

Ways of knowing and the possible contributions of curriculum to the decolonising project

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1. Introduction

In different forms and across the years, the call for curriculum transformation in higher education has been heard throughout the postcolonial world, both from within and outside the university. This is seen as one component of a broader postcolonial project which includes economic, political and cultural transformation to allow a more fitting and more respectful engagement between the new nation-state and its colonial past. The volume of this call for curriculum transformation has significantly increased in South Africa over the past months, very much as a part of the broader university student protests around access to higher education, affordability of fees and the operational character of South African universities. In this article, I try to explore what this may mean in a post-apartheid South Africa, particularly from the perspective of the provision of education to the coming generations of students.

My first argument is that the idea of 'decolonising the curriculum' is improperly conceptualised and as a consequence, inappropriate in its expectations. I take the view that the question is not 'how do we decolonise the curriculum?' but rather, 'how do we construct curriculum in higher education to positively contribute to the decolonisation project, particularly in the complex task of decolonising minds?'. The second part of this article reflects on the idea that the learning needs of our students are best served when we expose them to as many ways of knowing as possible. In this conceptualisation, curriculum development that acknowledges different ways of knowing in developing the habits of mind of our students is an essential starting point for the contribution that higher education may make to the decolonising project.

An apologia: I have struggled without success to fully understand the call for a decolonised curriculum because I have not heard a coherently articulated argument which explains the concept. Perhaps this is because this call often comes from a group that has more the status of a social 'movement'. This usually means that many people with very different contextual interests can claim to speak on behalf

of the 'movement' and it may well be the malleability of meaning that gives the concept its more general appeal. My comments are therefore based on what I think I hear people saying about the decolonised curriculum rather than a direct response to any particular academic postulate or argument. Importantly, I hope that readers will find this a useful contribution to a developing understanding of the role and place of higher education curriculum in bringing more positive meaning to individual and social development.

2. Concerns with the Idea of 'Decolonising the Curriculum'

2.1 Confusing curriculum with content of the curriculum

Such as I understand it, I have four primary concerns with the call for decolonising the curriculum in higher education. My main concern is with the first-principle error that I hear in the call for a 'decolonised curriculum' argument: that it considers 'curriculum' to be synonymous with 'content of the curriculum'. The call is for more Fanon and less Stewart-Mill, more Achebe and less Shakespeare, etc. But 'curriculum' is much more than the content or subject material that is taught in a course and includes consideration of aspects such as the skills and competence to be developed in students; the coherence of this development across the modules that make up a qualification; the pedagogical approach to be used, and assessment instruments that will allow not only development but also judgement of student learning. Content provides a context for these considerations and content on its own is not sufficient to induct the student into the fundamental principles and ways of reasoning in a particular discipline.

In this sense, those calling for a decolonised curriculum make the same mistake that academics often make about teaching and learning – that anyone who has at some stage in their lives been a receiver (or more often, a victim) of teaching is, by this fact alone, also a specialist in teaching. It is this feature that so strongly characterises our discussions about the crisis in teaching and learning in South African higher education. Like teaching, curriculum is a subject for application of a specialist mind – or at least a mind that is sensitive to the important factors that influence a successful curriculum and one that knows when to seek the advice of specialists on the subject. To cast content as being the same as curriculum is to misunderstand – and so trivialise – a complex academic process that, when done properly, is focused on development of the way in which students and graduates engage in the world of ideas within their chosen disciplines.

2.2 Focus on the humanities and social sciences

Having made this first analytical error, the path of the 'decolonised curriculum' argument must necessarily lead to the area of my second concern. The call for decolonising the curriculum is almost entirely structured around the course content of programmes in humanities and social sciences. On this matter, I am with Isaiah Berlin (1974) – I have yet to be convinced that the great traditions of human intellectual endeavour can so neatly be divided into the 'sciences' and the 'humanities'. What seems to have started as an institutional administrative division has solidified into disciplinary fences that limit the flow of ideas and seriously hobble the contribution of intellectual effort to real human development. All have been hurt in this process. The physical sciences have focused on development of specialists and 'technocrats' with little sense of the impacts of their models and algorithms on

human development. On the other hand, one of the more significant threats to democracy in the modern world is the low levels of scientific literacy of our human sciences graduates and the ease with which they hand their future over to technocrats on important questions of the relationships between science and society.

