

# Reclaim and Resist: A Critical Framework for Engaging Students' Research Writing through Slow, Deliberative, Collaborative Pedagogies

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## Abstract

Neoliberal discourses about students' perceived skills deficit persist in higher education worldwide. In South Africa, these are particularly marked, as market discourses overwhelm democratic citizenship discourses in many universities. This can lead to the domination of deficit approaches to teaching, especially of academic writing. This interdisciplinary article conceptualises a law teacher's and an academic literacies teacher's experience of developing a programme for law students navigating the shift from undergraduate to postgraduate research writing in these contexts. The authors identify a blend of critical pedagogies emerging from scholarship in their respective fields and honed through iterative cycles of reflection with colleagues and students. They show how these Slow, deliberative, collaborative pedagogies have been used to develop a critical framework for resisting the deficit positioning of students and for reclaiming ways of engaging democratically and care-fully with students, and with research as a scholarly, thoughtful, transformative practice. They argue that this framework can facilitate the expansion of student agency, scholarly identity, and the development of research writing capacities in the disciplines.

**Keywords:** postgraduate research writing; writing in the disciplines; collaborative pedagogy; deliberative pedagogy; Slow scholarship; South Africa



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## Introduction

Since the advent of South Africa's constitutional democracy, legal educators have grappled sincerely with what it means to transform the law and legal education. Extensive and ongoing attempts have been made to ensure that systemic barriers to access have been dismantled, and that law is understood to be a tool for justice and social transformation (Campbell 2014; Langa 2006; Mlambo 2022). Parallel to this, however, is an entrenched and perhaps growing market-driven mentality that neglects the transformative, democratic dimension of legal education and focuses on how profession-ready students are when they graduate (Deka and Sefoka 2025; Greenbaum 2010; Modiri 2013, 2014, 2016). This mentality focuses on the skills that students supposedly lack, and how to produce graduates to the satisfaction of future employers. Students' individuality and humanity, their identity as emerging legal scholars and practitioners, and their role in a participatory democracy are often neglected when this mentality dominates.

This tension—between a democratic orientation and a market-driven orientation to education—reflects the emergence of neoliberalism in higher education in post-apartheid South Africa. Neoliberalism is premised on the flawed instrumental assumption that education exists to stimulate economic growth, and the unproblematised belief that increased graduate output will lead to an improved economy with widespread socio-economic benefits (Baxi 2024; Maistry 2014). Mbembe (2012, 8) argues that, since 1994, all higher education reforms have systematically reduced South African universities to “appendices of the corporate world ... mere factories in the service sector of the economy”. Academic staff become workers to be managed; students are clients who become products; and graduation represents value-add. Specific manifestations of neoliberalism in universities include reduced budgets for increased numbers of students; a focus on efficiency, productivity, throughput and outputs; the commodification of knowledge; and the attribution of success or failure to individuals (Baxi 2024; Maistry 2014).

In this article, the research problem is thus located in the tension between a neoliberal, skills-based approach to higher education teaching and learning, and a transformative approach. It is in the context of this tension that the authors—one a law teacher and one an academic literacies teacher—began working together eight years ago. We were tasked with reconceptualising “academic support” workshops for a fourth-year research essay course for law students. The aim of this conceptual and reflective article is to present the critical framework for teachers in higher education developed during this collaboration. The framework facilitates resistance of neoliberal and deficit positioning of students (Boughey and McKenna 2016, 2021) and reclamation of ways of engaging humanely and deliberatively (Waghid and Davids 2022) with students and research as a scholarly, thoughtful, transformative practice (Clarence 2020). The bedrock for the framework is Jacobs's (2013, 135) challenge to literacies and disciplinary specialists to work collaboratively to develop a transformative approach to academic literacies

development in the disciplines. It was developed further through critical ideas and pedagogies from our respective fields of legal education and academic literacies development. The framework, we argue, can be used to effect transformative change in a range of educational settings, and to resist the positioning of students as clients and teachers as service providers.

The article explores the interdisciplinary blend of pedagogies that inform this framework. These were adopted over time to co-facilitate a set of 12 embedded research writing workshops for the research essay course. It considers the effect this has had on students and their research, drawing in part on students' anonymous end-of-year feedback. The article then acknowledges some enabling conditions for the implementation of the framework. Initially, however, some of the intersecting changes and challenges in higher and legal education in South Africa are identified, as a way of understanding how transformative, democratic discourses and practices have been eroded, and to identify specific discourses and practices that all educators for change need to resist.

