

# The Politics of Pedagogy in the Humanities: How can We not Speak of Language Teaching?

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University education has traditionally been associated with the advancement and transmission of learning in its highest forms, and the dispensing of qualifications governing access to the learned professions. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries university institutions in the West and Europe were intimately connected with religion and the constraints imposed by it (see Mazrui 1978). The Copernican revolution in the second half of the sixteenth century, however, caused tensions between complete scientific objectivity and considerations of inherited religion to enter a new era. In many senses, therefore, the idea of a university became, in Zymunt Ziembinski's formulation:

a community of scholars, who look for truth, inform each other of the acquired knowledge, and teach the methods through which such knowledge can be acquired (cited in Horn 1997:84).

The function of a university in the Western world may have involved investigating knowledge and the teaching of the 'methods through which such knowledge can be acquired', but that is certainly not the function universities evolved to serve in Africa. Mazrui (1978:285) reminds us, for instance, that 'almost all African universities in the colonies started as overseas extensions of metropolitan institutions in Europe'. In many senses, then, just like *commercial* multinational corporations in Africa, universities had to be part of colonial enterprise in order to sell *cultural* goods to a new

African clientele. In order to make sure that this broader agenda became a reality, Britain, France, and Belgium determined decisions on priorities for development that were to be achieved through universities established in the colonies. Such development was not meant to develop and improve, first and foremost, indigenous people's standards of life in terms of relevant local needs, values and norms, but according to the colonizer's interests. Writing about skills inculcated in most of these universities, Mazrui (1978:285) maintains that:

skills were transferred without adequate consideration for value in Africa, other skills were withheld because they did not conform to the world criteria of 'excellence' as defined by the present body.

This created an inevitable cultural and economic dependency by Africa, a state of affairs that provoked African scholars and leaders such as Mazrui and Mazrui (1998), Nkrumah (1956), Nyerere (1995), and, recently, Makgoba (2003), to argue for a re-thinking of the place and function of the university in Africa. These critical responses to colonial, cultural and economic alienation inflicted upon Africa through universities, among other instruments, were provoked by the myth that a university in Africa could not be a 'true university' if it did not service the colonial regimes. The educated manpower produced by such universities would only benefit the economies and peoples of the colonial powers:

In the very process of producing educated manpower ... universities were virtually defined as institutions for the western civilization, at least de facto. The institutions below university level were different stages of the same grand process (Mazrui 1978:307).

For the 'grand' colonial agenda to be successful, educational institutions, especially universities, had to be mere reflections of the parent bodies in Europe. Just like the commercial multinational corporations, they showed a faithful response to external decisions-makers in the home countries. Even when they did respond to the local environment, this was done within the boundaries permitted by the broader policies of the metropole. As a challenge to the status quo that favoured colonizing forces, Nkrumah had the

following to say regarding principles that were to guide a 'true African university':

We must, in the development of our universities, bear in mind that once [they have] been planted in the African soil [they] must take root amidst African traditions and cultures (cited in Makgoba 2003:7).

Nkrumah's caution does not mean, it may be argued, that the African university, as Makgoba (2003:7) puts it, 'is an insular or parochial entity' with a desire to re-invent a romantic, unadulterated past. It is rather a university with well-established and entrenched consciousness of an African identity, for it is from the consciousness of the environment around them that universities should derive their strengths. On the characteristics of an American university, for instance, a former Harvard President once said:

A university must grow from seed. It cannot be transplanted from England or Germany in full leaf and bearing. When the American university appears, it will not be a copy of foreign institutions, but the slow and natural growth of American social and political habits (cited in Makgoba 2003:8f).

One cannot speak of a university then, it seems to me, without taking into consideration its relevance and role into the lives of its citizens in a more direct way. Yesefu puts this more eloquently with reference to an African university:

An African university must not only pursue knowledge for its own sake, but *also* for the ... amelioration of conditions of life and work, of the ordinary man and woman. It must be fully committed to active participation in the social transformation ... and the ... upgrading of the total human resources of the nation (e.i.o.) (cited in Makgoba 2003:8).

