianidou and Phtiaka (2016) argue that empathy is a critical ability for students to see power disparities in society, the flaws of hegemonic ideologies and to challenge the status quo to create a fair and just world. Therefore, empathy should be cultivated in young people through education, given its vital role in celebrating difference and diversity in contemporary multicultural society (Gates and Curwood 2023). To foster empathy for students, creative and collaborative activities are recognised as beneficial (Cooper 2011; Ewing and Saunders 2016). Zhou (2022), based on their review of empathy in education, identifies two types of empathy: affective and cognitive. Affective empathy describes the experience of feeling other people's feelings and emotions (Zhou 2022). It describes more intuitive emotional responses to and understanding of other people's feelings and situations. In comparison, cognitive empathy entails a process of imagining other

people's situations and feelings through understanding and knowing, which leads to tuning in and being able to identify with others and see the world through the perspectives of others. It involves psychological mechanisms that seek to gain knowledge of the other person's experiences and emotions by 'absorbing and assessing feedback from others and responding to that feedback … [and] learning intensely about others in multiple respects and sharing both their cognitive and emotional responses' (Cooper 2011, 13–14). Whilst both types of empathy are important, for critical pedagogy, we argue that cognitive empathy plays a particularly important role since critical pedagogy is concerned about challenging oppression and injustice, raising awareness and empowering the socially disadvantaged, built on recognition and understanding of their suffering (Giroux 2011).

Recognition of privilege, positionality and intersectionality

Positionality refers to socially constructed positions of individuals in relation to others that are shaped by different power dynamics and material conditions, which are inextricably related to individual identities that influence social interactions with others and access to resources in society (Misawa 2010; CTLT Indigenous Initiatives by the University of British Columbia n.d.). The relationality of positions that is constructed through the continual differentiation between different social characteristics is critical (Carstensen-Egwuom 2014) since 'the elements of signification function not by virtue of the compact force of their cores, but by the network of oppositions that distinguish them and relate them to each other' as explained by Derrida (1982, 262). 'All parts of our identities are shaped by socially constructed positions and memberships to which we belong' and which are 'embedded in our society as a system' (Misawa 2010, 26). Thus, it is important to identify and recognise their own privilege with regard to race, class, education, gender and sexuality, and so on for people who are involved in research and collaborative working (Duarte 2017). In this regard, intersectionality provides a valuable tool to understand the complexities of social injustice. Intersectionality aims to highlight the multidimensionality of oppression and the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and so on, instead of each of these identities operating independently of one another (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016; Iwowo, Iwowo, and Forrest-Sleight 2023). According to the intersectional framework, an individual holds multiple identities, and understanding social oppression and injustice faced by an individual needs to be examined, based on the consideration of the intersection between multiple identities (Crenshaw 1995). Pedagogically, intersectionality fosters inclusive education by recognising how intersecting identities shape student experiences (Bešić 2020). As Iwowo, Iwowo, and Forrest-Sleight (2023) argues, it helps students understand structured power disparities and how multiple identities influence social relations. This awareness can reduce stigmatising attitudes and promote more critical engagement. They further note that intersectionality reveals the contextual nature of storytelling. It affirms the validity of narratives rooted in the lived experiences of marginalised individuals, challenging the dominance of Western-centric approaches to storytelling and knowledge production. These skills can help transnational groups recognise how individuals are stereotyped through the multidimensional layering of identities such as race, culture, class, (dis)ability, nationality, sexual orientation, gender, religion, age, appearance, and migrant status. Such awareness strengthens the

connection between critical enquiry and praxis. Educators and researchers must therefore employ intersectionality as a tool for critical reflection that confronts oppression and social inequality (Mattesson 2014).