## Intersecting Contexts

### **Changes and Challenges in Higher Education**

There have been substantial changes in universities, both globally and in South Africa, over the past 30 years (Maistry 2014; Mbembe 2015, 2016; Soudien 2023). Some of these changes have been judicious. For example, the imperative to widen participation and improve access to universities has resulted in more non-traditional students being in university education (Burke 2016; Younger et al. 2019). In South Africa, where racial, gender, and class-based exclusion characterised apartheid-era university education (Badat 2009), this was an especially welcome and necessary change. A related change is the marked increase in student numbers at universities worldwide (Harley 2017; Mbembe 2015). In South Africa, and increasingly in other contexts, the acknowledgement of the articulation gap between school and university (Ashwin et al. 2020; Bitzer 2009), as well as increased sensitivity to factors that may exacerbate this articulation gap, has resulted in a plethora of attempts to support students through the transition to higher education (Boughey and McKenna 2021).

Other vital changes, especially in South Africa, are the efforts to transform and decolonise university culture and curricula (Mbembe 2015; USAf 2015). Several conceptions related to these changes have become entrenched in universities worldwide. Some of these may be well-intentioned but are ultimately unhelpful. One such conception is the notion of student support that has strong remedial connotations (Boughey and McKenna 2016; Dison and Moore 2019; MacNaught et al. 2024). Students deemed in need of support are usually offered (or in some cases required to attend) a range of interventions to teach them the skills they supposedly lack. This deficit skills discourse that locates the perceived problem in the individual student is not only roundly critiqued by a range of scholars, but also ineffective. Autonomous skills

teaching leads to shallow learning (MacVaugh, Jones, and Auty 2014); it fails to translate to disciplinary contexts (Wingate 2011, 2018, 2019), and is also perceived to be discriminatory and unhelpful by many students (Bangen and Greenbaum 2019; MacNaught et al. 2024). Boughey and McKenna (2016, 1) describe this as the “discourse of the ‘decontextualised learner’ who is divorced from her social context, with higher education success seen to be resting largely upon attributes inherent in, or lacking from, the individual”. This discourse clearly fails to consider the impact of entrenched, systemic inequalities, in society and education, on higher education success. Importantly, these remedial conceptions of student support and the discourse of the “decontextualised learner” not only undermine student agency and identity (Case 2015) but are incompatible with transformation and decolonisation imperatives.

During this period there has been a marked global trend to turn higher education into a marketable commodity (Baxi 2024; Bozalek 2021; Lynch 2014). Maistry argues convincingly that there is competition between “capitalist market discourses” and “social democratic citizenship discourses”, and that the former are winning in South African universities (Maistry 2014, 57). Part of these discourses is the acceptance that the primary purpose of education is to drive economic growth, which requires individuals to be equipped with skills to make them market-ready and employable (Bozalek 2021; Maistry 2014). There is a related focus on efficiency, productivity, and output, which is valued over process and deep learning (Baxi 2024; Bozalek 2021; Lynch 2014). Students are both clients and product; university teachers must deliver the requisite service to their clients to achieve the desired marketable commodity—a work-ready graduate (Mbembe 2012). A knock-on effect has been vastly increased workloads for academic staff, who are expected to do more with less (Harley 2017). Values of care, creativity, engagement, originality, and community easily get lost in such contexts.

One feature of this neoliberal discourse is the focus on increasing postgraduate student numbers. South Africa’s National Development Plan 2030 indicates that, by 2030, 25% of university enrolments should be at postgraduate level (National Planning Commission 2014, 319). Accordingly, there is an increasing awareness of the need to develop appropriate postgraduate pedagogies. Herman (2011, 512) recommends “the creation of innovative programmes that attract and retain students into master’s and doctoral programmes”.

The framework presented in this article was developed to resist deficit and commodified discourses about students and throughput and to build an innovative and principled programme for students navigating the shift from undergraduate to postgraduate research writing. While attuned to students’ varied and complex material, linguistic, and educational backgrounds, it resists essentialising students, their experiences, and identities. Equally, it draws on some of the history of legal education in South Africa to identify what could be reclaimed, and what needed to be resisted. This is briefly explored in the next section.

## Changes and Contestations in Legal Education

Broad educational and political change lent impetus to the agenda for transformation of legal education, driven by two major stakeholders—law schools and legal practitioners. An integral part of the drive was the shift from the deeply uneven provision of legal education under apartheid to the need for a more accessible degree for all while taking into consideration the diverse nature of South African society (Colgan, Domingo, and Papacostantis 2017; Greenbaum 2004, 2014). However, the transformative agenda of legal education was influenced by an inherently flawed, over-debated tug between the two worlds of practice and academia (Campbell 2014; Iya 2003). Historically this debate has led to significant tension in determining how future lawyers should be educated: Should the primary goal be to prepare students for immediate entry into legal practice, market-ready and employable, or to develop broader intellectual, ethical, and democratic capabilities (Campbell 2014; Modiri 2013, 2014, 2016)?

