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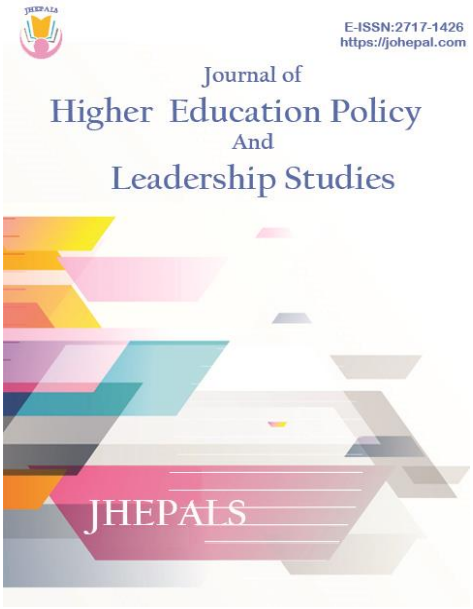

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Interactional Classroom Justice in Indian Higher Education: Understanding its Role in the Process of Moving Away from Rote-based Pedagogy through Transdisciplinary and Transformative Learning

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Abstract

This paper explores how transdisciplinary research (TDR), transformative education and interactional classroom justice can together move Indian higher education (HE) beyond rote-based pedagogy. While India's National Education Policy (NEP) (2020) promotes creative and inquiry-based reforms of the system, less attention has been paid to understanding the fairness of everyday teacher–student interactions. Based on qualitative data from the Co-Creation in Society (CCIS) course, a two-week transdisciplinary and transformative initiative, this paper shares findings to support the idea that the redistribution of epistemic authority formed a key element in students' experiences. Students felt they were treated as co-researchers rather than passive recipients of knowledge. This shift offered a structural space for students to instigate discussions, ask questions and modeled respectful engagement with social stakeholders, reshaping students' sense of agency and intellectual growth. The study concludes by extending classroom justice theory to include epistemic authority, and offering a rare Indian perspective on classroom justice, broadening international debates on issues of equity, didactics, and leadership.

Keywords: Interactional Classroom Justice; India; Transdisciplinary Research; Co-Creation ; Higher Education

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Introduction

Indian classrooms are frequently described as hierarchical and examination-driven, with rote memorization as a dominant approach to teaching (Thankachan, 2024). Such didactic models tend to focus on the reproduction of knowledge and less on inquiry, thus limiting opportunities for students to explore their own ideas, ask questions, or engage in dialogic learning. Research on teaching practices highlights the persistence of top-down instruction and thereby minimizing the students' voice (Tiwary et al., 2023). While scholars have addressed themes of inclusion, equity, and the social context of learning in India (Tripathi, 2025Tiwary et al., 2023), these concerns are rarely explored explicitly in relation to classroom justice and even less so in terms of interactional justice.

International scholarship on classroom justice, grounded in organizational justice theory, reflects its multidimensional character; distributive (focused on fairness of outcomes), procedural (addressing the quality of the process), and interactional (focusing on the interactions between teachers and students and the interpersonal relations) (Greenberg, 1990; Chory, 2007; Chory-Assad, 2002; Colquitt, 2001). Among these, interactional justice, which is characterized by themes such as respect, dignity, explanation, and authenticity in teacher–student communication (Chory, 2007; Colquitt et al 2001), is particularly important in shaping students' sense of motivation, engagement, and trust. Studies suggest that interactional justice can also enable more autonomous thinking in the sense that, when teachers treat students with respect, listen to their perspectives, and encourage discussion, classrooms are experienced as safe spaces where students can share ideas, challenge dominant viewpoints, and take intellectual risks (Chory, 2007; Estaji & Zhaleh, 2022; Sun, 2022).

The need for interactional classroom justice is especially pronounced in the Indian higher education (HE) system, where calls for reform have become urgent. For decades, Indian HE has relied heavily on rote learning, one-way transmission of knowledge, and memorization of facts (e.g., Tiwary et al. 2023). Recent reforms, most prominently articulated in the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020), call for more holistic, inquiry-based, and interactive modes of learning that foster critical reflection and prepare students to address real-world challenges.

Parmar (2024) explains that the proposed policy changes of the NEP promote decolonization efforts and emphasize the need to integrate Indic knowledge systems into contemporary classrooms, addressing the epistemic violence inherent in Indian educational structures as a result of colonial rule. Traditional Indic pedagogies, such as the Gurukula system, practiced close personal relationships between teachers and pupils, with an emphasis on experiential learning, character formation, and complex integration of knowledge in daily life, which formed the essence of learning (Shanwal, 2023). However, Parmar's study concludes that the way the NEP proposes to introduce such traditional knowledge systems does not sufficiently integrate them into contemporary education. The solutions set out in the NEP focus on creating 'separate' courses on Indic thought, rather than integrating such lessons in the way students are taught and assessed. As such, mass instruction and Western-based assessment formats remain unaddressed, "ghettoizing indigenous knowledge rather than achieving genuine integration" (p. 2831). Parmar (2024) therefore proposes that contemporary classroom policies should promote traditional Indian

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philosophy where the integration of various dimensions of the human experience (philosophic, scientific, artistic, social, spiritual) lead to more inherently interactive and dynamic learning approaches.