Reflection and critical reflection

Reflection refers to action grounded in 'the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it' (Dewey 1933/1993, 9). For Dewey, reflective thinking is a vital component of learning. It not only allows individuals to question the biases and assumptions that shape their actions, but also enables them to explore alternative ways of thinking and doing through deeper, critical engagement with their learning (Cheng 2023). Schon (1983) identifies two types of reflection: 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action'. The former occurs during an experience, when the social actor becomes aware of their thoughts, feelings, and actions in the moment. The latter happens afterwards, when the actor steps back to question their own assumptions, preconceptions, and biases, as well as the possible impact of these on their behaviour towards others. Critical reflection can be differentiated from reflection, based on reflective thinking and practice through the lens of critical theory (Fook and Askeland 2006). What makes reflection 'critical' is its focus on power, how power is distributed and used (Brookfield 1995) and its recognition of how certain assumptions are shaped by social, economic and political structures (Hickson 2011; Mezirow 1990). Mezirow's (1981) transformative learning argues that the ability to understand and challenge deeply held assumptions can be transformative by bringing changes in the status quo as we reevaluate our beliefs about the world and its relations with individuals. Reflection and critical reflection are closely interlinked and salient in empathy building practice. Understanding structural power inequalities and using such knowledge to challenge not only societal but also their own assumptions and actions should be an inextricable part of reflection. In addition, to co-create a narrative that tells empathy, it is vital that the creators to recognise structural injustice and its impact on certain groups and individuals. Therefore, we argue that practice of both concepts together strengthens individual ability to empathise and work with others with sensitivity.

Methodology

Participatory action research (PAR)

For Allies in Action, our multi-methods approach entailed combining practice research with sociological inquiry. The practical component drew on PAR. This technique involves coordinating groups to examine how they accomplish a particular creative goal (Stringer 1999). For our project, student teams were tasked with making and appearing in short films centring on the theme of empathy. One of the challenges related to PAR involves finding ways to articulate 'multiple positionalities, contradictions, and ambiguities across a group of very different people' (Cahill 2007, 337). However, for our purposes, this was a benefit. We were, after all, asking the student teams to coordinate their efforts in manner that was as transparent and egalitarian as possible. We encouraged

them to focus on 'building relationships, acknowledging and sharing power, encouraging participation, making change, and establishing credible accounts' (Grant, Nelson, and Mitchell 2011, 3), which is precisely the value of this type of 'collective storytelling' (McGonigal 2008; Woo 2010).

The project was not tied to a particular unit or degree. Therefore, it was not credit-bearing. This presented some challenges in terms of keeping our volunteers energised and engaged. However, it ultimately benefited the initiative as it chimed with our goal of gathering an extremely diverse group of students with different backgrounds, interests and perspectives. Additionally, we sought to incorporate a decolonial, anti-racist teaching philosophy in line with the work of Walker (2021) in order to flatten traditional hierarchies. Drawing on recent insights related to media arts in education (Olsen 2024), we promoted multimodal cognition and holistic learning. This meant the collaborations we supervised were not just creative melting pots; they were crucibles where new modes of identification and cooperation were forged via shared creative practice.

Sampling and recruitment

The 'purposive sampling' method enabled us to explore our chosen topic in detail through the selection and recruitment of participants whose features and characteristics fit into the purpose of our research (Richie, Lewis, and Gillian 2003). In our case the criteria required were students studying at authors' university who represented a wide range of characteristics, heritages, cultural backgrounds. On our campus there are many student clubs that celebrate under-represented groups including students who identify as Muslim, Eastern European, African, Asian, mature, and LQBTQ+. We contacted these groups via Student Union and circulated the recruitment advert whilst also promoting the project to students in different faculties using the project advert leaflet via emails to students and staff. This meant each team was a dynamic mix of collaborators with different socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities, sexualities, values, interests, and ideologies. Initially, 20 students agreed to take part and joined the first introductory session. After this session, 3 students left the project, and 17 students agreed to take part. They were studying undergraduate, master's and doctoral levels, although the majority were undergraduate and master's students. They were from various countries with diverse cultural and religious heritages, including Britain, India, Nigeria, Morrocco, Russia. Six participants were male and 11 were female, with a mix of those identifying with heterosexual and LGBTQ+ identities. The degree programmes they were studying were also diverse, including creative writing, psychology and cyber security, sociology and criminology, occupational therapy, and film directing. The age range of the participants were from late teens to 20s as well as some participants in their 40s and 50s. Groups were formed randomly to ensure a good mix of divergent backgrounds.