After the introduction of an undergraduate Bachelor of Laws (LLB) degree in 1997 (RSA 1997), many law schools shifted their focus to include more skills-based courses within the law curriculum. Reading, researching, and writing were understood as core skills that many students and graduates lacked (Dibetle 2007; Moore 2022; Sedutla 2013). This was later reiterated in the national review of the LLB, carried out by the South African Council on Higher Education (CHE 2018). The CHE recommended that research and writing must be fundamental to teaching and learning throughout the law curriculum and must culminate in a “substantial research essay” being written in the fourth and final year of the LLB (CHE 2018, 56).

Both practice and academia agreed on this focus on skills-based education (Deka and Sefoka 2025; Iya 2003). However, the undefined or vaguely described nature of these so-called skills contributed to ongoing uncertainty in the transformation agenda (Whitaker-Nel and Freedman 2015). In many cases, skills-based learning has become a driving force that displaces earlier pedagogical commitments to producing engaged, democratic citizens who understand the role of law in shaping society. A clear neoliberal agenda has emerged, privileging market-readiness, employability, and efficiency (Baxi 2024; Greenbaum 2014).

This shift has unfortunately resulted in a narrower conception of the law graduate. The ideal graduate is now often seen as one who is already an asset to practice, shaped by the needs of the profession, rather than one steeped in the broader values of justice, equity, or critical thinking. While the notion of a well-rounded or holistic legal professional is still part of the rhetoric, it is frequently relegated to specific curricular corners rather than embedded across the educational experience. As Campbell (2014) observes, content-heavy courses and limited time often prevent meaningful engagement with these broader educational goals.

This privileging of skills and a market-ready graduate inadvertently introduced the discourse of the decontextualised learner (Boughey and McKenna 2016, 2021) within

law schools. By focusing on how to address perceived inadequacies in reading or writing, deeper questions about how we teach, about democratic values, may be neglected. An unintended consequence is that affected students become alienated (Case 2015; Greenbaum 2014). True transformation lies not merely in modifying content or adding more skills training, but in rethinking the methods of legal education (Colgan, Domingo, and Papacostantis 2017). This includes critically examining the hidden curriculum, the unspoken values, expectations, and norms conveyed through teaching practices, and integrating real-world legal issues into courses beyond the traditional skills-based modules.

Importantly, the idea that academia and practice are mutually exclusive is questionable. A meaningful legal education should not be divided between theory and practice but be a dynamic integration of both (Iya 2003; Kielb 2017; Swanepoel, Karels, and Bezuidenhout 2008). In South Africa's recent past, democratic education, deliberation, and social justice were hard-fought for values. To reclaim this democratic endeavour, the framework for the research essay (RE) course had to enable both competence and conscience, helping students to become not only capable practitioners but also critical thinkers and engaged, caring citizens.

## Overview of the Research Essay Course

It is within this complex web of contexts that the framework we used to build RE was developed. RE is a final year, full-year Bachelor of Laws course in which students develop a legal research question and write a research essay of approximately 7,500 words. Each student is assigned a supervisor who provides feedback on students' short proposal, draft essay, and final essay. The objective of RE, as a capstone course, is to provide students with the opportunity to illustrate an in-depth understanding of a chosen research topic through completion of an honours-level research essay. The authors designed and co-facilitated a series of 12 workshops, presented throughout the year for all students as part of the core curriculum, to scaffold students through the research and writing process. Desia, the law teacher, is the course coordinator; Jean is the literacies specialist who works in the law school.

In the workshops, we attempt to reclaim research as complex, iterative and personally transformative. We were determined to resist a deficit construction of students and their capabilities, and we did not want to offer "quick fix" skills workshops on aspects of research writing—what Thesen (2013, 104) calls "pop up" or "soundbite" workshops—to address the various challenges identified by supervisors and examiners in previous years. The 12 workshops are presented in four time-sensitive clusters that are aligned to the research process (Biggs and Tang 2011). The first cluster explores conceptualising and starting research and preparing a research proposal. The second cluster scaffolds students through knowledge and writing considerations for the proposal to draft essay stage. The third cluster explores draft to final essay considerations, and the fourth cluster focuses on knowledge dissemination and publication.

In the following section, the critical framework underpinning all the above is presented. It comprises three intersecting and complementary elements: a collaborative pedagogy located in a socio-literacy approach, democratic and deliberative pedagogies, and Slow pedagogy.