There is no doubt that the idea of knowledge that goes beyond merely knowing something, to knowing that brings about an 'amelioration of

conditions of life and work' for the citizens, requires very specific pedagogic practices. And, for the purposes of this essay, it is pedagogic practices in the Humanities. *Politics of Pedagogy* in the first part of the title in this essay indicates an intention to explain pedagogic practices in various disciplines in the Humanities faculty. Through this explanation I want to engage, first, with a teaching practice that tends to conceal methods, theories and strategies involved in arriving at certain discipline specific conclusions within academic discourses and, second, how this concealment is bound to render our students as irrelevant to the needs and demands of our society.

Since universities are institutions that offer formal education, one of their major tasks is to develop students' cognitive abilities. Kembo (2000: 289) defines these abilities as

[learners'] memory, their ability to generalize, to grasp relationships such as cause and effect, to predict the consequences of events, to grasp the essential message of a speech or a book, and to evaluate situations.

Kembo (2000:289) further points out that formal education is meant to develop affective skills, by which she means:

attitudes to work and study,...tolerance for people who may differ from [learners]...learners' social skills ... their ability to work together with other people, to communicate with them, and to support those who need assistance.

Taking Kembo's explications into consideration, I want to argue that unless pedagogic practices in the university are carefully and deliberately checked to see to it that they successfully inculcate the above skills in students' minds, universities will be bound to fail, not only their students, but also the society at large. It is this deliberate introspection into our pedagogic practices in the university in general, and the Humanities in particular, that will enable us to produce students with the ability, as Nyerere (1995:5) puts it:

to produce logical thinking based on facts, to explain the thought processes and the logic, and to respond to the intellectual challenge

of an opposing argument—whether this comes from within or outside their ranks.

These are the skills our society desperately needs. To develop all these skills, I want to argue, requires a sophisticated and deeper understanding of the nature of language, and, for the purposes of this essay, the English language. This particular language because it has become the language in which most knowledge, in the form of research findings, is stored and because most institutions of higher learning, at least in South Africa, use English as the medium of instruction. In this essay reference to *language* is used in two senses: first, language as a means of communication; and, secondly, *language* as discourse that characterizes specific disciplines in the Humanities Faculty. This forms part of the reasons why I chose to make the second part of the title of this essay a question put in the negative and the interrogative.

On the one hand, in a world that sells and buys everything in exchange for the general equivalent, it is the criterion of economic usefulness that tends to determine the acceptance, and therefore success, of any course introduced within the context of tertiary education. We are slowly but surely undergoing an imposition of the 'hegemony of instrumental reason', as Blake *et al* (1998:3) note. Within this context educational authorities and market forces tend to exert pressure on higher education. This pressure poses a threat to formative degrees offered by most disciplines in the Humanities because such disciplines are interested, among other things, in the institutional and social importance of non-marketable knowledge. 'Non-marketable' not in the sense that the skills we inculcate in our students do not have any material, monetary and practical use, but rather that they are not of immediate, vocation-specific marketability like Medicine. The effect of this on some disciplines in the Humanities is, among other things, to integrate language development within mainstream teaching and, in English Studies in the southern African context, to raise the profile of the previously minor place of *English language teaching* (at English medium universities). It is difficult not to speak then of language teaching in the Humanities.

On the other hand, the question 'how can we not' suggests a caution, a warning, an urgent call to alertness in order to prevent a tendency that

could be self-destructive for the faculty. In this essay it represents a concern that various disciplines in the Humanities reflect on the condition of humanity and are concerned with the articulation of thoughts regarding the way in which we experience the world. A move towards attending to students' language needs in the faculty in particular, and in servicing other faculties in general, should avoid relinquishing this focus. Noyes' (1999:214) perspective on the Humanities' mode of knowledge production may be useful to our understanding of this focus:

The articulation of difficulty is the mode of knowledge production proper to the Humanities. And it is an essential mode of knowledge production in a democratic society, a society that takes its own humanity seriously.