The project

These teams were then tasked with creating a short film that expressed a harmonious combination of their richly varied worldviews and identities. There was at least one thing every participant had in common – each embodied at least one distinct mode of identification unique to themself. Thus, the participants were united by the fact that

they were all outsiders, each vying to be understood by their teammates. The process of achieving this understanding became the subject of their films. Through a series of six workshops that took place between April and May 2024 from 5-7pm, participants engaged in brainstorming, pitching, scripting, reflection, production and editing. We used the first session to introduce the team and the project to the participants. During this session the research team presented key concepts relevant to the project – Ubuntu, allyship, empathy, positionality, intersectionality and reflection/critical reflection – and their importance in collaborative working. We also provided practical suggestions and advice on practising effective allyship, drawing on the Cornell Health's Ally Up article. This was important pedagogically, conceptually and practically because most students were not familiar with those concepts and our introduction set out ground rules of working together with others in a sensitive, inclusive and considerate manner. However, no set structures were given to the students, and they had to come up with their own ideas, role divisions and plans of action through negotiations and interactions with their team members, guided by the theoretical framework and support from the academic project team. This meant the way they interacted with each other and the processes of working changed and evolved over the course of the project, as well as varying from group to group. This was important as students had to navigate their own working processes and relationships, not dictated by the academics who were there as facilitators, and it was exactly through such processes that they had to learn and practise empathy building and allyship. Through the following week, the students worked in groups in separate rooms. Once the idea was developed, the scripts were written, and preproduction was complete, the teams were free to arrange their times and locations freely to shoot their films towards the end of the project. All four films were showcased in our final project event (Figures 2–5).

Data collection and analysis

As this was occurring, our research team captured evidence of empathy building in four ways:

(1) Reflective journals and video diaries

Figure 2. Team 2 behind the scenes pose.

Figure 3. Team 2 elevator pitch film.

Figure 4. Team 3 workshop.

Figure 5. Team 3 dream team film.

(2) Behind-the-scenes filming
(3) Participant observation
(4) Participant interviews

This allowed us to track how different teams and individuals responded to collaborating in this fashion. It also helped us reach conclusions about how the initiative influenced their behaviour and beliefs regarding empathy building and intersectional collaboration.

Reflective journals and video diaries, and the behind-the-scenes filming

We asked participants to keep reflective journals and video diaries about their experiences and reflections on their experiences and to upload the video files onto a secure university's OneDrive project site each week as a way of developing cognitive empathy. We also filmed behind the scenes to capture participants in action with the goal of creating a montage to share in our last show case event, along with parts of video journals.

Participant observations

Participant observation (PO) is an exploratory qualitative research method in which a researcher enters and immerses themselves in a specific social setting to gather data on human interactions and behaviours (Blevins 2017; Hurst 2023). As Hurst (2023) notes, observation is essential when the researcher is interested in how individuals behave in relation to others and wider social environments. As our project sought to understand how students from diverse backgrounds interact and act in certain situations to co-create a film, three staff members entered classrooms each week to observe group work. We rotated across groups to gather variegated perspectives on group dynamics and interactions. During the observations, staff occasionally interacted with students – joining conversations or, when conflicts arose, offering mediation. Our field notes included: date, time, and room number; observer name; descriptions of the physical setting; people in the room; how they interacted with one another and what role they played; activities they were doing; and conversations they had (Hurst 2023). After each session, we discussed key events we had observed and uploaded our fieldnotes to a secure shared site, allowing us to exchange observations and reflect on our assumptions and views. In this sense, reflection and critical reflection were practised not only by students, but also by our research team.

The life story interview

The life story interview is a form of narrative enquiry that explores interviewees' life stories in their own words (Witter et al. 2017). With the aim to reduce power disparity between the interviewer and the narrator, this is regarded as an empowering method that allows the interviewee to steer the direction of their story (Lim 2018). The lead author is an expert in using the life story in their research on socially marginalised groups and individuals (e.g. Lim 2018, 2023) and carried out individual life story interviews with five participants who agreed to take part towards the end of the project between April and June 2024. The interviews were conducted online to manage time more effectively. They lasted between 1 and 2 h. Interviewees were asked to tell their life stories from childhood to today, together with their background, upbringing, life events that might have had a significant influence on them and their identity, and their experiences at BU. Once they

finished their life stories, questions were asked around motivations to participate in the project, challenges and benefits/positive experiences of the project, and what they have gained or learnt from their participation. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim for the analysis, based on written consent from the participants. The data was analysed using the thematic method that involves identifying repeated patterns or themes across a data set (Braun and Clarke 2006). Observation fieldnotes and interview data were analysed separately, following the processes of familiarisation, coding, identifying and reviewing themes, and then naming them (Braun and Clarke 2006). Then, we examined whether there were overlapping themes between fieldnotes and interview data. Themes identified through these processes included: bringing different people together and sharing divergent stories; creating safe spaces; opportunities for reflection; an important platform to practise and develop empathy; challenges; and learning experience.

