Editorial: Diversity, Transformation and Student Experience in Higher Education Teaching and Learning

Priya Narismulu
Rubby Dhunpath

The themes of the Fourth Teaching and Learning Conference and consequently for this special issue of *Alter*nation emerged out of engagements with key national and UKZN reports, notably the Report of The Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions (MCHET) (2008) and the UKZN Report of the Governance and Academic Freedom Committee of Council (GAFC) (2009). A further set of recommendations from the UKZN Senate Report on the Analysis of Research Productivity at UKZN for the period 2004-2008 and a Review of Indigenous Knowledge Systems/African Scholarship were the catalysts for a range of institutional responses, initiatives, innovations and projects which have inspired the focus on the theme of this issue of *Alter*nation – 'Diversity, Transformation and Student Experience in Higher Education Teaching and Learning'.

The MCHET, arguably one of the more severe indictments of higher education in the post-apartheid period, highlights the dilemma. The report contends that most institutions' understandings and interpretations of transformation, discrimination and social cohesion are broadly consistent with the White Paper on Higher Education. The sector has formally responded to the government's transformation programme and there appears to be broad compliance with transformation requirements, especially with regard to employment equity. However, the extent to which these responses have been able to transcend the level of symbolism is less evident. The report emphasises the disjuncture between institutional policies and the lived

experiences of staff and students evident in the learning, teaching, curriculum, language, residence life and governance at the majority of universities.

> The Committee found that the transformation of what is taught and learnt in institutions constitutes one of the most difficult challenges this sector is facing. In light of this, it is recommended that institutions initiate an overall macro review of their undergraduate and postgraduate curricula, so as to assess their appropriateness and relevance in terms of the social, ethical, political and technical skills and competencies embedded in them. This should be done in the context of post-apartheid South Africa and its location in Africa and the world (2008: 21).

Collectively, the MCHET together with the other documents identified above and the discourses they have inspired, point to the formidable challenges we face in higher education as we are called on to bear greater responsibility for transformation. Collectively, the documents implore us to concede that it can no longer be business as usual for higher education in a system where transformation is often a little more than the application of band-aid to deep-seated systemic pathologies; diversity is inscribed in the rhetoric of educational discourse but has little substantive expression elsewhere; and the student experience on many campuses is characterised by alienation, fear and in some instances, outright brutality, as students continue to endure individual, group and institutional racism through both the official and hidden curriculum. In some institutions the curriculum is so inextricably intertwined with the institutional and/ or dominant group culture that it is not conducive to reform, while in other institutional contexts, there is very little scope for curriculum innovation because of a limited view of the knowledge project (MCHET 2008).

Indeed, the knowledge project has been subverted on many fronts, but none as insidious as the subversion by academics themselves who fiercely defend their academic autonomy but are happy to relinquish it when faced with crucial choices over their curriculum and pedagogy (Nelson 2010). In short, the MCHET report concedes that while there are exemplary practices at some institutions 'nobody must underestimate the difficulties

which still exist. There is virtually no institution that is *not* in need of serious change or transformation' (2008:13).

In an article written for this special issue of *Alter*nation, Crain Soudien (who chaired the MCHET) points out that the attentiveness that is beginning to be paid to the challenge of race by South African academics and institutions is important for the transformation of our educational institutions and cultures at all levels, as well as critical for the development of ontology and epistemology here where the need is profound, as well as beyond our national boundaries.

Soudien's paper argues that South Africa is an important site for understanding how universities are engaging with the questions of change and transformation. He poses critical questions such as what it means to be human in South Africa relative to other parts of the world. He demonstrates how this theoretical space is being opened up in the South African academy and uses the experience and examples of key interventions within the higher education sector.

South African contributions to tackling the load of racial oppression borne by the African continent and diaspora are long overdue. Given our history and deep experience of racial oppression, scholars, policymakers and institutions elsewhere in the world are justified in expecting South African intellectuals and universities to show scholarly and institutional leadership in this area. Soudien alerts us to the need for greater attentiveness to scholarship and teaching that addresses indigenous forms of knowledge and questions of epistemology beyond the dominant Western models.

