

Report on Speak Out 6 of 18 May 2016

Speak Out Seminar: "Decolonising the higher education curriculum"

On Wednesday, 18 May 2016 the Edu-HRight Research Unit within the Faculty of Education Sciences hosted the first Speak Out seminar for 2016 under the theme of *Decolonising the Higher Education Curriculum*. The panel consisted of Dr Andre Goodrich, Ms Leigh-Ann Naidoo and Prof Bongani Bantwini, with Prof JP Rossouw (Director: Edu-HRight) who acted as facilitator.

Dr Goodrich is a senior lecturer in Social Anthropology on the NWU's Potchefstroom Campus, and focused at widening the discussion of decolonisation on the NWU campus and wider. Ms Naidoo is currently a PhD student in the Wits School of Education, and she spoke about the national movement of students against rising tuition fees, and in particular the Rhodes Must Fall student led movement at UCT. She also looked at matters related to the formation and role of black intellectuals.

Prof Bantwini is a Research Professor of Schooling (Primary & Secondary Education) in the School of Natural Sciences and Technology Education on the NWU's Potchefstroom Campus. He offered his views from an education perspective and pleaded for an ongoing thrust towards decolonisation and a balanced approach that value the contribution of all stakeholders.

The two hour event was attended by 34 people: 13 members of the Faculty of Education Sciences, 14 other NWU staff members and 6 students or post-docs. The seminar concluded with a question and answer session, during which more perspectives from the audience were added to complete the picture.

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**Ms Leigh-Ann Naidoo (Wits), Dr Andre Goodrich (NWU Anthrpology), Prof Bongani Bantwini (NWU, Education)**

Summary: Prof Robert J. Balfour

#### On intellectuals

The student movements of 1968-69 became iconic precisely of the longer-term impact on the academy and society that student questioning occasioned (in the context then of civil rights and anti-war politics). We are also living through what many have described as another key moment in world history where students from India, to Turkey, to Chile, Brazil, Mexico, Canada, Germany, Italy, Ethiopia, and the USA are challenging not only the current state of corporatisation of the university, most keenly felt by them through structures of fees and debt, but also the unequal global financial system that produces it. The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student movement is the South African iteration of this global movement.

When RMF was started in March 2015, the movement developed an educational agenda by selecting around 500 articles and books and making them available via drop box to a broader public, but specifically for black students and staff. This set of literature was largely written by black authors, and were mostly dealing with issues of black life. The RMF Education Subcommittee, planned a series of seminars and events to conscientize students and society at large. Claiming black writing as a resource in the decolonisation project was a means of bringing focus to the relationship between university and society, regarding the conditions and reproduction of inequality.

Black writing speaks to the relationship (or its absence) between knowledge and context. Fanon critiqued of decolonisation project of the 1960's and 70's, showing that Africanisation would not in itself unseat the system of colonial rule or change the lives of the majority of the people. In South Africa, Black Consciousness (BC) arising from SASO provided from 1968 for intellectual work by black students trying to work closely with masses of 'ordinary' people, in line with the radical educator Paulo Freire's (1970) notion that everyone is a student and lifelong learner. Radical thinkers of the period recognised that there were differences in the conceptualisation of teachers who saw the curriculum as a means of equipping learners with skills for social reproduction and teachers who, through the curriculum, addressed the relationship between the curriculum and social reproduction as intellectuals.

Are academics automatically intellectual? An academic is usually situated in a university context and performs the role of teacher, researcher and administrator. Specifically, academics read, think, write and teach, but it is important to acknowledge that slavery, colonialism and apartheid have marginalised black intellectual history in Southern Africa. Gramsci (1999) sees all people as potential intellectuals provided there is integration of 'thinking' and 'doing'. This enables leaders of a revolution or the drivers of change in society, to be from any walk of life or profession, undoing in some ways the political importance placed on the specialised or elite intellectual.

In South Africa, tracing the development in print of black intellectuals became possible after the missionary period, as this enabled a transition from oracy to print technology, but more than this it is important to realise that music and traditions associated with preaching and poetry offered intellectual possibilities. What is noticeable about the black intellectual tradition is its abiding concern with transformation in society (and thus by definition from an anti-hegemonic space).

A fundamental challenge to the mostly white academy, is the obligation to think from a common set of urgent social and political tasks not only associated with black intellectuals, given the commonality of context and imperatives around the need to transform. There are other views on this issue, for example, Muller and Moore (1999) who argue that it is specialisation that makes an intellectual, but this perspective does not deal with the relationship between knowledge and society so key to Gramsci's perspective. West suggests that black intellectuals combine both the need to offer critique as well as resistance to hegemonic and oppressive ideological, political and economic regimes. Within this perspective, the intellectual cannot be neutral, or detached from his/ her context, but is immanent and responsive to it.

In the above context the need to 'blacken the curriculum and the classroom' entails a restructuring of the relationship between the university and society, between knowledge and context and is thus an appropriate part of what it means to decolonise the curriculum.