Ethical considerations

Given the sensitivity of the topic and the nature of the initiative, rigorous ethical considerations and procedures were taken. Prior to the project, we received approval from authors' Ethics Committee (ID: 54201). Following British Sociological Association's Ethical Guidelines (2017), we ensured that all the participation was voluntary, and informed consent was sought from all the participants prior to the start of the project. Additionally, we have endeavoured to ensure anonymity and confidentiality in written publications, including this paper through which pseudonyms have been used throughout. To minimise any potential risks to vulnerable individuals, their rights to withdraw from the project at any point were clearly shared and reiterated during the project. We were also conscious of power disparity between staff and students, and its potential implications; we therefore clearly stated in our participant information sheet as well as verbally restressing that their participation in the project would not affect their grades or academic outcomes. Those who experienced tensions and conflicts were offered opportunities to talk to and discuss with project leaders and facilitators whoever they felt comfortable. Adhering to authors' institution's data management policy, we stored our data in our university's password protected secure OneDrive storage.

Findings

In this section we present main findings emerging from the participant observation fieldnotes and one-to-one interviews with students.

An avenue to bring different people together and to share divergent stories

The filmmaking process provided a vital platform for the participants to share personal stories, including details about their upbringings, religious beliefs and schooling experiences. This helped them understand each other, which became an important source for developing empathy. It also helped them recognise intersecting identities, their positionality and relative privilege whilst finding commonalities. Our observational notes on Group 1 illustrate this:

> During the first week, the group made connections. Common themes discussed included religion, culture, and experiences of being an 'other.' The students shared experiences of learning about religions different to their own, for example, being taught Christianity in Catholic school and learning about Islam through personal upbringing. The group reflected on cultural norms, such as restrictions on public displays of affection in Morocco, India, and Saudi Arabia, alcohol consumption, religious festivals, and gender roles in different cultures. This led the students to consider experiences of being an 'other,' e.g. the only non-white or Muslim student in school. The struggle for identity when people appear visibly different or have dual heritage was explored. The group found common ground with their shared experiences of being an 'other.' This helped to strengthen relationships between group members, and the various teams decided this would be the focus of their videos.

Interviews with participant students additionally expressed positive experiences by being able to meet people they would not normally interact with:

> Participant B: It was just nicer to work with people that have just been really different to you. These are people I probably wouldn't have been friends with organically, they're not people that I would have liked on my course or in my friendship group. It worked really well because we all have different interests that we were trying to find, like a common background.

Meeting different people generated curiosity among participants and their desire to get to know each other as well as positioning oneself in relation to the others:

> Participant A: My experience was phenomenal … People were genuinely so curious because we were from starkly different backgrounds. Oh, interesting person, extremely different positionality, something that I would barely know about. That begged my curiosity. And because everyone was curious about the other person and interested in them, they listened to them intently because they actually wanted to know.

As illustrated by these participants, meeting different people and having curiosity towards others was a significant starting point of nurturing empathy through reflective thinking of their different positions and experiences. Additionally, it became a fertile ground for having open and honest discussions about sensitive topics that were often avoided due to the fear of offending others.

Provision of safe spaces

The filmmaking offered safe spaces for students to openly and constructively discussed socially taboo and highly politicised topics in the UK due to its derogatory meanings, such as N-word, and their different meanings and usages in different cultural contexts, as illustrated in the observational notes of Group 2:

> This group discussed offensive language, particularly the N-word, which caused some non-Black group members to express discomfort with this term. The discussion moved onto reclaiming slurs within cultural contexts and why it can be empowering for some but confusing for others. Discussions moved on with participants openly sharing their experiences related to race, sexuality, body image, and cultural differences. They discussed societal norms, and intersectional identities, including challenges in interracial and LGBTQ relationships. Labels such as 'lesbian,' 'black guy,' and 'white lady' were highlighted in terms of how these terms can emphasise differences. They discussed how films and social media can influence perceptions of race, religion, and culture. They also reflected on how these can be addressed through storytelling.

