

Editorial

Curriculum without Borders: Transdisciplinary, Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Teaching in Higher Education

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It would be safe to say that in the South, the decolonisation project has reduced Shulman's notion of pedagogical content knowledge to the contents of curriculum. For decades, the South has consumed and applied curriculum content even when it ignored demographic, contextual and cultural differences and contradicted embodied realities. A case in point is Maslow's (1943) motivational theory as it cannot explain the acts of resilience and agency displayed by impoverished and oppressed high school students who, in 1976, resisted the imposition of a language curriculum and confronted the military might of the South African apartheid regime. Maslow's theory continues to occupy space and to promote middle class ideas of self actualization in the curricula of disciplines like Education and Psychology. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is much discontent about the intents and contents of higher education programmes.

As mentioned in the call for manuscripts, whilst scholars have theorised and taught higher education curriculum without disturbing its insidious interior and poor outcomes, the students have detected its weaknesses and limitations and highlighted these through protest actions that have shaken the foundations of disciplines and the material foundations of higher education infrastructures in South Africa. The students are impatient at the lethargic pace of change, and their actions have disturbed the functions of institutions in the country. Undoubtedly, despite the deficiencies of our curricula, the students

most affected by poverty, by social inequities and uncertain futures are demonstrating the ability to think critically - a key competence regarded as a 21st century skill (See e.g. World Economic Development Fund, 2015). Critical thinking by students is discomfiting as they generate interpretations that trouble our imaginations of ideal higher education students, revealing the ambiguity of the values we place on skills when they are redirected at higher education. Students it seems, already possess the ability to think critically so our concerns about their intellectual faculties are misdirected; we should instead, be concerned by *our* curriculum designs and interpretations.

At present, curriculum work, whether revision, transmission, interrogation, intervention or communication produces multiple discomfits - consuming energies, troubling fixed notions and disrupting taken-for-granted values in higher education teaching and learning. For too long, disciplines have dictated the content and worldviews, most often, in isolation, guarding its borders to prevent contamination and dilution. The publication, “Disrupting Higher Education Curriculum: Undoing Cognitive Damage” (Samuel, Dhunpath & Amin, 2016) and the *decolonise the curriculum* fallist movement, provide a spectrum of ideas on how cognitive damage is activated through the processes of formal and informal learning underpinned by the curriculum choices we make. Undoing cognitive damage, as captured in the writings of authors in that volume point to curriculum work as a complicated and time-consuming endeavour: it requires unmasking the hidden assumptions, stereotypical beliefs, imported worldviews, inappropriate and irrelevant content, and most importantly, discovering the ways in which curriculum designers and implementers are complicit actors of cognitive damage. It will require a rethinking of the notion of a discipline, perhaps by fragmenting its borders, compounding its aims and combining resources from multiple disciplines. In other words, engaging in teaching, learning and research which is transdisciplinary, interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary in nature. These are complex approaches that accelerate ideation and permit creativity to thrive. These approaches are akin to the notion of curriculum without borders.

The idea of curriculum without borders emerged organically in 2014 (see Amin & Campbell 2014). Their debates and discussions regarding preservice teachers and palliative care workers were enriched by amalgamating knowledge bases and disciplines for deeper insights, explanations and practices, “A curriculum without borders is open to insertions of various kinds that characterize each context. It is flexible and makes space for the

unexpected, the uncertain and the extraordinary” (Amin & Campbell, 2014, p. 167).

To grasp a concrete idea of a curriculum without borders we turn to a work of art by the Dutch artist, Maurits Cornelis Escher (see Fig 1). In the works that he produced, Escher combined mathematics and art to produce unusual tessalations that perplex our normative sensibilities. In Fig 1, for example, the biological similarities of fish and fowl become apparent when the distinctions between them become indistinguishable at some point. So too, for water and sky. Likewise, the borders between various disciplines are porous and often the similarities, overlaps and synergies are not easily identifiable or recognisable.

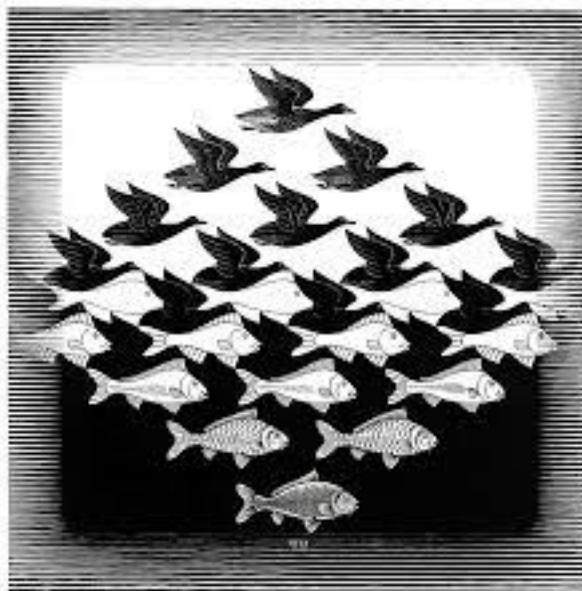


Figure 1: Escher artwork

Figure 1 is a graphic demonstration of the multiple realities that co-exist and their effects at the zone of convergence. At the poles, fish, fowl, water and sky are conspicuous, but in the equatorial belt of borderlessness, they merge and meta-perceptions and intelligences are stimulated. Similarly, convergence of various sorts, e.g. disciplines, knowledges, concepts and

theories, we argue, promote complex thinking and creativity. Likewise, a curriculum without borders is enriched by inclusion, expansion and integration. We can conclude that curriculum revision is not about instigating an *either or* option, like making choices between indigenous and western science, or between quantitative or qualitative methodologies. All kinds of ideas, irrespective of origin and approach are useful when complementarity is valued and insertions of extra-curricula content is an available option. All kinds of ideas produce better science and better knowledge. Critical thinking can and should be applied to all knowledge systems, whether it be discipline-, transdiscipline-, interdiscipline- or multidiscipline-based. A curriculum without borders ensures that contextual, cultural and demographic relevance and appropriateness are the guiding principles of teaching, learning and research.

The articles that make up this issue make for interesting reading regarding the notion of curriculum without borders. In keeping with the polyvalent nature of borderlessness, we have opted not to comment on the various articles as that would contradict the argument we are positing. However, we do encourage readers to engage with the debates, discussions and interpretations of curriculum without borders.

References

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