Within the current environment however, one of the established roles of higher education the role that the Humanities Faculty is well positioned to play is marginalized. Blake *et al.* (1998:4) understands this role as 'the transformation of individuals and of their understanding of their world [and]', a role 'that is being pushed to one side, if not abolished ...'. Within this environment the 'articulation of difficulty [as] a mode of knowledge production proper to the Humanities' is likely to be completely compromised. Students' loyalty to a tradition of enquiry, to the courses that sustain such a tradition, and the kind of commitment that is at the heart of academic endeavour are fundamental higher education values that are quickly marginalized due to globalized economic ethos. Even though it is true that students' limited (English) language competencies is among reasons for the erosion of loyalty to a tradition of enquiry characteristic of university learning, the teaching of (English) language in most higher education contexts is usually divorced from a teaching paradigm geared towards enabling learners develop a capacity to operate with ease within a learning environment that encourages the tradition of enquiry. Several factors contribute into this state of affairs.

Until recently, the paying of research-based, focused, and organized attention to students' language abilities (grammatical competence) has been a serious concern for the Humanities Faculty only. Law, Commerce, Accounting, Management and Science faculties have always, in my view,

regarded this aspect of learning as a domain for the Humanities. It became increasingly evident that 'accurate' language production is as pertinent for a student who is studying for a Humanities degree as it is for a student in the Commerce Faculty. Given the changes in the social, economic, political and educational spheres globally, sophistication in language (both spoken and written) has become a prerequisite for effective democratic citizenship and social success and, as a result, several universities in South Africa have seen the Humanities opening negotiations with other faculties regarding the introduction of Law, Commerce, Accounting, Management and Science language-specific courses. This is in fact an international trend that Humanities faculties, and English Departments in most cases, in Britain and America have already followed (see Balfour 2000). At my university, for instance, a 'successful' collaboration between the Programme of English Studies and Commerce has seen the introduction of the Commerce-specific language course for first year students. At the University of Cape Town (UCT) the Academic Development Unit, a unit within the Humanities Faculty, runs Law and Commerce-specific language courses for the Law and Management faculties.

I intend to explore, first, the problems inherent in such supposedly wise tendencies (servicing other faculties), secondly, the self-destructive pedagogic practices that tend to conceal the mode of knowledge production in the Humanities and, thirdly, conclude by offering what I suppose may be seen as an amicable approach to developing students' language proficiency, an approach that will foreground our identity as a faculty on the one hand, and a more empowering pedagogical practice that will enable our students to come to grips with the mode of knowledge production in the Humanities, on the other. It is through sufficient exposure to this informed understanding of various modes of knowledge construction, contestation and dissemination in the Humanities, I want to argue, that our students would develop appreciation for a tradition of enquiry and the courses that sustain such a tradition. Furthermore, such knowledge has potential to 'fuel ... the modern growth economy' (Blake *et al.* 1998:5) in ways that are sensitive to a democratic ethos. The argument that purports that knowledge produced in the Humanities can play a role in the economy runs directly opposite with popular belief. This belief 'is ironically (?) within universities' (Noyes 1999:210), and, I would add, entrenched within the mind-set of educational authorities.

In his Inaugural Lecture at UCT, Noyes argues that while higher education executives in most universities and educational authorities in most countries, including South Africa, doubt the usefulness of the Humanities degree, the employment market thinks differently:

Employers mention flexibility and originality of thought, critical thinking and the ability to express oneself and communicate as central reasons for the value of a Humanities degree (Noyes 1999:210).