These open conversations fostered recognising commonalities among people and shared humanity instead of focusing on differences. This was illustrated in the example of Group 1, who decided on the theme of shared experiences of being an 'other' and a sense of being an outsider that were part of all the group members' life stories. This was also similar to Group 2:

> The group agreed their video would not focus on difference, but on the theme of shared humanity instead. Additionally, their film would focus on a lift, which is a metaphor for people coming together in a shared space. Building on this theme, in week 2, the group decided to omit sensitive language in the video in favour of prioritising inclusivity. Discussions included shared unity and overcoming differences, emphasising race, gender, and stereotypes. Discussions focused on what unites people, such as shared humanity and migration.

This showcases the emergence of Ubuntu and how it brought people together in their collaborative working, founded on the spirit of collective humanity (Chilisa 2012; Letseka 2012; Mbiti 1969). The project also provided a safe space where participants navigated difficult topics with openness and honesty yet simultaneous sensitivity without fear of offending certain groups or individuals. Through such open discussions, the project also enabled students to reevaluate their own beliefs and thoughts, to articulate carefully, as stated by Participant A:

> … when you're discussing something and you're meeting new people and you are in a way representing the background and the positionality that you're bringing, then you try to be more precisely articulate or think about what the implications might be of what I'm going to say. So that was a good practice too, because I got introduced to my own thoughts anew, afresh in a different light or in a more precise articulation.

As can be seen, working with people from different backgrounds encouraged deep thinking beyond superficial judgment (Dewey 1993/1993) that has the potentiality of transformative learning (Mezirow 1990).

Opportunity for reflection

Participants expressed how taking part in the project taught them to be more reflective, rather than reacting quickly:

> Participant A: a lot of people said during the event they took a step back or in a way having a conversation with yourself almost, and gave the other person the discount that they might be coming from a different place that I don't understand right now. If you do that, then more often than not, you're going to be able to reconcile with it and then work your way through it. And that is a much more peaceful and inclusive way to go about it.

> Participant B: it was definitely like being more patient and taking a step back. Sometimes I can be a bit bossy … But I had to really take a step back and be like, this isn't my thing, this is everyone's so really slowed down and listened to everybody first and then realised that their experience, their opinion of this was going to be different to mine and they were looking at this film at a different angle.

This kind of approach enabled the participants to recognise differences in other people's perceptions, opinions from their own whilst allowing them to reflect on their own ways of looking at things and dealing with other people, deploying their understanding and recognition of different subject positions (Misawa 2010).

Important platform to practise and develop empathy

The collaborative activities built on Ubuntu became important channels to practise and nurture empathy among students:

> Participant C: I have started developing empathic skills. I'm more analysing how we can [be empathic]. I think if we stop being judgmental, if we start accepting people and their circumstances, where they come from, then consider why people do that or behave like that … step by step it will take you into the deeper understanding of different religion, culture …

As proposed by Molefe (2019), this narrative illuminates the role of Ubuntu and empathy, leading to deeper reflection and effort to understand others and their different positionalities. This participant was part of a group that most struggled to work together in a peaceful and harmonious way due to the clash of strong personalities and different perspectives. Nonetheless, their experience taught them to conscientiously make efforts to understand other people's positions and why others acted in certain ways that were different from themselves. This demonstrates the development of cognitive empathy among students who were engaged with psychological processes of deeper understanding of others with the goal of achieving a positive outcome (Zhou 2022). Similar development of cognitive empathy was described by participant A:

> I think I wielded empathy quite a bit since the beginning, but what this project made me realise is that I used to not consciously practise empathy … But here I understood that *practising empathy can translate into wonderful things that can happen as collaborations or creations.* It is not just good, it is also useful. You can almost employ it and seed it in whatever the group is and let it flourish and nourish the working environment and what the creation is.