It is not difficult to recognise the culturally and politically loaded spaces in which the physical sciences operate – both the so-called pure sciences and the applied sciences. As Karl Popper (1999) alerts us, the ways in which the empirically observable world is interpreted is heavily influenced by our prior assumptions about functional relationships between different phenomena. To illustrate this point, during the early 1900s, paleo-science research evidence was interpreted by people like Jan Smuts¹ mainly in term of racial ‘otherness’. Although he was open to the idea that human origins may be in Africa, he argued that local San people may well be a “deviant branch” of human development. He proposes that “[o]ur Bushmen are nothing but living fossils whose ‘contemporaries’ disappeared from Europe many thousands of years ago” (cited in Dubow 2007). It is not difficult to recognise how such a statement can be taken as scientific justification for racism. It took a long time and much hard work to expose what was, at best, a misinterpretation of the evidence and, at worst, plain scientific dishonesty aimed at sustaining ideas of racial superiority. We think that we have a better interpretation today – but this may also be flawed. My point is that the assumptions for interpreting scientific observations are socially constructed and, like all knowledge systems, contestable. Whatever we choose to call the process, curricula in the natural and the applied sciences are equally in need of transformation.

I was taught civil engineering at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in the late 1970s to early 1980s, at a time when the national design code had lower water-pressure requirements for black residential areas, compared with white areas – as one example of the depth of reach of apartheid. When I returned to Wits a few years later as an emerging academic, I recognised that it would be wrong to hold my lecturers accountable for the approach of the design codes since they did not write the regulations. However, I did hold them accountable for not telling their students that the Standard Building Regulations at the time did not represent proper civil Engineering. In this sense, their students were undereducated as civil engineers. It was this argument that led to the first introduction of a compulsory course in Development Engineering at Wits Civil Engineering in 1992. This was an important curriculum transformation moment and one that may well be thought of as a ‘decolonisation’ initiative.

At the time, however, we considered it to be a necessary part of the education of our students as civil engineers who are sensitive to the development context of their studies. Of course, the revised curriculum continued to ensure that our graduates are able to express themselves as competent engineers anywhere in the world. The alternative would be to graduate parochial engineers who are as undereducated as their apartheid counterparts but in a different context.

At this point, there are two aspects of academic attitudes towards the development of knowledge and ways of knowing that deserve mention. I have had occasion to meet academics who take it for granted,

¹ Jan Smuts was a writer and philosopher and served as Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa from 1919-1924 and 1939-1948.

for example, that Isaac Newton was the first person to use differential calculus methods; that modern medical science was developed in Europe; or that the only way to teach music is by exposing students to Bach, Beethoven, Berlioz and Brahms. This is a level of silliness that need not detain us unduly – but I raise it to alert us to the fact that we should not be naive in believing that there are no such academics at our universities.

2.3 Unjustifiable authority to the curriculum

A third concern with the call for a decolonised curriculum is that it seeks to give more authority to the curriculum than it deserves. The argument seems to run along the lines of ‘our students are only able to think and be what the curriculum allows them to think and be’. If this is true, then the question must relate to the quality of the academic programme and the ways in which intellectual competence is developed in our students. If students leave our academic programmes in a condition where they think and be only what the curriculum has allowed them to think and be, such students have clearly been improperly educated, regardless of the subject content of the programme. It is a curious thing for me to think back on how much I was taught in the applied sciences parts of my undergraduate studies that is today acknowledged as empirically derived ‘best guesses’ that often led to poorly understood or wrong answers. A curriculum that parades as dogma, or as custodian of the truth, should find no place at an institution of learning that claims the title ‘University’.

To be sure, social context also plays an important role here. The curriculum at white universities in the colonial and apartheid periods cannot be asked to take all the blame for the distorted social understandings of their graduates. Many of our graduates will take compulsory courses in ethics and go on to do terrible things in their professional lives – we cannot blame the curriculum alone for this.