## The Framework: Putting Overlapping Bodies of Scholarly Knowledge into Praxis

Mbembe (2015, 5; *italics in original*) argues that decolonisation “is inseparable from the *democratization of access*”. With Morrow (2009), he is clear that access must go beyond formal access to universities and entail authentic epistemic access for all students. A range of subsequent scholarship agrees (Collett, Dison, and Du Plooy 2024; Motala, Sayed, and De Kock 2021). Mbembe explores how decolonised epistemic access requires the development of a new set of “pedagogies of presence” in which everyone in the university classroom is a co-learner (2015, 6). The framework presented in this article represents an attempt to develop a guiding set of pedagogies of presence that resists neoliberal discourse, that facilitates students’ critical engagement and co-learning, and that centres and critiques disciplinary knowledge and ways of knowing.

## The Bedrock: Socio-Literacy and Collaborative Pedagogy

The framework is built on a resistance to neoliberal, autonomous approaches to literacy development that label students as needing “skills development”. These approaches are incompatible with a democratic, transformative curriculum (Dison and Moore 2019; Moore 2025b). Boughey and McKenna (2016, 2021) point out that, despite a widespread awareness among universities of socio-literacy approaches, such as the academic literacies approach, deficit conceptions of students remain dominant in South Africa. The academic literacies model centres “meaning making, identity, power and authority and foregrounds the institutional nature of what ‘counts’ as knowledge in any particular academic context” (Lea and Street 2006, 227–228). Jacobs (2013) argues that continuing to frame academic literacies work as skills development limits its transformative potential. Clarence (2020) further points out that skills discourses fail to recognise that literacy demands change at each level of study.

This bedrock principle helps us to resist these enduring traps with RE. Critical and social approaches recognise academic writing as being discipline-specific discourse, and frame writing as both a process (of thinking, identity development, and agency building) and a product (of publication). This aligns with our university’s adoption of a writing-intensive approach to developing writing in the disciplines (Bean 2011; Nichols 2017; Nichols et al. 2023). We were further eager to embody the idea that academic literacies development becomes truly transformative when it is dialogical, and when all students take part in critical discussions of genres and expectations with disciplinary and literacies experts (Wingate 2011, 2019). Importantly, these principles align well with the deliberative pedagogy envisaged by legal education for democracy scholars, explored in the next section.

We attempt to model and embed this founding principle in the RE workshops. Writing as process is valued through the compulsory use of a reflective research journal throughout the year, in which students complete workshop writing activities, and in which they reflect both personally and on their research throughout the year. The course mark is made up of the proposal, draft essay, final essay, and reflective journal; in this way, writing both as process and product is valued. Importantly, we take a dialogic and critical approach to facilitating discussions about legal research. For example, rather than reminding students “this is how you research in law” or “these are the sources valued in law”, we ask them to consider what counts as legal knowledge for their particular research question (the answer will differ depending on the field, and depending on how normative or critical their question is) and to discuss and challenge ideas put forward by the facilitators and other students. Because students select a range of cutting-edge, critical legal questions to research, mostly situated in a South African or southern African context, we can draw on these to contextualise abstract discussions, and to provide examples, which ensures that the course is consistently responsive to the decolonial imperative.

Rooted in the socio-literacy approach, and an important dimension of this bedrock principle, is the scholarship of Celia Jacobs (2007, 2013, 2015), and specifically her notion of a “collaborative pedagogy” between disciplinary and literacies specialists. Her starting point is that higher education must create “discursive spaces” where writing and disciplinary specialists can collaborate (Jacobs 2007). Jacobs argues that disciplinary specialists, on their own, are not always best placed to teach disciplinary literacies, as their deep knowledge and practices are so tacit that it is difficult for the disciplinary specialist alone to surface and explain them to novices (Jacobs 2007, 59). Jacobs (2015) argues that a collaborative pedagogy can socialise students into disciplinary discourses as well as facilitate critique and critical awareness of discourse norms. She makes the case for *sustained* collaboration between disciplinary and literacy specialists, arguing that it is this that allows for a shift to critical understandings of this kind of teaching (2007). The pedagogy is thus flexible—both normative and transformative (Lillis and Scott 2007; Moore 2025a).

This focus on developing a disciplinary identity and inducting students into, as well as contesting, academic and disciplinary norms, takes time (Jacobs 2013, 132). Jacobs therefore cautions that this cannot be limited to students’ first year, as so many academic literacies interventions are. She argues that it should happen across the undergraduate degree, and into postgraduate studies (Jacobs 2013). The workshop team—a law teacher and literacies teacher—attempts to create this kind of discursive space in every workshop. We present extracts from a range of types of legal research and, through recurring conversations, point out the norms and moves in different pieces of writing and ask critical questions about why and how this is done, and what the alternatives are. Students are encouraged to join these conversations and begin to point out patterns and question accepted norms themselves.