This paper posits that two related—albeit Western—approaches, *transdisciplinary education* and *transformative education*, illustrate and propose a similar shift. Transdisciplinary education emphasizes co-designing, co-researching, co-producing, and co-disseminating knowledge among academic and non-academic stakeholders, thereby encouraging students to address complex problems facing contemporary society through multiple perspectives and collaborative inquiry (Horn et al., 2024). Transformative education complements this approach by fostering self-reflection, collective emancipation, and the formation of students as "change agents" capable of engaging with their social environments and societal actors in an engaged and emphatic manner (Hoinle et al., 2021). Both approaches share a commitment to reshaping traditional teacher–student roles, bringing more justice, and cultivating dialogic, participatory learning environments.

Yet even as Indian HE embarks on this transformation, the interpersonal dimension of fairness, and how students perceive that teachers treat them, remains underexplored. Interactional classroom justice offers a powerful but underutilized lens for understanding whether these reforms can succeed in shifting classroom dynamics away from rote learning and toward autonomy, inquiry, and collaboration. Respectful and transparent teacher–student interactions can create conditions in which students feel included, supported, and motivated to engage beyond memorization.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the role of interactional classroom justice in the context of a two-week higher education format known as the Co-Creation in Society (CCIS) course, implemented at a large Indian university. Specifically, we ask:

> How did students participating in the CCIS course experience the classroom in terms of interactional justice, and in what ways did this shape their learning and sense of agency?

By bringing together concepts of interactional justice, transdisciplinary and transformative education, and ongoing reforms in Indian higher education, this study contributes to both global debates on classroom justice and the local effort to reimagine learning in the country.

Transdisciplinary Research, Transformational learning, and Interactional Classroom Justice in the CCIS course

Central to the learning approach encompassed by transdisciplinary research (TDR) is the notion of contextualized learning; encouraging students to work together on a real-life complex problem, in which they learn the necessary research skills to look at it from diverse perspectives, gain knowledge from various actors, and find sustainable solutions in collaboration with other students. In the CCIS course, students are encouraged to work in teams to analyze and conduct research on a societal problem, and work together on comprehensive solutions to it. In small teams, students are taught to identify, understand, and develop potential paths toward change, based on a literature study, theoretical

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exploration, field visits with non-university actors, group interviews with these actors, qualitative analysis and creative problem-solving.

Transformative education principles guided the entire program in terms of how it was delivered, focusing on the students' emancipatory process. Transformative education is an educational paradigm that aims not just to transmit knowledge, but to foster profound shifts in learners' perspectives, values, and identities. Its core focus is to enable students to critically reflect on their assumptions, social contexts, and the broader world, thereby cultivating agency and the capacity for action (Mezirow, 1997; Cranton, 2006). Key principles of transformative education include, for example, critical self-reflection (students are encouraged to examine their own belief systems, their assumptions and biases, e.g., Mezirow, 2000), dialogic learning (creating dialogue and interaction between students and teachers, as well as between peers, aiming to reduce hierarchical power dynamics, and allowing multiple perspectives to come up; Cranton, 2006), agency and empowerment (understanding and addressing the students as autonomous thinkers, who are not just recipients of knowledge, but interact with the material to form their own ideas, generate solutions and act in their communities; Hoinle et al., 2021), and emphasis on social change (creating opportunities for students to explore and clarify links between their learning process and societal issues and encouraging students to examine their own role, and ability to act; Hoinle et al., 2021).

In the development of the CCIS course, it was also understood that its implementation depended on addressing the mode of facilitation. In discussing the conditions for facilitation, we realized it was about creating more interactional classroom justice in the way teaching was practiced so as to make students feel respected and valued. To create a classroom context in which students could be addressed as autonomous learners, the following structural and more abstract principles were formulated:

Respectful communication. The first principle is to foster respectful interactions with students. We separate 'respectful' from the more commonly understood 'polite' or 'formal' communication, by emphasizing the need for active listening, inquiry-based interaction and non-verbal interactional cues to give a sense that students are really being heard. This means that students are regularly invited to share their thoughts and given full and empathetic attention when they speak. Simple practical ways to encourage respectful communication would be to thank students for sharing their thoughts, to respond to their ideas with interest, consideration, and acknowledgement of the thought process, and to avoid dismissing so-called "wrong" ideas (Chory, 2007; Estaji & Zaleh al., 2022).