The focus of this special issue appears to have some consonance with developments on the continent. Mkandawire (2011:24) recently made the argument that 'Africa has the fastest growing university population in the world. This means that we can focus on problems of quality and equity'. He goes on to 'point to the strengthening and revitalising of the African faculty as the urgent issue' while recognizing the impact of democratisation on debates in higher education.

South African academics enjoy significant freedom, relative to their counterparts elsewhere in the academic world. Faculty members have substantial latitude in choosing what to teach, how to teach, and what theoretical and methodological traditions they choose to deploy. The challenge facing academic researchers who make the journey into less familiar

mindscapes of conceptualising their pedagogical work, is how to obtain the appropriate theoretical tools to make sense of their emerging insights derived from their practices, pay their conceptual debts to earlier works (Biggs 1979) and pursue roads less travelled upon to leave their own footprints.

Curriculum innovation and transformation is an awkward endeavour. Unlike corporate entities which appear and disappear and whose survival depends on their capacity to innovate in order to feed insatiable desires for novelty (following an increasingly unsustainable capitalist model), higher education is less vulnerable to the vagaries of competition. For instance, a QS Rankings observer notes that there is very little movement in top end of the league where the larger universities hardly ever close down their operations and prestigious ones seldom lose their esteemed positions. Part of the reason for this apparent stability is a 'dearth of disruptive innovation' (Christensen & Eyring 2011). The imperative to innovate is usually established by those institutions at the top and those lower adopt the survival strategy of imitation, rather than innovation. Hence, 'little-known and smaller institutions try to move up in the ranks by adding students, majors, and graduate programs, so as to look more like the large universities' (Christensen & Eyring 2011:1). It is not surprising that the essential elements of modern higher education are so similar to their earlier incarnations although students today are more diverse, 'the shape of classrooms, the style of instruction, and the subjects of study are all remarkably true to their century-old antecedents (Christensen & Eyring 2011:1).

It is therefore gratifying to be able to co-edit this special volume compiled from submissions that reflect the experiences of academics in various institutions who have embraced the challenges of diversity and curriculum transformation, muddying their boots as they traverse their disciplinary fields into the less comfortable landscape of conceptualising, researching and theorising their praxis. The emerging higher education teaching and learning landscape is rapidly providing space for academics to make explicit their tacit pedagogies and subject them to theoretical scrutiny, underpinned by empirical work.

The theoretical traditions and theorists that frame some of the papers in this volume will be familiar to many, particularly to academics in the humanities and social sciences. For some, there will be a temptation to dismiss the invoking of Piaget, Bloom, Vygotsky, Bernstein, Marx, Freud

and other 'classical' theorists as dated or inappropriate in explaining modern-day phenomena. The seminal works of these classical theorists which are firmly inscribed in teaching and learning discourses are typically more accessible to academics embracing these discourses as they expand their disciplinary repertoires. Indeed, much of this scholarship has been superseded by contemporary theorists who engage their scholarship through quite different philosophical and methodological lenses. Therefore, scholars who use them injudiciously or with scant regard for emerging works (some of which have more powerful explanatory potential) risk undermining their research endeavours, and further risk the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education.

Vanessa Tang, in her article titled 'A Piagetian-Bloomsian Approach to Teaching and Learning Economic Concepts' reflects on the benefits to be derived in returning to the classical theorists to address the challenges of teaching and learning economic concepts at undergraduate level, which can be a frustrating passage for both teachers and learners. In managing the dilemmas of students who often arrive at university with a fear of economics she had adopted a Piagetian-Bloomsian approach to teaching, which takes a cognitive-constructivist approach to teaching and learning. She describes the approach as a visual representation and communication of an individual's knowledge structure of single or multiple concepts, as constructed by the student, taking the form of a matrix in an approach similar to mind mapping. This guided instructional technique, she argues, is designed to foster students' cognitive growth. The effectiveness of this teaching and learning approach, she notes, is confirmed by the results of a survey which demonstrate that students find this teaching approach useful and there is a strong positive correlation between higher cognitive skills and the usefulness of the teaching approach evidenced in the improvement in examination scores in four teaching semesters.