Thus, use of cognitive empathy can be highly instrumental in helping the collaborative working relationships thrive and achieve better creative outcomes. This was manifested in the final products of different groups. The group whose teammates worked more harmoniously and supportively whilst being able to have open and honest conversations produced better films in terms of the overall technical and creative quality. These works tended to be more inventive and more engaging for viewers. Since participants in these groups were able to focus on their tasks without wasting their time and energy with in-fighting, they were able to communicate and understand their collective visions clearly and effectively. This meant they were able to realise their goals, producing coherent compelling works. On the other hand, those groups with weaker working relationships and stronger internal tensions produced films that were not as polished or as high quality as their harmonious counterparts. For these groups, there was no clearly agreed or understood collective vision, due to ongoing tensions and conflicts. As there were no cooperative working relationships through which allocated roles could be fulfilled, there was no way for them to create a high-quality film.

Challenges

Putting our concepts into practice was not easy as one can imagine, especially given that each group had individuals with diverse personalities and backgrounds, and they had to navigate and find their own ways of working, based on loosely defined guidance and principles. In particular, one group struggled to work together and progress with their project.

This was particularly the case for Group 4 whose members were stuck in a deadlock and each session was filled with tensions and arguments, as illustrated in the excerpt of our fieldnotes:

> The group explored the concept of privilege, which caused some debate, particularly because some members were uncomfortable using the term. There was an ongoing tension between Participant E and Participant C, stemming from differences in views on privilege and cultural identity. Participant E was more confrontational in their approach, while C appeared to be more reflective and hesitant to fully engage with the debate. Eventually Author B intervened and suggested a 40-second speaking limit for everyone to keep conversations focused, ensuring that each voice was heard without anyone dominating the discussion. This helped in managing the tensions and encouraged more balanced participation.

One of the group members who participated in the interview expressed their reflection on it:

> Participant D: I think the most challenging thing was coming to an agreement, any form of agreement. I think all 4 of us in that group are strong-willed people, very opinionated, even this at different levels. So that was the challenge for navigating conflict in very diverse spaces …

This illuminates why collective concept of 'Ubuntu' is foundational in collaborative working by prioritising common humanity and goals (Mbiti 1969; Higgs 2012), instead of individual voices and perspectives. Accompanying problems were the lack of a clear vision or outcome of their project as well as not confronting the problem head on and putting aside, which eventually exploded when the issue became too serious to be discussed constructively:

> Participant D: Everybody did not totally understand what this end product would look like, it was a big silence, and I think we avoided that confrontation for too long. We got to that point where I felt like the essence of this was not being met, because for you to get to that point of empathy, that needs to be so full of vulnerability. But it felt like there was a hold back to get to that point.

One of the solutions to the deadlock was interventions by the project team at different stages of the project with the emphasis on the common goal whilst reminding them of the importance of respecting each other's voice. This helped them overcome the dilemmas and difficulties to some extent although their tense dynamics were not removed entirely.

Learning experience

Regardless of difficulties and barriers faced by some groups, all interview participants described taking part in the project positively as important learning experiences. Even participants from Group 4 who struggled most appreciated their participation and expressed the value of creative practice-based projects like ours for personal growth and effective pedagogy:

> Participant D: Thank you, because it's been a big learning experience for me personally. It's a good step from here as well in terms of my personality and my personal life, and also what I want to do academically.

> Participant E: Even when it doesn't work, you learn something. You just didn't get the output you wanted. But who said the output you wanted is the right output? … I think people need to do this [kind of project] … I think this is very fun and I feel like schools and university should regularly do this because these things [challenges of interacting with people from different backgrounds and how to overcome challenges] manifest in our lives every day. … because the more we think about these things, the more we will put them into practice because your thoughts turn into your actions. So, it's important to do this at a bigger level … I think we're all going to remember this for life.

These accounts highlight the value of the processes more so than the outputs because it was through the processes of working together with people from different backgrounds, subject positions and understandings, participants learnt important lessons. Thus, whether participants in different groups worked harmoniously or not, one critical lesson they learnt was to think about, practise and develop empathy as described by Participant A: '*the way you can practise empathy and utilise it for the work or for creation or for collaboration is what I took away.*'