Transparent and inclusive decision-making. Another principle is to be transparent and explain decisions that are made, and possibly include students in the decision-making process when the context permits such participation. This includes decisions regarding, for instance, the timing of certain procedures or events, the motivation behind conducting particular activities or exercises, and asking for feedback on the decisions made (Sun, 2022). This principle is consistent with informational justice, which is a subcategory of interactional justice. Informational justice refers to the extent to which individuals explain decisions related to outcome distribution and the motivation behind their actions (Chory et al., 2017).

Encouraging participation and voice. In order to encourage students to share their perspectives, it can be helpful to work with different classroom formations, such as putting

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students in pairs or small groups, to ensure that they experience the time and safety to clarify their thoughts before presenting them (Jose & Shanuga, 2018; Tiwari et al., 2023).

Developing cultural awareness of structural inequalities. Students, especially in the Indian context, often come from very diverse cultural, social, and educational backgrounds, which are also fraught with challenges related to caste, class, economic status, and language differences. It felt important to create opportunities for students to reflect, at least to some degree, on their position and role in society, and to learn to be sensitive to hierarchical and discriminating realities. This means, for the CCIS, that students were invited to "check in/ check out" (COCO) (Campbell & Anderson, 2011), which is a structured practice used in schools to support students' engagement and connection. It is usually done at the start and end of the day, where students can express how they feel at the time, what they experience(d), and share consistent moments of reflection between themselves as "learners" and the events in which they take part (Maggin et al., 2015).

Creating a safe space for learning. A final important principle is to normalize the fact that learning and growth are accompanied by making mistakes. To promote this growth mindset, it can help to create moments where students reflect on what went well and what could go better. In the CCIS, students have to present some of their work at the end, where they also reflect on what they learned and how they felt it could be improved.

The CCIS course

The CCIS was developed in collaboration between two universities (one in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and one in Pune, India). As mentioned above, the essential part of the course is to familiarize students with examining a complex societal problem, and to encourage them to work together on comprehensive solutions to this problem. In small teams, students are taught to identify, understand, and develop potential paths toward change, based on literature study, theoretical exploration, field visits with non-university actors, group interviews with these actors, qualitative analysis and creative problem-solving. Examples of the societal problems from which students could choose during this course, are:

The industry–academia gap: understanding the gap between the quality requirements of industry and what universities currently offer, which leaves many graduates in India unemployed.

Juvenile crime: understanding and offering solutions to rising rates of youth crime in urban India, also in relation to the complexities involved in the trial and punishment of juvenile offenders.

The course is comprised of 10 two-hour workshops, spread over two weeks. During the course, students are encouraged to interact with other non-academic actors, such as company directors (CEOs), staff and managers of non-government organizations (NGOs), ordinary citizens, etc., and to seek a wide range of perspectives on the issue that they are exploring. To collect data for their projects, three field visits are organized to offer students opportunities to conduct interviews with a broad range of social stakeholders relevant to the issue (in this case police officers, CEOs, parents and educators, and NGO staff). In preparation for the field visits, students are encouraged to read and talk about the problem, and to identify theoretical perspectives to better frame and understand it. Relevant research exercises (e.g., based on conceptual modeling, causal tree analysis, actor mapping, and

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interview skills) are conducted to stimulate the students' research inquiry process. Throughout the course, students are invited to reflect upon their own role in the context of their problem (including personal values, motivations, norms, and experiences), and each other (e.g., through team exercises and reflection sessions), to encourage interpersonal competencies and reflexivity.

Research Methodology

Study Context and Selection Process

The CCIS course was developed and implemented in an Indian university in Pune (often referred to as the Oxford of the East, with many educational institutions based there), where most of the academic programs are delivered in large lecture halls, with teachers using Power Point Presentations (PPTs) to convey their content. During the course preparation process, exploring the views of students and teachers found that both groups were looking for new forms of learning, as the current rote-learning approach limits the possibilities for students to interact actively with the material and with the teachers. A niche experiment in the form of the CCIS course, where radically different principles were followed for two weeks, was thus developed as a step toward normalizing different forms of teaching.

The CCIS course was run twice in the first semester of the Management and Organization (M&O) Department in 2019. Fifteen second-year students were selected for each course, making a total of 30. After a round of introductory presentations there were explanations about the course and the voluntary nature of participation in it. Students were also advised that they would receive no extra study credit or other benefits through participating in the course. Nevertheless, 360 students expressed initial interest in a brief Statement of Purpose (SOP), in which they reflected on their hope to acquire new skills and experience a type of education that would build their confidence for the future. A total of 30 students were selected on the basis of their motivation; all of whom gave their informed consent before the course began.