Through critical questioning, careful modelling, and scaffolding of disciplinary texts, the literacies specialist assists disciplinary specialists to make the invisible or opaque demands of disciplinary discourse visible, and so more epistemically accessible to students. Importantly, in this collaborative pedagogy, disciplinary knowledge is central. This facilitates important discussions such as “[w]hat counts as evidence and reliability?” and “[w]hat counts as a way of disputing evidence or reliability?” in the discipline (Jacobs 2013, 136). Students’ research and knowledge are centred, and they are asked to consider these questions in relation to their specific research topic and field. The focus thus shifts to how each student communicates their argument and knowledge, rather than on a broad range of generic writing skills, many of which may have no relevance to a particular research project.

Lastly, Jacobs (2015) cautions that one of the challenges of a transformative collaborative pedagogy is “how to develop classroom materials that highlight the complex (often hidden) social practices that determine the principles and patterns through which disciplines communicate meaning, and then how to mediate such materials in a collaborative pedagogy” (Jacobs 2015, 140). In this we are intentional in drawing on examples of a range of legal arguments, some normative and some critical. (We use extracts from journal articles and theses as well as from previous students’ proposals and essays—used with their permission). For example, students will work in groups to discuss critically three very different examples of a proposal, with reference to the rubric that is used to assess their proposals. They are asked to present to the class what was effective, and why, in each proposal, and what was not. They are also invited to consider how differently each proposal met, or did not meet, the explicit criteria. A similar process is used with final essays. In this way, students collaborate, deliberate, and co-construct responses to different texts and, through class discussion, come to see both what is valued and how a criterion can be met in markedly different ways. Workshop facilitators add their voice to the discussion and, very often, the law teacher will notice and point out quite different features of the text to the literacies teacher, which leads to further critical discussion. The literacies teacher’s role of asking the question that a novice might (Jacobs 2007) creates space for students to ask questions they might otherwise have been embarrassed to ask (as they learn that there are no “stupid” questions or, if there are, it is often one of the teachers asking them).

### **Pillar One: Democracy and Deliberation in Legal Education Scholarship**

The framework was further developed by reclaiming pedagogies from critical legal education scholarship, specifically, democratic and deliberative pedagogies. These pedagogies were widely promoted just after the transition to democracy but have become muted in the push to produce market-ready graduates. The Constitution highlights a commitment to a “society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights” (RSA 1996). Underlying this notion is the ideal of promoting a recognition of “the potential of each person” (RSA 1996). Through democratic pedagogy students can, in addition to gaining legal knowledge, gain a sense of confidence, self-awareness, and respect for self and others (Waghid and Davids

2022). If law schools embrace the ideal that transformation and democratisation are both content and context and encourage students as active citizens in a democracy, some attention needs to be paid to creating spaces for open communication (including discord) and social relationships. Within such spaces diverse opinions, expressed in a discussion, are constructive as diversity can change perspectives significantly and there is “something to be learned from the other perspectives” (Young 1996, 127).

The standards for the LLB degree speak of graduates who are critical thinkers and enlightened citizens with a profound understanding of the impact of the Constitution on the development of the law and advancing the course of social justice in South Africa. (CHE 2015). Law schools are ideally placed to encourage and grow a new mindset in law students, a mindset that befits a participatory democracy, encouraging an exchange of ideas within the learning environment (Waghid and Davids 2022).

Deliberation is a foundational concept in democracy education. Deliberation provides students with the opportunity to talk in an open and public forum where difference and diversity are welcome additions to the deliberative mix (Benhabib 1996). Good deliberation lies in the deliberative process of incorporating the skills of care, listening, and emotion (Waghid 2019). Waghid and Davids (2022, 5) maintain that it is possible to conceive of pedagogical encounters, informed by deliberative action, as acts of justice. This aligns with Jacobs’s (2007) notion of discursive spaces. For students to find their place in higher education, for them to feel that they belong, law teachers need to respond by providing enabling spaces for discourse. The deliberative model, advocated by both Mansbridge (1998, 2010) and Young (1996), is a model that can facilitate the type of participation envisaged by the framers of our Constitution.

In the RE workshops, this pillar of the framework strengthened our attempts to create an open communicative environment founded on democratic and collaborative engagement. By encouraging and modelling deliberation, students were able and required to engage regularly and critically with peers and lecturers. This, in turn, supports the development of a horizontal space where authentic and productive dialogue can take place (Longo and Shaffer 2019). Students are viewed as active participants in their own learning; lecturers are seen as capable, but also caring and humane (Waghid and Davids 2022). This ethos is established in the first few workshops, which are all held in person. We attempt to facilitate a culture of respect (for each other, for each other’s ideas) through intentional, active listening and modelling vulnerability. Through a series of group activities and individual written reflections, students begin to realise that the facilitators are serious about hearing student voices and inviting contributions and critique, but equally serious about requiring authentic participation and peer engagement.