Adopting the classical theorists to make sense of her own context allows Tang to appropriate the cognitive-constructivist strategy to engage students and develop their analytical and creative skills as they identify, explore and link key concepts. Conceding that not all students would appreciate the proposed Piagetian-Bloomsian teaching and learning approach, she expects her own teaching and learning approach will evolve over time with exposure to an ever-changing heterogeneous group of students.

Responding to heterogeneity is the cornerstone of effective teaching in South Africa's diverse lecture rooms, requiring a creative blend of conventional and innovative approaches. This is evident in the paper by Annah Bengesai who demonstrates the effects of a move from conventional models of learning and teaching towards constructivist models within the Faculty of Engineering, which historically has been plagued by unsatisfactory student retention in an era when Engineering can no longer be considered anything but a global profession (Du Toit & Roodt 2009:39). Further hampered by critical staff shortages and high student-teacher ratios, engineering academics are compelled to explore alternative pedagogies to enhance student learning. Bengesai explores Supplemental Instruction (SI) which is a peer-assisted learning programme that is targeted at 'high-risk' courses rather than 'high-risk' students. The approach seeks to facilitate deeper understandings of course content while encouraging students to develop better meta-cognitive skills so that they develop higher levels of knowledge about the knowledge they acquire.

Endorsing Bengesai's claims about the potential value of Supplemental Instruction, Vino Paideya reveals through her study that Engineering students experienced chemistry SI as discursive learning spaces offering opportunities for discussion, for reflection and meaning making, motivating students to take responsibility for their learning. She argues that the social learning spaces created during the SI intervention session have the potential to develop independent lifelong learners in chemistry.

Central to the notion of lifelong learning is the creation of positive social spaces that encourage collaborative learning where students can effectively mediate knowledge and enhance their confidence as they gain access to concepts. The approach is underpinned by Vygotsky's (1978) work on cognition and premised on the principle that knowledge is first socially constructed and then internalized, emphasising that the creation of learning spaces involves more than controlling the external conditions to enhance learning. It also involves mediating the power asymmetries between students and lecturers that characterise educational practice.

Performance data provided by Bengesai over the three semesters reveals that the approach generates positive outcomes. However, the author cautions that the results also indicate that SI can potentially create over-reliance on support, presenting a paradox, in which the efficacy of SI in

promoting independent learning is brought into question, disrupting its transformative potential.

Power differentials in lecture halls, a product of the country's past, continue to impact on the dynamics of teaching and learning in the present. Juxtaposing the dual tensions of transformation and diversity in education in a democratic South Africa, Veena Singaram, T. Edward Sommerville, Cees P.M. van der Vleuten, Fred Stevens and Diana H.J.M. Dolmans explore collaborative learning from a different angle to the SI approach adopted by Bengesai. Using problem based learning (PBL) as the point of reference, the authors argue that transformative learning transforms problematic frames of reference and fixed assumptions and expectations to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open and reflective. Citing Mezirow, the authors consider how students can act on assimilated beliefs, values, feelings and judgments of others as impediments to their own learning.

Data for the Singaram study was obtained from focus group interviews with second year medical students and teachers. The process involves the posing of 'a disorienting dilemma', a situation in which new information clashes with past beliefs, leading to self-examination and critical assessment of assumptions, which catalyse new perspectives. The identification of dilemmas that hinder the transformation process presents possibilities for their eradication. Sensitive issues such as racial quotas, artificial separation and language fluency as an indicator of academic ability are explored as tensions. The authors affirm their support for changes in policy, epistemology and institutional culture, arguing that structural alterations do not necessarily change the individuals who collectively *are* the institution. Confronting some of the tensions and contradictions in the relatively secure environment of collaborative learning serves as a catalyst in transforming students' prejudices.