Discussion

Our findings have demonstrated the value of creative practice-based approaches and a conceptual framework that deploys interconnected multiple concepts to foster empathy building among university students, founded on Ubuntu, a concept rooted in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) of relationality, communal ethics, and collective humanity (Chilisa 2012; Letseka 2012). One of the most powerful things that emerged from our project was seeing how – through dialogue and collaboration – most participants managed to see past perceived difference to find the hidden harmonies connecting them. The fear of causing offence did not prevent them from attempting to connect across difference, and the fear of being misunderstood did not prevent them from expressing their unique points of view. Unlocking the empathy paradox means finding ways of confronting policies and social norms that marginalise groups of people, while resisting the tendency to define any group as inherently 'marginalised.' This is why notions of intersectionality are vital, as they remind us that we are all living constellations of different types of difference (Crenshaw 1983; Hill Collins 2001). However, as exemplified by our observations and interviews, this requires conscious efforts and collaborative endeavours to recognise the relative privilege stemming from different subject positions endowed by social structures and power relations (Duarte 2017; Misawa 2010). Most importantly, the spirit of Ubuntu is foundational in realising collective goal of creating a narrative that tells story of empathy. Ubuntu provides the path to belonging and it reminds that we are all complicated and vibrant members of the same human community (Mbiti 1969). As demonstrated by our project, the common ground that connected different members, e.g. whether it was being positioned as an 'other' or an 'ally,' provided the stronghold for each group to work together to achieve their common goal. In this process, the combined application of positionality, intersectionality and reflection/critical reflection was instrumental in practising and nurturing empathy among participants. Even the group whose members faced difficult challenges due to misunderstandings, strong personalities, and differences in perceptions, found the project provided opportunities to reflect in and on their behaviour and action interacting with others whilst deploying the

forementioned concepts (Cheng 2023; Schon 1983). At the same time, critical reflection was part and parcel of our project, and all the participants and facilitators had to engage critically with structural inequalities and power disparities in society through ongoing discussions and conversations (Brookfield 1995; Fook and Askeland 2006; Mezirow 1990). Thus, critical reflection and reflective thinking was an inseparable part of learning (Dewey 1933/1993) as illustrated by our examples. Our findings showcase the effectiveness of our conceptual framework that is founded on Ubuntu and applies the interrelated concepts as a combined tool to foster empathy (Zhou 2022) and multi-perspective allyship (Bhattacharyya 2024; Kutlaca et al. 2020).

Methodologically, our creative participatory action research approach utilising a combination of different methods of data collection enabled us to examine how students develop empathy from different angles whilst creating a space for 'collective storytelling' (McGonigal 2008; Woo 2010). We were able to capture the richness of interactions and behind-the-scenes as well as individual participants' reflections, together with participant observations from facilitators, providing an almost 360-degree perspective on the project processes and outcomes. Life story interviews empowered the students to steer the direction of their life stories through creating narratives in their own words (Witter et al. 2017). Concurrently, they added important individual reflections and testimonies on their experiences and what they learnt from their participation.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated the potential of a creative, PAR model grounded in Ubuntu to foster empathy and allyship among HE students. By convening diverse teams to co-create short films, we nuance how structured collaboration, critical reflection and the acknowledgement of positionality can generate insights into intercultural understanding. The findings underscore the value of integrating indigenous philosophies of relationality with contemporary pedagogical frameworks to challenge prevailing power dynamics and encourage transparent dialogue. Rather than a positivist objectivity, this strength of the study lies in capturing lived, co-constructed meaning. Its findings should therefore be understood as situated and interpretive. We also recognise that the project inaugurates opportunities to extend and deepen the study in future research: focalising the challenges encountered by less-cohesive groups can enable a proactively tailored support to mitigate impasses in collaborative work. A longitudinal study can enable deploying the Allies-in-Action paradigm through large-scale testing across diverse HE contexts. Such can allow for assessing whether the empathic skills nurtured through this intervention endure over time and influence participants' subsequent interactions and professional practice. It can also facilitate experimentation with alternative creative media (theatre, media-art, etc.) that are equally time-demanding; such may surface medium-specific affordances for empathy building. Given the centrality of intersectionality to our framework, a longitudinal study can also enable an in-depth exploration of how particular identity intersections shape the dynamics of allyship and empathy. In the meantime, we hope the *Allies in Action* project offers a model for future empathy-building initiatives led by educators, activists, and creatives, and recommend that educators adapt its creative

PAR method to cultivate empathy in learning communities. The last words here belong to Cornel West (1993) who reminds that 'race matters,' as do gender, sexuality, ability, and other positionalities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The project was funded by the Bournemouth University.

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