2.4 Separating the African experience from the human condition

My last concern with the idea of ‘decolonising the curriculum’ is that it sounds like an attempt to present the African experience as unique and so remove us – as Africans – from the human condition. This tone of voice is heard across disciplines in calls for ‘African Sociology’, ‘African Philosophy’ or ‘African Science’. I am reminded here of Wole Soyinka’s response to the romanticising argument of the Negritude Movement: “A tiger does not proclaim his tigrity: he pounces” – a response strongly shared by Es’kia Mphahlele and Ali Mazrui (cited in Mazrui 1979). It is also worth taking a mirror-reflection from Césaire’s caution against “European reductionism” which has the potential to “... amputate man from the human and isolate him, permanently, in a suicidal pride if not in a rational and scientific form of barbarism” (cited in Mbembe 2017).

Great scholarship is marked by its ability to engage critically with important matters of the human condition – across constructed identity boundaries. For example the township² narrative can be found in *King Lear*; Mexican peasants were stimulated to rebel against their bad government by listening to stories of the Russian revolution; and Nelson Mandela’s name is now heard in folk songs sung in rural

² For international readers: townships are poorly serviced and high-density urban residential areas in South African cities, demarcated for black people and further separated by the broad racial subcategories of blackness in the apartheid imagination.

India. In matters of the relationship between power and powerlessness, Africa has much to teach the rest of the world – but also much to learn from the rest of the world.

One of the fine but – to my mind – underrated scholars from our continent, Cheikh Anta Diop (1974:n.p), cautions us to avoid an intellectually shallow approach to the decolonising project. In the preface to his book on the African origins of civilisation, he makes the point that post-apartheid South Africans would do well to heed:

When they [colonisers] explain their own historical past or study their languages, that seems normal. Yet, when an African does likewise to help reconstruct the national personality of his people, distorted by colonialism, that is considered backward or alarming. We contend that such a study is the point of departure for the cultural revolution properly understood. All the headlong flights of certain infantile leftists who try to bypass this effort can be explained by intellectual inertia, inhibition or incompetence. The most brilliant pseudo-revolutionary eloquence ignores that need which must be met if our peoples are to be reborn culturally and politically. In truth, many Africans find this vision too beautiful to be true; not so long ago some of them could not break with the idea that Blacks are non-existent culturally and historically. It was necessary to put up with the cliché that Africans had no history and try to start from there to build something modestly.

And again:

It could seem too tempting to delude the masses engaged in a struggle for national independence by taking liberties with scientific truth, by unveiling a mythical, embellished past (Diop 1974:n.p).

3. Possible curriculum contributions to the decolonising project

The concerns that I have expressed so far about the notion of ‘decolonising the curriculum’ are not intended to deny the fact that there is an important decolonisation project afoot – and one that continues to be necessary in much of the colonised world, including South Africa. Equally, there most certainly is a need for curriculum transformation throughout the South African education system. In the narrow context of the contribution of universities to this matter, as I indicated earlier, it seems that the question is better stated as: ‘how do we construct curriculum in higher education to positively contribute to the decolonisation project, particularly in the complex task of decolonising minds?’ I do not have ready answers to this question but I would like to propose some foundational principles that may guide us in developing proper responses.

The starting point must be to acknowledge that the learning needs of our students are best served when we expose them to as many ways of knowing as possible. I add the phrase ‘as possible’ to indicate that there are limits to what can be achieved in this regard. These limits lie within our students’ chosen discipline of study, the time that they have to spend with us and the competencies we intend to develop in our students to make them positively contributing graduates.

It is important to understand these limitations because it reminds us that no individual or institution or, indeed, no society can claim to be the custodian of the full body of ‘correct’ human understanding.

The very significant contributions of Greek and Roman civilisations to human understanding in areas like mathematics, law and philosophy were made at a time when they believed that lightning was caused by argumentative gods. As a good example of a paradigm shift in its correct sense, the entire theoretical framework for explaining parts of the observable world was ruined when society agreed to replace the many-god model with monotheism.