Many presentations and discussions at the conference reflected diverse though increasing levels of awareness of the publicly funded educator's caveat: 'The process of holding others accountable requires that we first hold ourselves accountable' (Ross n.d.:21). Contending that debates on transformation in higher education have been largely confined to institutional level interventions Murthee Maistry argues that insufficient attention is paid to curriculum and pedagogy. Drawing on his teaching in Critical Business Education he argues that teaching for equity and justice in

our unequal society and world involves more than transmitting disciplinary content and reproducing teachers who in turn induct their students into captive subject positions in the machinery of capitalism. The article asserts that it is the responsibility of academic teachers to address contradictions in their disciplines during their teaching, in pursuit of a social justice agenda.

In 'Teaching Social Justice and Diversity through South/African Stories that Challenge the Chauvinistic Fictions of Apartheid, Patriarchy, Class, Nationalism, Ethnocentrism …' Priya Narismulu reflects on the teaching of basic metacognitive skills to level one students. These and other strategies are used to enable all students to deconstruct the familiar and naturalised chauvinisms behind bigotry and learn how discursive and more material forms of power may be engaged. Students learn how to analyse narratives in relation to questions of place, race, gender, class, nation, language, and culture. This is a synthesizing strategy to overcome division, disempowerment and silencing, as illustrated through the selection of eight stories that explore and encode transformative skills and practices.

Dealing with the MCHET challenge, 'does the curriculum prepare young people for their role in South Africa and the world in the context of the challenges peculiar to the 21st century?' (2008:21), Emmanuel Mgqwashu points out that it is well established that the learning of cognitive skills is best acquired in the mother tongue and that for this reason teaching and learning needs to occur in learners' mother tongues. Given that indigenous African languages gained official recognition some time ago there is no reason for the majority of South Africans not to have access to the epistemologies and skills the curriculum and syllabus are designed to impart in these languages.

Engaging with the colonial and apartheid era prejudices that represented indigenous languages as irrelevant to the modern world and deliberately underdeveloped, this essay argues that local languages are used by a huge majority of South Africans and must be developed to enable effective teaching and learning, for instance through moving from structure-focused tuition to greater integration of language and literary studies to allow for deeper engagement with the linguistic needs and realities of people within and outside the academy.

Tackling the questions of social justice and diversity in relation to the limited and largely colonial languages of instruction in South/ Africa,

Ayub Sheik examines the significance of globalization, glocalization and emerging technologies for the cultivation of language ecology. The article argues for the use of inclusive and integrated strategies to meet students' language needs and the goals of equity and access in South Africa.

Arguing that mindfulness is valuable for action research projects that focus on social change, Kriben Pillay addresses the challenge of developing practitioner research. The article distinguishes between self-study as a cognitive strategy, where meta-critical thinking serves the development of professional practice, and a meta-cognitive approach to self-study as mindful self-observation. Arising out of a workshop presented at the conference, the paper addresses gaps in academic approaches to research (including interdisciplinary action research), postgraduate education, local economic development and other areas.

The challenge of transforming higher education literally takes on another dimension through the creation of a virtual learning environment, where educational interactions are managed online. Technology enables African teaching and learning networks, to break down the boundaries created by time and space. Craig Blewett, Rosemary Quilling, Zahra Bulbulia and Patrick Kanyi Wamuyu reflect on the virtual collaborative learning experience they set up for an Honours module involving Information Systems and Technology students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and Applied Computer Science students from Daystar University in Kenya. Within a broad framework of social constructivism the study focuses on students' academic, operational and technological challenges experienced on a project entitled NextEd, which is an actual operational model of virtual learning environments as transformative learning spaces at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The value of the study is that it also presents the limitations of virtual learning environments from the student's perspective, such as incomplete communication; limited ability to build relationships and other complexities of distance interactions. An interesting finding of this study is that most of the respondents are below the age of 23 and the rest do not exceed the age of 27. Aptly labelled as 'Generation Y', they are described as being directed towards visual and kinaesthetic learning and interactivity. The changing face of transformation may well be that such projects are 'student driven rather than lecturer pulled'.