Data Collection and Analysis

A qualitative research approach was employed, including observational notes, transcribed recordings of the sessions, and in-depth interviews with students (N = 10) and academic staff (N = 4). In addition, two 90-minute Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with 12 students after the intervention to understand their experiences of the course.

The observational research was conducted by an independent research assistant who was present throughout the intervention and during each session (20 hours in total). As the objective of the study was to understand the broad learning experiences of students in this course, and particularly how the intervention shaped their experiences of interactional classroom justice, a fieldnote protocol was designed to capture both descriptive and reflective notes (see Creswell, 2016). The notes were developed from a few key research questions, including: a) how is the power and relational dynamic between students and teachers throughout and in between the various exercises?; b) how is the setting organized for students to speak their mind and collect their thoughts (e.g., how are questions asked, what model or time is provided to allow students to discuss); c) what seems to be the emotional mood of the students (e.g. enthusiastic, anxious, low mood, reflective, engaged);

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and d) how do students seem to receive and process the exercises and theories, in the way they are conveyed? The protocol was designed in a way that the assistant could describe the more factual information shown in the left-hand column in Table 1, while the more reflective information is presented in the right-hand column.

Table 1.
Example of the field note protocol

Descriptive notes	Reflective notes
Monday 10.15 am The teacher is presenting exercise 1 while standing in front of the classroom. The teacher asked four interactive questions.	Monday 11.00 am The students seemed excited in doing exercise 2 about conceptual design. There were many smiles and students were actively engaged with each other. The students were gathering around a joint chart paper, and actively writing and drawing with markers.

During the in-depth, hour-long qualitative interviews we aimed to explore the perspectives of student participants and academic staff concerning the impact the CCIS course had on features related to interactional classroom justice. We opted for semi-structured interviews where we explored broadly how participants experienced the interactions (e.g., between peers, as well as between students and teachers), roles and structure of the CCIS, as well as how these interactions differed from their usual classroom experiences. We also explored the impact of these interactions on their learning experiences. The interview protocol was semi-structured, allowing the conversation to be partly guided by the interviewer and partly remain flexible to capture unexpected insights (see Ahlin, 2019).

Finally, the focus group discussion (FGD) was used to gain insights on the same questions but allowing the discussion among participants to help elicit new insights. FGDs can be a useful tool to understand the attitudes and perspectives of participants around a certain topic, particularly uncovering why they experienced their reality in a particular way (Nyumba et al., 2018). Discussing the differences in perspectives in the format of a group discussion can thus bring up different and complementary data to the observations and individual interviews.

Analysis

All FGDs and interviews were audio recorded and the data were transcribed verbatim. The data from the three sources were triangulated to develop our understanding on the impact of the intervention on interactional classroom justice. We used a deductive thematic analysis process as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 86), which aims to compare participants' narrative accounts by constant analysis and identification of patterns or themes in the qualitative data. Braun and Clarke (2006) advise six phases of analysis, including a) familiarization with the data; b) generation of initial codes; c) searching for themes; d) reviewing themes; e) defining and naming themes; and f) producing the report. Two researchers first familiarized themselves with the data, reading and re-reading the transcripts and noting down first thoughts. They initially coded the data independently,

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creating relevant codes for each interesting feature throughout the transcripts in a systematic way. The researchers' coded data were then brought together and the codes were collated into potential themes (such as 'critical thinking') to create a joint coding list (see Table 2). The codes and themes were refined through ongoing analysis, going back also to the original research questions. The final analysis from the coding process was discussed before writing up the results.

Table 2.
Coding List Example

Theme	Subtheme	Code	Data excerpt
1. Igniting critical thinking	Expanding sense of ownership of learning process Support and excitement to think critically Increasing trust and self-confidence to think independently Better discussion and analytical skills Teacher facilitates rather than teaches. …(continued)	- More student autonomy - Longer responses to questions - Student-led conversation - Asking why and how questions - System thinking …(continued)	Student: "*We are not used to being so provoked to think in class, and now I feel that my brain is challenged all the time.*" Student: "*I feel very mature suddenly, as if I'm actually learning now and my thoughts matter. It's very exciting.*" ...(continued)
2. Personal development and responsibility	Student taking responsibility for societal issues Skill development for engagement in real-world problems Overcoming personal and emotional discomforts Collaborating and conversing with various actors …(continued)	- Being able to converse and ask questions to NGO and company leaders - Conducting interviews - Self-perceptions improving - More awareness of the world ...(continued)	Student: *"I'm so interested in this now… I feel we should think more constructively about how we can solve this. I think we can do more."* ...(continued)
3. Self-awareness and social relations	Emotional check-in and check-out Peer relations becoming stronger ...(continued)	Students feeling understood Less anxiety and tiredness ...(continued)	Student: *"I'd never thought of my university as a place to make friends ... but I really feel that I've met someone who gets me, and I'm really thankful for making such dear friends."* …(continued)