Equally, it is possible that our graduates will go on to be very competent accountants or sociologists without being able to explain the chemistry of digestion or the reason they put on a jersey in the morning. The empirical evidence that 'if I don't eat, I'll die' or 'I feel more comfortable when I wear a jersey' is sufficient to allow them to be fully functional graduates. Of course, the empirical explanation is not sufficient if the chosen discipline of the student is in physiology or thermodynamics. But then, the student in thermodynamics can rest comfortable in the knowledge that they do not have to bother about the complexities of, say, determining depreciation values. We would all do well to remember that the best of science is no more than engaging in the difficult work of trying to find better wrong answers.

A further foundational principle in transforming our curriculum is to accept that, if the university is to stand for the universal, then the monocultural learning institution cannot but undereducate its students. To be true to our academic mission, which is always to try to give meaning to complexity, we must remain open to the possibility that greater meaning emerges when we are willing to be led by the hand to gaze upon a problem from a sometimes unfamiliar or even uncomfortable direction.

The world of complex number theory is a useful illustration here. This is a branch of mathematics that is built on the seemingly ridiculous foundational argument that the equation: $1 + x^2 = 0$ has a solution. It requires us to suspend belief and accept that the square root of -1 exists, even if only as an 'imaginary' concept that constitutes a different way of thinking about numbers. While complex number theory may at first glance seem like intellectual game-playing, the foundations of quantum mechanics rely on this concept and there are many real problems in areas like electrical power supply or electronics that cannot be understood without a detour through this 'other' way of knowing numbers. My own work in the computational analysis of heat flow in concrete has forced me to suspend linear understandings of clock-time as a variable – in much the same way as scholars in music are often obliged to do.

To extend this illustration: I was introduced to complex number theory as a second-year engineering student, at a time when black students were not allowed to live in the 'white' university residences or surrounding areas. This meant a train ride back and forth each day, alongside working adults who were making the same cramped journey to and from their workplaces. I recall having a nightmare at the time: I dreamt that I had explained to the workers on the train that the square root of -1 exists. They got very angry and threw me off the moving train. I woke up with a start, just as my head was about to hit the rail tracks. The point of my short story is this: new ways of knowing will frighten us and we have to develop – in ourselves and in our students – the courage to deal with the unfamiliar. Without this mental courage, we can make no claims to the title 'academic' or 'intellectual'.

Equally, we cannot expect to teach social sciences to students in this Southern African, multilingual part of the world if the lecturer is a monolingual English speaker. Such a lecturer would lack both the

words and fundamental understanding of aspects like family and community connectedness – and would therefore miss a large part of another way of knowing that is certainly in the body of knowledge that our students arrive with into our classes. If the lecturer teaching (say) anthropology, sociology or development theory classes knows only one word for ‘uncle’ or ‘grandmother’, or uses the same pronoun (‘you’) for both a child and an elder person, the lecturer is the ‘academically disadvantaged’ person in the class and may well need a bridging course to make up for the deficit. Indeed, in the range of use of words for family and community connectedness, the shallowness of English places it in the minority in the family of human languages. (As an aside, there is much wrong with a world in which people who can claim multiple generations of presence in South Africa are still not able to at least greet in a local African language. In many ways, the norm is not normal in our country and our universities). However, this is not a call for lecturers to be competent in all the possible languages that are likely to be spoken by their students. The point is rather that it is reasonable for our students to expect that those who teach them have an intellectual sensitivity to the ways in which their world views are constructed and then to celebrate – not merely tolerate – such world views as essential in the ways in which we engage with knowledge in all our academic programmes.

Those who take up the challenge of transforming curriculum in our higher education institutions must resist the temptation to take dirigiste or commandist approaches to controlling the curriculum. In a recent lecture, Prof Muxe Nkondo (2016) makes the very promising observation:

With the ‘Rhodes-Must-Fall’ movement, the educational system will become much more democratic and empowering, and educators, learners, and policy makers will be able to talk more freely about the transformative function of education.