There is a tendency in law for students to view their peers as competitors. This democratic, deliberative dimension of the framework sustains our attempts to model relationships that are collaborative and collegial. Students are encouraged to be curious,

creative thinkers who are contributors to their own, and others' learning. We do this through including student voices from previous years (either in person or through the letters they write at the end of each year to incoming students) and setting activities that require students to reflect on their former and current research experiences, and to share these with their peers.

## **Pillar Two: Slow Scholarship and Slow Pedagogy**

In RE workshops, we strive deliberately to create an inclusive, just, and non-hierarchical space in which students feel comfortable, but where they are also challenged and supported to attain genuine intellectual depth and academic excellence in their work. Our aim is for the course to be both personally and academically transformative. This led us to the second pillar of our framework: principles from Slow pedagogy (Berg and Seeber 2016; Collett et al. 2018) and Slow scholarship (Bozalek 2021; Leibowitz and Bozalek 2018). These include

acknowledgement of collaboration and the building of interdisciplinary communities of practice; allocating time for internal reflection and mentoring; a focus on an ethics of care in the way in which we interact with and acknowledge each other; embracing Slowness and caring collectively. (Collett et al. 2018, 118)

The number of workshops is intentional; there are many weeks during the year in which students do not have to attend a workshop and can work at their own pace. However, they know that the RE community remains committed to their research process in between workshops. They can continue to collaborate outside workshops (for example, in voluntary “shut up and write” sessions) and can meet with facilitators or peer writing mentors at any time during the year. We emphasise that each student should find ways of engaging their research and each other that best embody care for them.

This Slow scholarly approach emerged to challenge increasing neoliberal practices within universities, and “promotes the quality of relationships, grappling with ideas and recognising the importance of subjectivities” (Leibowitz and Bozalek 2018, 983). It values quality and depth over efficiency and deliberately slows the teaching process down so that students can fully develop in the learning process, through active learning based on their own interests (Jukić 2022, 23). Students are given enough time to learn at their own pace, within course constraints, and they are encouraged to reflect on their learning in workshops and in their research journals throughout the process (Shaw, Cole, and Russell 2013). Free writing, as a conscious, subjective practice, allows students to slow down and experience writing as a process (Gray 2021) that can help them transcend paralysis or writer's block, to clarify thinking, and assist in overcoming procrastination. We make time for free writing for different purposes in several of the workshops and encourage students to experiment with it in their own time.

Another crucial dimension of this Slow, humanist pedagogy is the rejection of dualisms (Leibowitz and Bozalek 2018, 984). Dualisms we chose to resist were the expert-novice

construct and the false cognitive-affective divide. Team members attempt to model empathy and vulnerability throughout the course and share stories of our own research and writing struggles, particularly in relation to personal, identity, or family matters. This allows students to do the same. We also try to keep tabs on students through the short writing tasks submitted on the learning management system (LMS) and follow up with students who seem to be struggling. Additional assistance is offered if required or requested, but it is not imposed. Students who prefer to find their own research path outside workshops are free to do so. Insights from students in previous years are invaluable here. Current students are often intrigued and relieved to hear (from the letters that graduating students write to new students about their experience of RE) about how previous students have grappled with ideas and identities, managed setbacks, and found their way through challenges to their experiences, perspectives or intended arguments. In this way, and others, community is extended across cohorts of students. All of this serves to break down false divides within students, between students, and between staff and students, and to create a space that is humane and more connected.

Coffman et al., in the context of doctoral studies, argue that “[t]he process of becoming a researcher and adopting a professional and scholarly identity is a process of transformation and identity development” (2016, 30). They also found that students struggled to integrate multiple roles and identities during this process. We draw on this insight but argue that the experience of final-year legal research students is equally transformative, identity developing, and challenging. For the first time, they must conceptualise their own research problem, decide on the scope and angle, and develop the confidence to carve a unique research path. This requires an identity shift from being an undergraduate to being a more independent and autonomous researcher (albeit a fledgeling one). This can be both terrifying and liberating. Clarence emphasises that research writing pedagogy “needs to account for the affective dimensions of writing and research as well, to engage students in more holistic, critical, and forward-looking conversations about their writing, and their own developing scholarly identity” (2020, 46). She also observes that acknowledging the role of affect and identity development is especially important at postgraduate level.