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4.	Feasibility	Faculty readiness and motivation Structural, logistical, and institutional challenges ...(continued)	Uncertainty in staff about skills for co-creation Lack of confidence in staff that they can convince students ...(continued)	Staff: *"We need time and training to get better at this"* ...(continued)

Ethics

All participants gave their informed consent to participate in the course, as well as the related qualitative research, after the details of the study, including their right to withdraw at any given moment, had been explained to them. The Ethics Committee of the VU University, Amsterdam (Betchie), waived the need for ethics approval.

Findings

When looking at how both students and teachers described their experiences with the CCIS course, and reflecting on classroom observations, it becomes clear that the way the course was organized offered a notable shift in how students felt encouraged to think and learn. Instead of primarily receiving knowledge, students said that they felt continuously pressed to play a more autonomous role, with explicit acknowledgement of their own thought processes, their existing knowledge, their respective roles in society, and developing analytical abilities. Through the TDR component of the course, where students collaborated with peers to investigate a complex societal issue, they were placed at the center of the knowledge-creation process. This approach had a significant impact, fostering confidence, ownership, and a sense that their contributions mattered both within the classroom and beyond it.

Igniting Critical Independent Thinking

Observational notes show that students gradually took more ownership of the classroom dialogues and their own learning. In group exercises, students were encouraged to examine problems from different perspectives and to question underlying causes and consequences together. This is an important phase in the TDR process, where students jointly work on defining the problem, mapping how the various aspects of the issue are linked. For instance, with regard to the youth criminality case, students deployed, for example, pedagogic, socioeconomic, legal, and political lenses to begin grasping the complexity of their chosen problem in India. Early on, many students tended to answer in short statements such as "I don't know," but gradually their contributions became more detailed and complex. This was supported by the way facilitators invited them to keep asking "why," and structured tools (e.g., post-its and mapping exercises) that gave students the confidence to explore their reasoning together.

Students described this approach as both demanding and empowering. One female student noted: "We are not used to being so provoked to think in class, and now I feel that my brain is challenged all the time." Another commented: "I feel very mature suddenly, as if I'm actually learning now and my thoughts matter. It's very exciting." These reactions

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suggest that the course not only supported students in terms of developing analytical skills but also gave them a sense that their own ideas were valued.

The shift was also evident in classroom discussions. Where early exchanges were sometimes emotional and reactive, students later showed more nuanced debating skills, and greater ability to de-escalate conflict. Instead of expressing frustration through personal statements, they began framing their contributions in terms of broader societal consequences, allowing conversations to remain constructive. This was noticed, for instance, in a debate that took place around a structured exercise where students were asked to think about the societal values underlying the complex issue of the care of elderly people in an increasingly modernizing India. Students were asked to work out how values and norms play a role in this context (e.g., values of tradition, care for each other, collective vs. individualism, autonomy, freedom, and their respective norms). The discussion began in a somewhat emotional fashion. While this is not wrong, and a good start for further exploration, it was encouraging to see that students were stimulating each other to clarify the thoughts behind their statements with more clarity, asking "why" and "how" questions, before offering other angles on the issue. It seems that they were already taking over the facilitators' behavior here:

> "I really think it's ridiculous how they treat elderly in Western countries. India should not go after that model." (Student #1, male)
> "Interesting and understandable starting point. Who wants to respond to this?" (Facilitator)
> "I am curious to know what makes you say this? Why do you not want India to go after the Western model?" (Student #6, female)
> "It is just that I believe that the fact that elderly have always been respectfully treated in our country should not be lost. They have given everything to their children and grandchildren, and at the end of their lives, they are just put in an institution." (Student #1, male)
> "I totally see that point, and that also breaks my heart, but at the same time, I think that such institutions, when the care is well organized, can also play an important role in lowering the burden for the respective family members. It is really hard to both raise children and work, and in many families both men and women work nowadays, and also take good care of the elderly. Perhaps it is inevitable, with the economic pressures, to distribute these tasks." (Student #6, female)
> "I think it is complex. It is also hard that we are all becoming much older than we did before. So, there is a longer caretaking time. Perhaps it is just hard to sustain." (Student #5, female)
> "Hm, but I understand the first impulse of student 1. I wonder if there are alternative ways to deal with this problem. If we do not want to put our elderly in institutions, but also cannot really care for them ourselves, are there other ways to lessen the burden?"