The issue of supervision comes under scrutiny in the Academy of

Science of South Africa (ASSAf 2010) study. It confirms that South Africa is under-producing at the scale of only 26 doctoral graduates per million of the total population of the country based on 2007 cohort analysis of Higher Education Institutions with only 1274 doctoral graduates qualifying in that year (Samuel & Vithal 2011). This crisis, which is often attributed to the preponderance of the master-apprenticeship model of supervision (Govender & Dhunpath 2011), calls for a radical re-conceptualisation of existing supervision models to address the unsatisfactory graduation rates. Among the alternative models proposed are the cohort model and the PhD by publication to accelerate the rate of doctoral graduations.

Callie Grant takes us through her experiences of obtaining a PhD by publication. Within this contested space of doctoral education, this article focuses on the PhD by publication which, Grant clarifies, is not a single monograph or book-length dissertation, but rather a series of shorter pieces, which are assessed by a range of different readers and reviewers before they are submitted for a final examination. She explores the notion of connectedness which is central to a PhD by publication, and her article focuses on her 'logic of connectivity' which operated at five levels in the PhD. This highlights the transformational impact that PhD studies should aim for in terms of its potential to contribute to further research rather than being done as a means to an end, only to find the thesis positioned as a white elephant on the shelf. Grant presents a convincing argument that the advantages of undertaking a PhD by publication outweigh the disadvantages.

There can be little contestation around the importance of the nurturing environment free of hostility proposed by Singaram *et al.* for effective teaching and learning. However, an overly supportive postgraduate environment that fails to critique sterile ideas cultivates mediocrity. Nyna Amin's 'Critique and Care in Higher Education Assessment: From Binary Opposition to Möbius Congruity' uses a poststructuralist lens to engage the dual discourses of care and critique drawing on a study related to the assessment of Masters students. Amin explains that tensions arose when students considered critiques they received on assignments as uncaring while she interpreted their responses as a lack of care for intellectual growth. Using the visual image invoked by the 'Möbius Strip', she argues that while it appears that critique and care are oppositional stances, a deeper interrogation reveals the hidden aspects of care in critique and critique in care, demon-

strating that language constructs differences and masks the nature of reality of a singular phenomenon and, more specifically, its paradoxical nature.

While the study is presented as an illumination of the value of critique on the assessor it also highlights the experiences of students as the assessed. A study of this type attests to the nature of reflective practice in teaching and learning as a key element in the transformation of our discursive practices, forcing assessors to consider how binary structures can be destabilised without compromising the importance of assessment in higher education, particularly as it relates to MA and PhD supervision.

Assessment is perhaps one of the more neglected areas of systematic enquiry in higher education, with multiple choice questions (MCQ's) enjoying prominence in certain high-enrolment courses. Despite the controversy surrounding the approach, particularly in contexts of student diversity, its increased use in recent years has been largely attributed to factors such as increasing class sizes, reduced resources, perceptions of increased incidences of plagiarism, shrinking timelines for the finalisation of student grades and the competing demands of maintaining a creditable research profile (Hughes 2007).

In their paper, 'Producing Better Quality MCQs at First Year Level: Are Guidelines and Templates Enough?' Sue Price and Mitchell Hughes explore the problems associated with accommodating diversity in higher education assessment. Responding to high student numbers and the constraint of having to operate a common curriculum over two campuses (Westville and Pietermaritzburg), the School of Information Systems & Technology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal has adopted multiple choice questions (MCQs) as its primary assessment method at first year level. Based on their experiences of implementing a set of MCQ guidelines and an MCQ template, together with a structured cycle of review and feedback, the authors contend that there are several pre-conditions for effective and successful implementation including thorough mastery of the subject matter by the question developer and the ability to write simply and concisely especially for students whose first language is not the language of assessment.

The authors caution that academics should not underestimate the time and effort required to construct and test items that have design flaws such as implausible options, word clues, grammatical clues or logical clues in the stem or options, as well as either no option or several options with the

correct answer. These undermine the validity of assessment. The authors emphasise the importance of providing training in MCQ construction techniques to mediate these hazards.

The massification and internationalisation of higher education (Marmolejo 2010) has become the norm as government funding for higher education is diminishing in the face of the global economic crisis. This is particularly true of the United States where universities have adopted an entrepreneurial character to attract international students, and with it, the attendant complexities of diversity and difference, including the challenge of varying academic capacities that students bring from varied contexts. In this context, issues of performativity (Peters 2004) and standards of benchmarking quality are catalysts for the transformation of education.