It became clear that affect and identity need to be explicitly engaged and reflected on in our attempts to develop research and writing capacity at fourth-year level, as part of the Slow dimension of the framework. Some of these attempts are detailed in the previous sections. Additionally, in some workshops, for example, we start with a short “I feel” exercise in which all students write anonymously into a collaborative writing document and share how they are feeling (in general or about their research). Sometimes we turn this into a word cloud so that we can see patterns of response. These feelings are discussed and reflected on together, and we try and brainstorm ways of supporting each other and managing anxiety, procrastination, or imposter syndrome (three commonly recurring themes). Another simple exercise is to ask students to reflect on where they write, when they write, how they write, and what they do when they cannot write. As they share this in groups, they identify similar challenges and ways to overcome them

or discover useful techniques that other students use. Importantly, this is not discussed in deficit terms. Rather, it is framed as a sharing of researchers' experiences and challenges.

Regarding the reflective research journals, Fry, Klages, and Venneman (2018, 379) remind us that “reflective narratives are valued for their ability to personalise learning and support development within what educationalists call the affective domain—the area of values, feelings, motivations—and this is largely how they add authenticity to assessment”. After students receive their proposal and draft essay feedback, our workshops focus on reflecting on feedback received, naming and reflecting on how they felt about it, and working constructively with feedback and supervisors. This happens both through individual writing in research journals and collaborative reflection through class discussion. Conversations are often painful, honest, but ultimately helpful; students share coping strategies and helpful experiences to which facilitators add to or reflect on where necessary. Additionally, by making the reflective research journals part of how the course is formally assessed, we emphasise to students that reflection is not a “soft skill” but a powerful means of learning, and for finding congruence between personal and academic identities.

Part of this reflective, affective process is the necessary engagement with risk. Thesen (2013) observes that research writers, especially novices, tend to “play it safe” when it comes to writing and tend to conform to conventional and narrow views of what constitutes good research writing. She also notes that the term “risk” tends to have negative connotations in contemporary society (which was not always the case) and is seen as a threat to be managed. She challenges this view and suggests that students, especially postgraduates, should be encouraged to take risks in writing as a way of integrating their authentic style, individuality, and experience into their authorial voice. This argument presented an attractive (if risky) challenge in a discipline such as law, which can take a normative and narrow approach to “what counts” as good writing. Here we are fortunate to have colleagues and former RE students who have taken risks in their authorial voice, or in their choice of “what counts” as legal knowledge and legal argument. We analyse extracts of this writing and, through collaborative pedagogy, make visible the risks that are taken, and the range of ways in which authors have been able to integrate their own experience or write powerfully in an unconventional style.

All of these Slow principles complement the deliberative, democratic principles of pillar one. Grounding these in the bedrock collaborative pedagogy between disciplinary and literacies teachers has allowed us to reframe and reclaim the RE workshops as a transformative learning space. To illustrate this, some of the patterns of feedback on this learning are briefly set out in the next section.

## Impact of the Framework

It is beyond the scope of this article to engage with feedback and impact in any detail. However, from the iterative cycles of reflection with students, staff, and external examiners held over the past eight years, these are some patterns that can be identified.

In a discipline that is often criticised for teaching in silos, RE offers the opportunity to consolidate and deepen the necessary critical research and writing capabilities needed of any law graduate. Most important is students' taking on the identity of scholarly legal researchers. The students show a definite shift from initial uncertainty (anomie) to identifying themselves as a researcher who has agency. Some students recognise that RE requires them to shift from neoliberal to democratic understandings of education and the law and, in the process, show that they are the self-aware democratised citizens we seek. This is seen in reflections such as the following:

Don't underestimate the power of collaboration. Engage in discussions with your peers, attend research seminars and participate in academic forums. Collaborative thinking can often lead to breakthroughs and enrich your and others' research experience. (Student A 2022)

This suggests that the framework has helped students to view each researcher in the class as human with strengths and weaknesses, instead of competition.

In their journals, many students indicate their appreciation of the ability to create, to remain curious, and to engage and develop their identities. Importantly, they show appreciation to those involved in the process, not as service providers but also humane, vulnerable, caring, and independent citizens. For example, Student B (2023) reflected:

The RE journey is hard but beautiful. ... This course has moulded me more than any other course I have taken at university. It's a cross between being on your own but not entirely being alone. You decide what goes in, what stays and what goes out. That process goes beyond who you are academically, it applies to who you are as a person. For me, my topic and my journey solidified why I want to be in this profession, the ability to give a voice to the poor and provide not only help but instil change where it is most needed.

Many students feel that RE prepares and motivates them for postgraduate research. At the end of each year, several students tell us of a new determination to do a master's or doctoral degree. For example, Student C (2022) enthused:

This research journey has been amazing. I have thoroughly enjoyed it. In fact, the experience of working on my essay—along with my experience as a Writing Fellow at the Writing Centre—made me sure that at some point in my career, I would like to become an academic. So in that sense, doing the Research Essay elective has been life-changing!