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The dialogue above illustrates the way students were gradually learning to address complex problems. It is imaginable, and this is what the interviews with students reflected, that they were becoming increasingly excited about their learning path, as their ideas were becoming more structured, more nuanced, clearer, validating the importance of their contributions. One male student said, for instance:

> "I really liked the exercise on norms and values, because it made me see so clearly why we all behave in certain ways, and how persistent we can be in our behaviors if we are run by these values. It helps to understand this."

Also, as can be observed in the dialogue, the discussion and knowledge creation were centered around the students, with little focus on what the facilitator thought about the matter. The facilitators' job was to follow the comprehension and participation of all the students in the group and perhaps steer the conversation toward areas that had not yet been fully addressed, leaving most of the learning process in the hands of the students themselves. One of the facilitators described this process as helpful for her as well saying:

> "I learn a lot from the students through the interactions we facilitate. They have such diverse thoughts and perspectives, ways of working, which this course gives an opportunity to observe, more than if we would just 'teach'."

Personal Development and Responsibility

A central feature of the course was that students bore responsibility for their own research projects. They formulated research questions, structured interviews, and managed their respective data. This responsibility motivated them to engage more actively, and to see themselves as capable of creating meaningful work. As one lecturer put it:

> "Current educational formats provide students with knowledge, but little context to apply their own knowledge and be part of it. This course helps students to use their knowledge, for instance on communication, in various settings, from NGO people to CEOs of big companies. I see that this helps, because it accelerates what we want in students: for them to develop the skills to function in this world and add to it."

Because of the TDR element in the course, students were also trained, through role-plays, to conduct their own interviews. They practiced with different settings and roles (e.g., a journalist interviewing a poor fisher about the quality of the water in which he was catching fish vs. interviewing the CEO of a large oil shipping company about the same concern). Again, students were given the responsibility to clarify to themselves what they wanted to understand better, what information they required, and how to proceed toward exploring solutions. This continued in their interactions with real interviewees in the context of juvenile crime and the education–industry gap. For example, in a dialogue with a CEO, students respectfully questioned the causes of the gap for graduates and challenged the emphasis on grades as a recruitment filter. Afterwards, one student who had been shy at the beginning of the course reflected: "I'm so interested in this now… I feel we should think more constructively about how we can solve this. I think we can do more."

While students initially also found it challenging, the respectful and attentive responses of their peers and teachers created a supportive atmosphere in which they felt

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encouraged to take some risks. The observation notes describe how students listened carefully and showed interest in each other's work, which contributed to a sense of safety and collective trust.

Self-awareness and Social Relations

The course also created opportunities for students to reflect on themselves and their relationships with others. Regular check-in and check-out rounds allowed them to share how they were feeling—whether anxious, tired, or enthusiastic—with no obligation to disclose more than they wished. Students reported that this helped them relate to one another and to distribute tasks more effectively in their teams.

Several students said they developed deeper connections with classmates, in some cases feeling that they got to know their peers better. For those who began the course feeling shy or isolated, the open atmosphere made it easier to participate. One student explained: "I'd never thought of my university as a place to make friends... but I really feel that I've met someone who gets me, and I'm really thankful for making such dear friends." Others described the course as a space where they could express personal insecurities and still feel accepted.

Encounters with external communities, such as visits to child centers, further broadened students' awareness of society. These experiences gave them a stronger sense of responsibility and the possibility for social change. As one student reflected: "Before, especially as Management students, we're more thinking in terms of 'I want to be the CEO of a company, I want to do marketing, making money', but now I can think about working with NGOs maybe… It made me think about society in a way that I usually do not."

Feasibility: Implementation, Practicality, and Integration

Asking teachers about their perspectives on what role TDR and transformative-education-based teaching could play in Indian HE institutions to create more interactional classroom justice, most were optimistic about the potential of wider implementation, pointing out that many teachers are already motivated to make their classrooms more engaging and student-centered. As one lecturer put it:

> "Teachers here really want to do something that speaks to the students, and want to do it more creatively. And for that, they look out for more tools. They will definitely be open to do this course, as well as the type of teaching that it involves."

At the same time, the teaching staff highlighted some challenges. Many lecturers had limited prior exposure to interactive teaching methods, both as learners and as educators. Taking on a facilitative role, where students' voices and ideas take a central place, may therefore require considerable training and practice. Participants emphasized that future teacher preparation should give lecturers a chance to experience this kind of learning for themselves, so they can appreciate how it feels to be supported, challenged, and respected as an active participant.

Practical barriers were also noted. Many classrooms are designed for large groups and fixed seating arrangements, which restrict opportunities for group work and movement. While staff suggested that this could be worked around by using pair work or small-group

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tasks, they acknowledged that physical spaces need to better accommodate interactive methods if they are to become a regular part of teaching.