### **On curriculum**

Curriculum has, since the Enlightenment, been invested with notions of discipline (orthodoxy) and education. The education project has been imbued with values at times incongruent with the directions taken by new knowledge. This incongruence creates epistemological stresses as new knowledge comes to challenge orthodoxies and values. Thus every academic discipline contains within it those domains specific to, and which are regarded as cardinal, as well as those new domains, also within the discipline, but considered as its marginal, or marginalised fields (or what may be defined as areas of value and of waste). Four processes internal to discipline define what is marginal and cardinal, for example, Omission (as in "we will not teach African Philosophy"), institutional containment (as in "we will teach African philosophy in a separate course or in a department of African studies", leaving the thrust of the discipline untouched), intellectual containment (as in "we will teach African Philosophy by evaluating it from the perspective of our chosen European philosophical tradition" so that African philosophy becomes the curriculum's straw man), and finally; camouflage (we will teach those African philosophers and appoint black staff who are deemed good in terms of the discourse structuring an otherwise unchanged curriculum). In view of this decolonizing a curriculum requires replacing the principles of order and value that the curriculum serves, not simply by shuffling content. Colonialism was characterised by conquest and extraction, legitimizing its processes as well as outcomes. Education introduced by colonial powers took similarly the hue of intention and outcomes in terms of describing legitimate knowledge, its purposes and its others. For example, Anthropology was concerned with people, but the discipline was often spent in service of rendering colonial populations governable such that they could be converted into labour.

Curricula may, then, be colonial inasmuch as elements of this valuation continue to exercise their effect in and through our classrooms. And this extends beyond the representational and identity politics that has trapped the discussion to date in the humanities.

The colonial character of a discipline can be discerned by examining the zones of exclusion it has produced. And it is to these zones that we must look to compose an alternative system of valuing knowledge. I want to suggest that there are two categories of exclusion that we might look to in order to begin that composition work. The first is to be found on our campuses, the second, more important one is Mbembe's death worlds. Within disciplines those groups concerned with disrupting its norms and orthodoxies (for example, African Studies; Gender Studies; Popular Culture; Queer Studies; Indigenous Knowledge Systems) should be considered as reflexive resources needed to compose new curricula, and in terms of identity politics how might disciplines, deal with their death worlds, in terms of the people associated with marginalised research or sub-domains within the curricula.

How to decolonise the curriculum is a question that we all need to ask ourselves. We need to ask ourselves: Is our curriculum liberating (for whom and why)? It is ironic that South African universities, which are supposed to be setting the trend for the society, are the ones still trailing behind even with concepts they write about daily, (for example, the concept of transformation). What has hindered or delayed such reflection and re-examination?

## On education

South Africa has a long history of disavowing its context (what Achille Mbembe calls, “an outpost of European imperialism in the Dark Continent”).

In their criticism Battiste, Bell and Findlay (2002, pp. 90, 83) argue that Universities have largely held on to their Eurocentric canons of thought and culture and sapped the creative potential of faculty, students, and communities in ways both wasteful and damaging. In his opening remarks for the conference “*transforming the curriculum: South African Imperatives and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Possibilities*” at the university of Pretoria in January this year, Norman Duncan (2016) reminds us that despite the recognition that higher education curricula are often alienating and out of kilter with the realities of South Africa and Africa, progress in respect of curriculum transformation has, in many respects, been sluggish and often uninspiring. Drawing Ngugi, he views it as being about reshaping, turning human beings once again into craftsmen and craftswomen who, in reshaping matters and forms, needed not to look at the pre-existing models and needed not to use them as paradigms. Fanon understands decolonization as precisely a subversion of the law of repetition. In Ngugi’s terms, “decolonization” is a project of “re-centering” Africa, in this case: defining clearly what the centre of knowledge is.

With regards to science education, Hershberg (1999) cautions that failure to ensure good education means diminished quality-of-life stemming from an enormous gap between minority of haves and a majority of have-nots that will undermine the basis of civil society and our democracy.

Currently, our university curriculum and pedagogies hardly does justice to our students as they do not take into consideration who they are and their daily life sciences. The scientific fundamentalism or “scientism” continues to claim that Western Modern Science is the only valid way of coming to know. We still present and teach Western science as the only science that exists. Mellow observes that if Indigenous students encounter university courses that are not useful or that teach only Eurocentric concepts, then their time spent studying may be wasted, and the students may need to unlearn concepts and assumptions. Findings from research conducted for the ETD-P-SETA focusing on the supply and demand of scarce and critical skills, shows that most of our graduate students come out of university with huge challenges in terms of content knowledge and pedagogical approaches. Clearly, this disadvantages the young ones who will be taught by them.

Just as we decommission statues, we should as Mbembe argues, decommission a lot of what passes for knowledge in our teaching. In order to set our institutions firmly on the path of future knowledges, we need to reinvent a classroom without walls in which we are all co-learners; a university that is capable of convening various publics in new forms of assemblies that become points of convergence of and platforms for the redistribution of different kinds of knowledges.

James Ogude (2016) notes the difficulty of challenging certain value regimes that underpin and shape our educational process with a view to their transformation, whilst not losing sight of the global provenance of knowledge in our curriculum. We need to refer to some of the questions raised by Ngugi (1981) such as: What directions should an education system take in an Africa wishing to break with neo-colonialism? What then are the materials our students should be exposed to, and in what order and perspective? Also, I think we need to also ask ourselves: how does science education focused on the emancipation of the community? The inclusion of indigenous science; an indigenous definition of scientific literacy; an indigenous innovation agenda; and a community focus is critical (Boisselle, 2016). Secondly, we need to expand the definition of the Western science to include practices indigenous to communities. According to Harry Garuba (2015), transforming the curriculum involves contrapuntal thinking at every level; it needs a contrapuntal pedagogy that brings the knowledge of the marginalised to bear on our teaching.

Without a complex understanding of the nature of what we are actually facing, we will end up with the same old techno-bureaucratic fixes that have led us, in the first place, to the current cul-de-sac. Trying to understand the nature of science curriculum in South Africa is about a struggle for self-determination. Very important is the recognition that a science curriculum that teaches science by including and respecting the community, creates opportunities for cultural mediation and inclusion that can help address some of the damage done by the colonial and apartheid regimes.