



FVZS CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT SESSION

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On 27 September 2021, The Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert Institute for Student Leadership Development held a virtual critical engagement session titled “Leadership: Nuances of Inter-generational Perspectives on Power and Morality.” The session sought to explore the myriad ways in which people think about and apply change in leadership structures, and the impact of those changes on a local, national, and global level. Additionally, the critical engagement session was compulsory for all our short court participants, excluding the Graduate Programme participants.

The session sought to encourage our short course participants to explore prevalent issues such as Gender Based Violence and apply morality as a way of thinking. Against this backdrop, our short course participants could provide impactful feedback on the impact of GBV on leadership and leadership structures, while utilizing the definitional arrangements and subtleties of power and morality to think about what people do, and how those actions affect other people.

Moreover, the critical engagement session was open to the public, specifically during the panel discussion. However, the structure of the session focused on our short course participants; prior to the session they had to watch a video titled “A Conversation” between James Baldwin, who was a novelist, playwright, essayist, poet, and activist in conversation with Nikki Giovanni, a poet, writer, activist, and educator. In the video, Baldwin asserts that the relationship between morality and power is a very subtle one as power without morality is no longer power.



FVZS CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT SESSION

The conversation itself takes place in 1971, which was a tumultuous time in the USA, as the decade saw the continuation of the 60s, as marginalized people continued their fight for expanded social and political rights. Now situating the 1970s for South Africa; students mobilized against the Apartheid regime, using working class ideals that were based on democratic and participatory socialism. This saw a cultural change in political dialogue because student leaders provided the energy to alter leadership and leadership structures into democratic South Africa.

For the live session of the critical engagement, we had a panel discussion, which was followed by a Q & A, and then breakout rooms for our short course participants, course coordinators, and FVZS staff members so that the discussion could further align with the discussion forums created on the SunOnline platform. The discussion forum questions were for our short course participants, and each short course had a question that aligns with its content. For instance, the question for the Global Citizenship short course was: “How do we critically analyse power as an exercise of affective change when dealing with global issues such gender disparity within leadership structures?”. This question sought to highlight people’s intimately gendered experiences in leadership, both as leaders and as people who are led. For the Leadership in Education short course, the question was: “How can educators exercise agency in cultivating leaders who interrogate power in institutional settings, in ways that contribute to leadership as a space within which we achieve change in institutional narratives on student leaders and student movements?”. The significance of this question for our short course participants is that educators are leaders, not only in their respective fields, but as people actively involved in cultivating future leaders. Thus, our aim was to extract varying themes from the critical engagement session that interlink with our short courses.



FVZS CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT SESSION

Some key themes that emerged from the panel discussion during the live critical engagement session emphasized the subtle nature of morality, in that it is not just there, thus, we ought to think carefully about morality as justification for our actions. This has significance for the conversation between Baldwin and Giovanni, in that Baldwin speaks from the perspective of an older stalwart of the civil rights movement, and Giovanni takes on a younger, radical feminist stance, where she does not see the value of mass political organization.

For Baldwin, a moral compass is at the core of one's being, thus, if you lose your core then everything else is destroyed, so you must figure out ways of saving your core. The ability to think morally requires imagination and the courage to ask difficult questions of oneself. In morally just contexts, we ought to worry about people's vulnerability, rather than asserting our rights, so that we do what is right even if it is against what we have been taught.

So, the conversation between Baldwin and Giovanni, as well the live discussion helps us to interrogate these concepts to bridge the gap in our critical thought as students, staff, scholars, and broader communities. Such conversations will help us reflect on our own work, and the impact we want to have on those we serve.