

Tribute to Our Colleague and Friend Vanessa Merckel from UJ Colleagues

How does one pay tribute to someone like Ness? For those of us who worked with her, and there are so many, our lives have been so much richer. Vanessa was a valued colleague, well-loved and a passionate teacher who modelled what it means to embrace and practice socially just pedagogies. She worked with enthusiasm with academics as they embarked on and continue their journeys as teachers in higher education. An activist for all her life, she treasured above all the values of our democracy and pursued social justice in all aspects of her life and she ensured that the students and staff that she engaged with emulate this in their own contexts. She loved working with staff and students and missed the face-to-face engagement when we were forced online. Ness hated not being in the same room as her colleagues. She actively engaged with multiple voices, encouraged rich debates and was forthright in all her engagements.

One of her students/colleagues Zainu says 'She embodied to me what being a teacher truly was. More than in her words, her actions were those of a caring, understanding friend who looked at us as complete human beings, not students. She was a champion of social justice and it reflected in her being when she engaged with us as her students. She resonated love to all who came into her presence.

Louder than life, Vanessa had the uncanny ability to make fun of everyone including herself, and everything, without ever being 'rude'. She gave real meaning to speaking 'truth to power'. She believed strongly that the key to fostering deep, engaged learning was rooted in an epistemology of love which was the subject of her brilliantly written doctoral thesis. Ness, we are so glad you got to see your reports and that they confirmed that your work is awesome. While we mourn you we are so happy that we have your work to draw on. We celebrate you, your work and contribution.

Her contributions to the scholarship of teaching and learning extend beyond UJ as she played an active role in HELTASA (Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa) and the TAU (Teaching Advancement at University) programme which ran nationally. Vanessa created a definitive footprint in the realm of teaching and learning.

Her TAU colleagues have this to say: 'During the first week of TAU 3 we acutely felt her absence from our engagements. She reminded us that social justice is not just a theory but should be embodied in ways we teach learn and interact in higher education'.

Ingrid writes 'What a beautiful, caring, generous soul she was and is, and how she loved laughing and sharing and Jazz music! And so sad that she should pass just as her PhD is complete and examined – how I would have and will still cheer at her graduation, but sadly in her absence. Gosh, we will all miss her for many moons to come, and we are so grateful for past times shared and for all our wonderful memories of the woman who refused to "shut up and wear beige"! There are so many Ness-isms that we will remember the 'shut up and wear beige' was one of them. But we all know that even though she said 'I'll just shut up and wear beige – she never did. That's what we love about Ness. Ness always showed up and was present. She believed in giving her all. There was no short-cuts with Ness. Whenever we needed her she was always willing to be fully present – the other Ness-ism is 'I may not be all there but I am there'. I want to say thank you to Mickey, Tams, Alex and Andre for sharing Ness with us

Taken too soon, DR Vanessa Merckel will be loved and remembered always by her colleagues and friends. We keep her family in our thoughts and prayers in this difficult time.