This indicates, among other things, that employers have an insight into the fact that various disciplines in the Humanities produce graduates with valuable skills relevant to the work place. The acquisition of these skills, however, demands a particular level of proficiency in (English) language and without such a level, it is unlikely for a student to be flexible and original in her thinking. Within the South African context where racial and/or linguistic categorizations have traditionally been used as indicators of language proficiency, it is pertinent for us as Humanities Faculty to re-think and re-conceptualize this notion (language proficiency), and to re-adapt our pedagogic practices in the language development programmes. Furthermore, to be able to produce students with 'flexibility and originality of thought', the skills that employers and the society in general need for nation building project, the Humanities need to transform deliberately certain pedagogical practices in teaching disciplinary knowledge. If it is our premise in the Humanities that it is through the successful manipulation of language that students' critical thinking skills are developed, then we have to make the relationship between knowledge production and language learning explicit. This is pertinent to our success in the process of rendering ourselves as a valuable entity in an institution of higher learning and in asserting our identity as a faculty. As we may agree, pedagogy in the Humanities enterprise should be geared towards providing learners with pedagogical space for critical thinking and reflective literacy necessary in identifying the inadequacies of ideologies that appeal to dominant groups in society. It is bigger than producing simplistic instrumentalist knowledge demanded by what can be seen as the pragmatic requirements of capital.

Because of the pressure exacted by economic imperatives on institu-



tions of higher learning, the Humanities Faculty finds itself forced to design discipline-specific language courses for the disciplines outside the Humanities. Is this decision not self destructive in the sense that we are directly conspiring against ourselves and what we represent as a faculty? Are we not, as Macedo puts it, 'reducing the priorities of [critical] reading [of the world] to the pragmatic requirements of capital [thereby] creating structures that anaesthetize students' critical abilities' (Macedo 1993:190). By designing, say, a Commerce-specific language course, are we not in fact 'imprisoning' a student into Commerce discourse, thereby narrowing her understanding, and limiting her knowledge, of the existence of competing discourses that give shape to society? Such a student will not 'speak commerce' all her life. She will have to read newspapers, listen to news, watch some films, read magazines, meet students with cultural backgrounds different from hers, work for a company that will require her to work as a team member, all of which require an understanding of different, and sometimes contradictory, discourses and modes of thinking.

As a faculty, I want to argue, we can come up with a far better approach to language training to prepare such a student for challenges characteristic of democratic societies. Our success will depend, however, on our resolute stance against designing language courses that will compromise our approach to knowledge production. Now that most faculties identify language training as a necessary requirement for their students, we need not allow a situation where we become a sub-faculty for other faculties by introducing language courses that will be a mere service provider to such faculties. Instead, we need to re-think the place of English language teaching and learning in the faculty, and the relevant pedagogical approach to language teaching that will be in line with our mode of knowledge production.

But, is our mode of knowledge production accessible to students? Would we be successful, in other words, teaching (English) language to other faculties in ways that are informed by our mode of knowledge production when that mode is not made explicit to students (and to some of us)? These are pertinent questions for a society whose education system is supposed to produce critical thinkers who are well equipped to live and become productive in a society that upholds democratic values. For disciplines in the Humanities these questions are even more pertinent since our enterprise is to understand humanity and society and engage with

challenges of building a nation with a notorious history of racial inequalities.

Within various disciplines in the Humanities, academics, in the process of constructing specific disciplinary knowledge(s), tend to employ certain forms of language which operate as 'given', and, as a consequence, endow particular set of linguistic codes (constructs) with all the objectivity of disciplinary 'facts'. These linguistic codes (constructs) become the criteria in terms of which students are assessed. This is because most disciplines tend to assume that students understand what they are objectively supposed to understand. As far as assessment is concerned, students are expected to manipulate language academically, a skill which presupposes a constellation of acquired abilities. Because students are underdeveloped in high-level skills in strategies for reading comprehension and in summary and paraphrase, they resort to plagiarism. This plagiarism, however, is usually not (though not always) an intention to cheat, but is due to students' inability to rephrase ideas and arguments in their own words. This requires a situation where interaction between students and lecturers become underpinned by principles of reflexive pedagogy, i.e., an explicit teaching practice driven by a view that pedagogic communication needs to signal the discourse's constructedness. This is pertinent within pedagogical communication, as Ellsworth (1989:59) writes:

