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Title   What might 'decolonising the curriculum' mean?
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SRHE ABSTRACT:

What might 'decolonising the curriculum' mean?

Recent student protests (2015-2016) in South African universities have led to calls for 'decolonising the curriculum'. Student collectives are circulating and reading texts on decolonial theory (e.g. Grosfoguel, 2011, Mignolo, 2000) and also Africanist and anti-colonial works (e.g. Ramose 2002, Biko 1978, Fanon 2008). South African universities, particularly historically white universities, are being critiqued by students for the Eurocentrism of their curricula and for the racism and whiteness of their institutional cultures and pedagogic practices.

In response, curriculum transformation is now firmly, and some would argue – finally - on the South African higher education institutional agenda; especially in the Humanities. At my own institution, the University of Cape Town, a new Strategic Plan (UCT, 2016) sets out as its first goal, 'To forge a new inclusive identity that reflects a more representative profile of students and staff', expanded to include, 'Creating an affirming and inclusive teaching and learning and research environment … with specific attention to those who have been historically marginalised' (UCT, 2016:2). Regarding the curriculum, UCT commits itself to 'Interrogate ways in which current curricula may marginalise particular identities and perpetuate dominant cultural assumptions and philosophies of knowledge' and also to 'Recognise and utilise the diverse linguistic, cultural and experiential resources that students bring to the classroom'. In addition, academics are to be 'equipped to use critical pedagogies to interrogate their assumptions about the curriculum and their students and to work effectively in diverse classrooms' (UCT, 2016:4).

However, a recently completed thesis (Baijnath, 2017 unpublished) suggests that academics in the Faculty of Humanities at UCT are currently caught in an ambivalent space where they feel pressurised to change their curriculum practice, but lack adequate decolonial and/ or curriculum theory to act decisively. Additionally, the study showed that academics find themselves caught between two incommensurable discourses that are not helpful for resolving the curriculum challenges they face. The first, from the past, is the liberal discourse of 'academic freedom' and the second is a racialized form of identity politics prevalent in some student movements. Many academics interviewed felt that the latter was inhibiting their sense of agency in the classroom and closing down the public sphere where curriculum issues might be debated and discussed.

If Baijnath's study is an accurate reflection of the current state of curriculum reform on South African campuses, then there is serious developmental work to be done to clear the way theoretically and provide 'points of departure' and safe, inclusive spaces for curriculum and pedagogic deliberations. It is particularly the gap between high-level meta-epistemological debates and the need to engage academics and students on the ground to effect concrete

changes at course and classroom levels that this paper seeks to address.

To this end a Working Group called 'Decolonising Pedagogy in the Humanities' has been formed where course convenors, teaching assistants and student representatives are meeting to deliberate on how to make changes to undergraduate courses – with an initial focus on first year courses. The author is a member of this group and the paper will report on work-in-progress made in this group.

Firstly the paper will report on the author's attempts to condense three bodies of literature: decolonial theory, Africanist theory and postcolonial theories[1] – with a view to teasing out their implications (affordances and limitations) for curriculum and pedagogic reform. This will culminate in a set of questions for the Working Group to be used as triggers for discussion. To structure the questions into a rough, open-ended curriculum design template, I will use Bernstein's model of the pedagogic device, with its three hierarchical levels, renamed as the Fields of Knowledge Production, Curriculum Design and Pedagogy. Question to be included under the Field of Knowledge Production will concern the historical development and locus of enunciation of the disciplines and their inherited assumptions about epistemology, ontology and methodology. In addition there are debates to be had around critiques of assimilationist and developmental models of curriculum versus approaches advocating 'critical border thinking' and 'epistemic pluralism'. Moving to the Field of Curriculum Design, questions will be formulated to surface taken-for-granted 'recontextualising rules' that have shaped current curricula, including the profile and identity of the 'ideal student' for whom the curriculum is designed, the structuring of time and space and assumptions about performativity and graduate attributes. We will need to interrogate silences and absences in the selection of content and the selective legitimation of linguistic and cultural resources. There will also be questions that interrogate the nature of the curriculum's 'regulative discourse', the institution's dominant 'habitus' and how change this in ways that lead to inclusion without assimilation. In the Field of Pedagogy, we will formulate questions about ways in which current methods of delivery and assessment constrain the emergence of some students' agency and potential and advantage others. We will also need to re-think modes of classroom interaction and how to create spaces where subaltern voices can speak and be heard.

Using participant-observation and critical discourse analysis, I will report on the process and outcomes of the Working Group's activities and on how the set of questions worked as a curriculum design template for 'decolonising the curriculum'. It will report on what issues and unintended consequences arose in the Working Group's deliberations and what concrete steps for change are being worked out at curriculum and pedagogic levels.

References

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1 I have argued to include postcolonial studies and diasporic thinking in the literature review because, although a diffuse set of theories, some offer nuanced positions, for example Bhabha's (2004) notions of 'hybridity' and 'third space'.

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