However, he then goes on to propose the establishment of a “policy research unit”, supposedly under the direction of a government official to defend our decolonisation project. In his words:

To trace the potential influence of Eurocentric ideas and intellectual networks in public and private institutions, a dedicated policy research unit should be established and required to provide, on a regular basis, detailed analyses of neoliberal strategies within decision-making and advisory structures, and their implications for policy implementation. The unit should trace, also, the subtle ways in which Eurocentric ideas are diffused to broader politics. In so doing, it would help government to better understand the ‘invisible’ dimensions of the popularisation and dissemination of Eurocentric ideology to communities and mass audiences. Particular attention should also be given to bridges that Eurocentric think-tanks build between the world of ‘experts’ and corporations to facilitate policy coherence.

To perform an effective deconstruction of the primary terms of Eurocentric discourse *is to censure their usage, negate them*, and to expose their subversive agenda. [Emphasis added].

This is worrying language. If our students are not able to reason their way through socially unacceptable ideas, the blame must lie with us for not educating them properly. To try to cure this problem by allowing those in authority to censure or negate particular ideas is to allow the wooden horse, pregnant with danger, into our universities. As academics, ours is to teach, not to captivate. Ours is to liberate minds, not to transfer dogma to our students.

Our curricula must be ever respectful of the irreducible plurality of human opinion. This means that we have to avoid calls for us to acknowledge only one interpretation of history and to genuflect before the singular ideological position – whichever one happens to be in the mind of the particular group in discussion with us at the time. All opinions matter and it is one of the most dehumanising forms of social exclusion to say to a group of people that their opinions do not matter because of some constructed identity label that they happen to carry.

Recent history has many instances of this sort of barbarism and it is unbecoming of a university to be found aligning itself with such an approach. The rise of fascism in Europe during the run-up to the First and Second World Wars, was a frightening social movement in our recent history. But more frightening was the number of European academics and intellectuals who went out in support of the rise of fascism – and there are many similar examples.

The process of transforming curriculum has to recognise our students as autonomous learners who can form their individual opinions after careful consideration and reflection. We must be unhesitant in our belief that all our students have the capacity and potential to operate at the level of ‘the best that can be thought and known’ and that there are no forms of knowledge or ways of knowing that are not accessible to some of our students simply because of their ‘blackness’, ‘poorness’, ‘Africanness’ and so on. The curriculum must acculturate our students into the understanding that a sceptical attitude to the ‘common or received wisdom’, supported by reasoned and coherent argument, is a healthy aspect of the critically engaged intellectual.

Curriculum transformation also fits in the broader context of institutional culture transformation. The ways in which the intellectual development project is managed in student areas like residences is also in need of attention. It is not always clear that we fully acknowledge, through expression of our institutional cultures, that black students may be equally interested in the world of ideas for its own sake, rather than simply being at our universities to secure a future job. We have to get over the patterns of racial cleavage and mistrust that many South Africans learnt over the apartheid years in the ways that we engage with the learning needs of our students.

Lastly, curriculum transformation must also be about raising the tone and quality of the programmes that we offer to our students. Pedestrian and boring curricula deserve to be challenged and our students must stand with us in ensuring international comparability of our programmes – because students deserve no less. Being locally relevant is not necessarily incompatible with being globally excellent. Our students must be able to ply their crafts alongside the finest minds in the world without losing their sense of place or groundedness in the realities of the local development needs.

4. Closure

I have tried to argue that we need to develop a more coherent position and understanding of the meaning of curriculum transformation in higher education and how this process may contribute to the very necessary decolonisation project in our societies. I have also tried to argue that there are some foundational principles that should be secured and defended as we develop our approaches to curriculum transformation.

This is a task to be tackled by those who turn their hands and minds to the complexities of teaching and learning – the academics at the proverbial chalkboard. Leadership at universities can only support and facilitate the process. Through the ongoing conversations that academics have with students, our peers at other institutions and relevant professional or disciplinary leaders on matters of the curriculum, we have to sharpen our pens to bring convincing academic argument to our Senates and to provide guidance to university leaders. This is the task of academics in engagement with each other. On this matter, academics cannot hand their authority over to the likes of government, professional bodies or university managers.

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