[T]here is no communication without disturbing background effects, and this 'static' is likely to be greatest in the pedagogical communication between one who knows and one who is to learn .... Communication can only be regarded as pedagogical when every effort is made to eliminate the faulty 'signals' inherent in an incomplete knowledge of the code and to transmit the code in the most efficient way.

This involves developing students' awareness of the fact that, as Montgomery and Stuart (1992:7) put it: 'meaning [is] a function, not of particular words or wordings, but rather of the discursive formation in which...expressions occur'. When language is in use (whether in writing or in speaking) a discursive formation functions as a set of regulative principles that underlie actual discourses. Within this context, meaning becomes an effect upon the human subject, but not a stable property.

Pedagogic practice in most disciplines in the faculty, however, does not lend itself to principles underpinning reflexive pedagogy. The latter is seen by most academics as too elementary, and is therefore rejected because it clashes with their pedagogical philosophy that what a lecturer says is so self-explanatory that a student who fails to unpack it is not supposed to be in the university in the first place. What this philosophy ignores is the fact that learning implies acquiring both knowledge itself, and the code of transmission used to convey a particular body of knowledge. Assuming that students will understand the academic discourse, without explicitly reflecting on its constructedness, is to ignore the fact that language is not just a collection of words, but provides us with a system of transposable mental dispositions. Given the demographic changes experienced by universities in particular, and changes our country has undergone in the last decade in general, it would be self-destructive for the Humanities to maintain a teaching practice that is essentially content-centred and insular, thereby ignoring making explicit the role language plays in learning and in the construction of specific disciplinary constructs.

Reflexive pedagogy should not be seen as a practice with potential to 'water down' the 'noble' aims of university education, but as a practice that allows practitioners of the pedagogical communication methodically and continuously to reduce to a minimum the misunderstanding arising from the use of an unfamiliar code. Such misunderstanding is usually evidenced by the kinds of essays students produce, for these display poor mastery of language as students seek to reproduce the academic discourse, thus find themselves constrained to write in a badly understood language. Defined by their lesser knowledge in academic discourse, students can do nothing that does not confirm the most pessimistic image that the lecturer, in her most professional capacity, is willing to confess to. It is a common thing to hear lecturers making comments such as 'they understand nothing because they do not want to do their work'. As a lecturer, one teaches as one ought to, and the meagre results with which one is rewarded can only reinforce one's certainty that the great majority of students is unworthy of the efforts one bestows upon them. Bourdieu (1989:7) presents the image of a lecturer in a rather illuminating light:

the [lecturer] is as resigned to his students and their 'natural'

incapacities as the 'good colonist' is to the 'natives', for whom he has no higher expectations than that they be just the way they are.

Ironically, while this is the kind of attitude many lecturers have toward students, the former still expect the latter to manipulate language academically. This expectation betrays a rather flawed image of students by institutions of higher learning, i.e. that students are a socially homogeneous group who differ only according to individual talent and merit. Because of this image, comprehension and manipulation of language are the first points on which students' knowledge is judged. I argue that assessing students on such premises ignores some facts about human knowledge, and, of course, about learning.