Some students who complete RE and carry on to a postgraduate degree tell us that they feel very well prepared for the research, and attribute this to the RE workshops. For example, a student who enrolled for a master's degree in law completed RE during the Covid years, when all teaching was online. He told us he had saved the workshop recordings and had rewatched them all in preparation for his master's programme.

Colleagues have commented that they can see an improvement in RE students' written argumentation, both in this essay and in other final-year essays. There is also consensus that students who have completed this course as part of their LLB are better prepared for postgraduate research writing. One professor and supervisor described the course as a "wonderful innovation, providing final year students with an opportunity to engage with sustained research and writing for possibly the first time in their undergraduate studies". She went on to state that "aside from its inspirational effects, the course generally nurtures and grows undergraduate students to become young, independent researchers" (Letter of support 2024, quoted here with the author's permission).

Colleagues have flagged professional growth as a positive unintended consequence of being involved in RE. They tell us how much they enjoy the collegiality and the process of the research pitches, supported supervision, and the mini conference—that it is what the academy should be about but too often is not. Young academics have also expressed appreciation of the explication of the research and supervision process in RE, as it helps to prepare them to supervise students at a higher level.

In addition to feedback from students and colleagues, one of the external examiners (a practising advocate) added his perspective on the final research essays that he had moderated:

The privilege accorded me to moderate the essays of young students gives me a window of observation into the thought processes and matters that exercise the minds of young students. This is precious and priceless. My overall assessment is that academic standards are not deteriorating. If anything, access to the internet and social media is improving the acumen, interest, appreciation for diversity and capacity of young people at university. When properly supervised, not even grammar, syntax and spelling are suffering. (Personal correspondence 2024, quoted here with the author's permission)

These positive perspectives are reflected in the results for the course, which have steadily improved since implementing this Slow deliberative collaborative framework.

## Enabling Conditions

We are mindful of the possibility that our reflections in this article could be read as a glib "here's how to do it!" narrative, compounding pressures on over-burdened university staff (Harley 2017) to deliver something similar. We want to resist this and to be explicit about the necessary conditions for implementing this framework. We also

want to be clear that it is these conditions, rather than individual heroics, that make it possible to explore these pedagogies.

The first enabling condition is institutional and managerial support. The school in which we work has made a budgetary and curricular commitment to employing a full-time, permanent literacies specialist to collaborate with their academic staff. Furthermore, they formally recognise the time the disciplinary specialist spends on this course. Implementing the framework without this may be challenging, as it takes time and interdisciplinary expertise.

Secondly, law students know that their intended profession has high research and writing expectations and so are arguably more motivated and open to developing these capacities. We build on this by deliberately cultivating and maintaining relationships with legal professionals who contribute to the course and validate its importance. For example, an experienced advocate acts as an external examiner and speaks to students at various workshops. A related significant affordance is the depth of scholarly expertise in the law school, and the commitment and generosity of many of our most experienced supervisors; the framework is strongest when the collaborative pedagogy extends beyond the classroom and involves other disciplinary voices.

Related to this, disciplinary specificity lends power to these pedagogies. They simply would not work in the same ways if presented as a centralised generic programme or without the collaborative dimension of the pedagogy. In contexts where there is pressure from universities and professions to graduate work-ready students with good research and writing “skills”, the temptation exists to resort to quick, “pop up” remediation efforts (Thesen 2013). It is essential that students, colleagues, and management understand the rationale for Slow, deliberative, collaborative pedagogies in courses such as these. Without a shared “discursive space” (Jacobs 2007; Waghid and Davids 2022) in which all these actors understand and participate, deficit discourses of support are likely to re-emerge, especially if individuals driving the resistance are no longer involved in the course.

## Conclusion

Harley, in her argument against alienation among academic staff, reminds us that

[d]oing things well, endowing what we do with our intelligence, creating in a joyous, thoughtful, caring way could help us move against-and-beyond capital, and help us heal the harm that has been done to ourselves. (Harley 2017, 10)

We argue that this powerful and appealing vision applies equally to working with research students and student research itself. This critical framework, together with the material and managerial support we were privileged to draw on, has allowed us to explore and reclaim research with our final-year students as creative, humane, critical, intellectual, and playful. This is not to say that it is not also messy, complex,



challenging, and sometimes exhausting. We have been relieved to find ways of resisting some of the neoliberal pushes towards efficiency, output, and product over process, and delighted that so many students have attained depth, quality, and rigour in their final research essays.

By engaging student agency and identity through this Slow reflective set of deliberative and collaborative pedagogies, students are scaffolded through the zone between undergraduate and postgraduate studies and develop their scholarly identities. This framework also guides the development of students' collective and individual reflective capacity and creates a strong foundation for further research. We argue that this critical framework has application in a range of educational settings, as a tool for reclaiming education as a site for personal and intellectual transformation.

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