For broader integration, staff stressed that the university is well positioned to adopt such a course because of its independent status and openness to curriculum changes. They also noted that there is already momentum in society—among students, parents, and employers—for a shift toward education that prepares students more holistically. To make this sustainable, however, teachers need time and resources to engage in their own research and professional growth. As one staff member explained:

> "I believe that a supportive research culture will strengthen the teacher's own interest and analytical skills, which they can apply in their classroom. Actually, many of our staff are hired based on their background and interest in research. But for this we also need the required time and continuous training."

Discussion*:* Linking TDR, Transformative Education, and Interactional Classroom Justice

Redistributing Epistemic Authority

The literature on classroom justice conceptualizes interactional justice in terms of respectful treatment, sincerity, and transparent instruction (Colquitt et al., 2001; Chory, 2007). Our findings suggest that this view, while very meaningful, is also incomplete. The most significant changes observed in the CCIS course were both that students felt respected, and that they were positioned as legitimate contributors of knowledge. In other words, interactional justice in this context was realized through the "redistribution of epistemic authority"; a repositioning of who is entitled to define questions, generate insights, and shape what counts as valid knowledge. In that sense, interactional classroom justice also requires that students be entrusted with epistemic responsibility (Ruthven & Hofmann, 2016). The shift is evident in how students began to frame questions, negotiate meaning, engage stakeholders, and co-construct interpretations, acts that have traditionally been reserved, implicitly, to the instructor.

This extension of interactional justice, which is justice enacted not just in tone and fairness but also in the redistribution of intellectual participation, resonates with emerging work on epistemic justice in educational settings (e.g., Fricker, 2007; Ruthven et al., 2016; Babu, 2025; Parmar, 2024). For instance, Wood and McAteer (2023) show how teachers and assistants can moderate epistemic injustice by validating students' voices even in constrained settings. In the CCIS context, facilitators did more than moderate, as in the design and structure of the course students' voices were indispensable in defining the inquiry and research process. This is also an important advance beyond the solutions proposed in the NEP 2020 to address the legacy of colonial rule in contemporary Indian education systems (see Parmar, 2024).

TDR and Transformation-based Education as Justice-oriented Education

The CCIS course is a clear example of TDR-based education as a justice-oriented pedagogy. TDR emphasizes co-design, co-research, co-production, and boundary-crossing between academia and practice (Horn et al., 2024). In the CCIS course, student teams did not simply apply pre-ordained theoretical frameworks to societal issues; rather they negotiated

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problem definitions, interviewed real stakeholders, iterated their models, and mediated between academic, social, and policy discourses. In doing so, they experienced the messiness and uncertainty of knowledge production, rather than only its polished end-products, as part of their learning experience. As expressed in the metaphor provided by Schön (1983) of the "swampy lowlands" of complex problems, students should get the opportunity to enter the messy, unpredictable nature of real-world problems, and practice navigating this complexity to work toward more robust ideas and solutions. The literature on TDR often highlights this potential for transformative change in higher education, not just for students' content knowledge, but also for their identities, values, and commitment to action (Horn et al., 2024). Our findings echo this: many students spoke of "maturity," agency, and possibility of social engagement (e.g., shifting from business-related career ambitions toward interest in NGOs). In this sense, the mechanism of transformation is intimately bound up with justice: the change happened not through top-down "inspiration," but via relational dynamics of trust, respect, and shared inquiry.

From a transformative education perspective (Mezirow, 1997; Cranton, 2006), the course cultivated critical self-reflection, dialogic interaction, and the capacity to reframe assumptions. For example, the value-norm exercise about care for elderly people asks students to examine deeply held cultural assumptions and contrast them with alternative social models. This kind of reflective dissonance is central to the transformation of perspectives, and it was facilitated precisely through the respectful, iterative discourse practices the course embedded, and facilitators emulated.

Importantly, transformative education emphasizes that learners can become active knowledge agents rather than recipients of knowledge. The CCIS findings show how students gradually enacted this agency, as seen when they began to challenge each other or external interviewees, or to steer group discussion toward unexplored angles. The shift from "I don't know" to "I think…" is, in many ways, the visible trace of such authorship.

While TDR and transformative education provided the scaffolding for the CCIS course, the interactional justice lens demonstrates how the important shifts mentioned above were enabled. The consistent practice of listening attentively, thanking students for their contributions, prompting further exploration rather than dismissing ideas, and avoiding "right/wrong" judgments build a climate in which students felt their reasoning was worthy of engagement. This allowed them to risk tentative thinking. The mix of small-group work, pair discussion, role-plays, and creative tasks allowed quieter students more entry points. These modalities prevented louder voices from dominating and gave everyone multiple routes to contribute (see also Sanako, 2024). Through check-ins and reflection, students were "normed" into a growth orientation. The respect observed among peers (listening attentively, asking clarifying questions) reinforced safety and relational trust. Finally, by engaging with external stakeholders (CEOs, NGOs, child centers), students' sense of epistemic boundaries expanded. These dialogues repositioned them from being passive observers to interlocutors, reinforcing that their ideas had legitimacy beyond the classroom.