There are two issues basic to any inquiry into the nature of human knowledge: first, how language contributes to our understanding of the world, and, secondly, how our beliefs about the world inform our understanding of language. Language consists of a set of forms that can be described at various levels—at the level of sounds, word formation, sentence formation, and discourse structure. Some aspects of meaning can be associated with each of these levels. Presented in this way, language becomes not simply a vehicle of thought, but also a system of categories; a means of communication which, without a reader's (or listener's) 'accurate' interpretation, can be of no use. Interpretation during pedagogic communication is a difficult and risky process with no guarantee of a satisfactory outcome, even if one has correctly identified the words and correctly worked out the syntactic structure of the sentence. Bourdieu (1989:8) presents reasons for such difficulty in a persuasive manner:

This is because language does not reduce, as we often think, to a more or less extensive collection of words. As syntax, [language] provides us with a system of transposable mental dispositions. These [mental dispositions] go hand in hand with values which dominate the whole of our experience and, in particular, with a vision of society and of culture. They [mental dispositions] also involve an original relationship to words ....

This conception calls for university practitioners to identify, recognise, and

to deal with the factors that separate them from students and, in particular, to acknowledge the importance of students' knowledge of the nature of the code of communication and the dependence of this knowledge on factors such as social origin and school background. This requires explicit teaching practice that will consider, first, the fact that academic language is no one's mother tongue and, secondly, that the existing divorce between the language of the family and the language of learning only serves to reinforce the students' feeling that the university education belongs to another world, and that what lecturers have to say has nothing to do with daily life because it is spoken in a language which makes it unreal.

By choosing to mystify the language which includes them as members of the group, while ignoring the fact that they themselves are not 'authors' of such a language (but are simply 'interpellated', to use Althusser's terminology, by specific discursive formations), academics 'conceal the contradictory character of their discourses to both themselves and to students' (Montgomery & Stuart 1992:5). It is not surprising that the subtle social meanings posited in several disciplines are quite hard even for native speakers of English from outside the (academic) group to pick up, and are particularly difficult for non-native speakers. This breakdown in the teaching relationship is largely the consequence of the nature of disciplinary languages and the manner in which they are applied. Because of this, pedagogy loses all meaning, for, it does not reflect the intention to communicate self reflexively, and thus to establish true communication (true dialogue) between a teacher and learner.

Understanding in the university needs to be conceived as a function of the social group in which it is embedded. In the lecture hall, for instance, the desired outcome of the interaction that takes place between students and lecturers is the understanding of the language being taught and learnt. Because of this, understanding needs to become a social institution from which students can borrow and to which they can contribute. Meaning has to be negotiated between the participants in an interaction, for communication is a risky undertaking, requiring not simply the exchange of linguistically packaged ideas, but an effort of imagination on the part of the listener or reader. The implication for this, among many, is the fact that

understanding could be in [constant] state of flux; of augmentation,

of modification, of radical transformation, of restructuring of its patterns of silence, or even of fading from current consciousness' (Bourdieu 1994:7).

What remains unclear, though, is the extent to which this fact underpins teaching and learning in the Humanities. This is an important question, for, even though academic discourses within various disciplines, at face value, appear to be unitary, there are contradictory aspects too, and there are further contradictions amongst disciplines in general. Academics within specific disciplinary languages are actually acting in response to conventions with which strangers (students in this case) are unfamiliar. Actually, so many of the problems students are encountering within the university education system are not solely linguistic, but also have to do with the nature of conventions lecturers subject themselves to and ignore making such conventions explicit to students.

Even though teaching theory in practice realises itself as a relationship between teachers and learners, the systematic analysis of institutional practices seem to be neglected in higher education. If teaching practice in the university does not relate closely to the principles underpinning reflexive pedagogy, we need to look at the principles dominating institutions of higher learning, and be willing to consider changes in them if need be. The approach to language teaching and pedagogy in the Humanities suggested in this paper have the potential to assist first, students from other faculties who need language training and, secondly, mainstream structures within the faculty in developing more effective means of meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse and non-traditional student body. Should we not compromise our identity as a faculty, furthermore, other faculties will soon discover our worth and increasingly recommend that their students enrol for specific offerings that will make them relevant, first to the socio-political, educational and political needs of the country and, secondly to the process of nation building to enable us to enter into the international debates as valuable contributors rather than mere appendages of metropolitan interests.

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