The Potential of Normalizing Alternative Forms of Education in the Global South

While the value of these specific alternative forms of teaching has been described, the findings also elicit a number of important challenges. Teachers noted entrenched habits of deference, where students were initially reluctant to question or interrupt. This illustrates

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how the redistribution of epistemic authority requires not just structural design but time, rehearsal, and patience. This is also reflected in studies conducted in other non-Western contexts, such as in Lahore, Pakistan (Tahira et al., 2023). This study argued that it is probably unrealistic to assume that simply introducing an interactive form of education means that students will immediately show agency. Similarly, Tepsuriwong et al. (2013), in their study in Thailand on implementing a more peer-based assessment format, found that some patterns of authority can be deeply ingrained and meet resistance when trying to change them.

Moreover, physical infrastructure (fixed benches, lectern-style classrooms) constrained interactional possibility, mirroring challenges that many universities face in attempting to adopt participatory pedagogies. Even the best design can be hampered by spatial rigidity. These concerns are echoed in teachers' responses in a large national survey in India, where 12% found the infrastructure and furniture of Indian school buildings insufficiently conducive to interactive and group-based education formats (Kaur & Bansal, 2019). A final tension lies in the preparedness of faculties. Some tutors or lecturers lacked prior experience in facilitation, expressive listening, or letting go of control over the content. Immersive "train-the-trainer" models may help here, as well as supporting teachers in conducting more research themselves.

Beyond India, this case exemplifies how embedding interactional classroom justice in transdisciplinary, transformative learning can empower HE institutions in (non)-Western contexts to nurture critical thinkers, collaborative problem-solvers, and socially engaged leaders of the future. While the need for interactional justice is particularly acute in Indian higher education, where rote memorization and hierarchical instruction remain pervasive, similar concerns have been raised in Western contexts. Research both in the United States and in Europe has shown that students often perceive injustice in classrooms when their voices are marginalized, when teachers dominate any discussion, or when questioning is discouraged (Chory, 2007; Freeman et al., 2014; Paulsel & Chory-Assad, 2005). Such parallels suggest that interactional justice should not be viewed as being exclusive to non-Western systems but rather as a global challenge. What distinguishes the Indian context is the intensity of hierarchical norms and the institutional weight of examinations, which make the redistribution of epistemic authority both more difficult and more transformative.

Concluding Remarks

Our study advances the literature in two ways. First, it links classroom justice theory to transdisciplinary and transformative education, demonstrating that reforms toward inquiry-based learning work well only when fairness and justice in communication are embedded in pedagogy. Second, it provides an empirical study case from the Global South, taking the discourse of classroom justice beyond Western contexts. By combining a justice-oriented lens with TDR and transformative education, this study illustrates that changing pedagogy alone is not enough. For deeper change, classrooms need to reallocate not only where knowledge is sent and received, or reduce hierarchical power relations, but also stimulate the redistribution of intellectual authority. That involves treating students not just as audiences, but as potential knowers; trusted interlocutors in co-creating meaning about the world. In the context of Indian HE and its longstanding traditions of rote-based

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teaching, the CCIS offers a helpful example: interactions matter deeply, not just as a "nice extra" but as the very medium through which justice in learning can be practiced.

In further research, it would be useful to examine longer-term effects. How do students sustain their new voice in subsequent, more conventional, courses? Also, comparative studies across different disciplines could reveal how strongly disciplinary norms resist or facilitate epistemic redistribution. Another promising direction is to analyze how intersectionalities of class, language, economic status, or gender mediate students' willingness to stake knowledge claims, drawing on work on epistemic agency and power dynamics (e.g., Baze et al., 2025), which was not considered in great detail in this case study.

In conclusion, this case study of CCIS illustrates how TDR and transformative-education-based approaches can move beyond abstract ideals to create tangible opportunities for interactional classroom justice, even in contexts marked by hierarchical authority and rote-learning traditions. This approach may also make a significant contribution to nurturing higher education students' leadership and management skills for today's world; fostering an innovative growth mindset and the capacity to share authority with other thinkers, so as to better match graduates with the job market and improve their ability to address important societal challenges (NEP, 2020).

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Human Participants

This study was conducted in accordance with relevant ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation. Anonymity and confidentiality of all participants were ensured.

Originality Note

This manuscript is original, has not been published previously, and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

The author declares that [ChatGPT-5] was used for drafting an early version of the article, just for the purpose of improving the language of the manuscript. No further use of these technologies are also confirmed by the author to write different parts of the research.

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