Victor Borden, in his paper, 'Accountability for Student Learning: Views from the Inside Out and the Outside In', explores effective accountability which commences with the articulation of specific quality objectives that accommodate the diverse core objectives of higher education. Borden explains that most quality assurance processes rely on institutions to define quality on their own but that makes it difficult to convey to various constituents what specific institutions and the higher education sector as a whole contribute to society at large, individuals and communities. This paper explores practical and conceptual issues related to increased demands for accountability for student learning outcomes through a US lens of experience and offers a framework for a constructive approach to public accountability applicable to both the US and South African contexts.

Finally, in the context of the 'growing recognition that the existence of a vibrant research community is vital for the study of Africa' (Mkandawire 2011:25), it is clear that research is no less important, and in fact essential, in the areas of teaching and learning for social justice in a diverse society and world. While this special issue attempts to contribute to the development of intellectual capacity and scholarly networks (Mama 2006) it is also mindful of the need for higher education institutions to work together, as the staff and founding institutions of the merged University of KwaZulu-Natal have found necessary, to meet the needs of our society and world more effectively.

The cover of this issue of *Alter*nation has a drawing of the African Iris by artist A.W. Kruger. The iris is an emblem of diversity the world over

and is part of many local and international emblems and insignia. The African iris signifies local prevalence and its rhizomatic character represents depth, knowledge, non-hierarchy, constant renewal and change especially in contexts of transformation. '[T]he rhizome is so constructed that every path can be connected with every other one. It has no center, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite. The space of conjecture is a rhizome space' (Eco 1984:57)[1].

References

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) 2010. *The PhD study: An Evidence-based Study on how to Meet the Demands for Higher-level Skills in an Emerging Economy. Consensus Report.* Pretoria: ASSAf.

Biggs, J 1979. Individual Differences in Study Processes and the Quality of Learning Outcomes. *Higher Education* 8,4: 381-394.

Christensen, CM & HJ Eyring 2011. The Inevitable Change Ahead (in Higher Education). *Inside Higher Education* July 14.

Department of Education 2008. *Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions.* Pretoria: Department of Education, South Africa. Available at: http://www.pmg.org.za/files/docs/090514racismreport.pdf. (Accessed on November 30, 2011.)

Du Toit, R & J Roodt 2009. *Engineers in a Developing Country: The Profession and Education of Engineering Professionals in South Africa.* Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Eco, Umberto 1984. *Postscript to The Name of the Rose.* Weaver, William (trans). New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich.

Govender, K & R Dhunpath 2011. Student Experiences of the PhD Cohort Model: Working Within or Outside Communities of Practice? *Perspectives in Education* 29,3: 88-99.

Governance and Academic Freedom Committee 2009. Report to the UKZN Council (GAFC) May 2009.

---

[1] The editors wish to thank the editor in chief, Prof. Jannie Smit for his invaluable contributions to the production of this journal issue of *Alter*nation.

Priya Narismulu and Rubby Dhunpath

Hughes, C 2007. Using MCQs for Formative and Summative Purposes: A Discussion Paper Prepared for the Assessment Subcommittee of the UQ Teaching and Learning Committee, University of Queensland, Australia.

Mama, Amina 2006.Towards Academic Freedom for Africa in the 21st Century. *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* 4,3: 1-32.

Nelson, C 2010. What Academic Freedom Is and Isn't. *Inside Higher Education* December 21.

Mkandawire, Thandika 2011 Running While Others Walk: Knowledge and the Challenge of Africa's Development. *Africa Development* 36,2:1-36.

Marmolejo, F 2010. Internationalization of Higher Education: The Good, the Bad, and the Unexpected. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* October 22.

Peters, M 2004. *'Performative', 'Performativity' and the Culture of Performance: Knowledge Management in the New Economy.* Part 1. New York: SAGE Publications.

Ross, D. n.d. Social Justice and Equity: A Teacher Educator's Journey Within. Available at: www.epu.ac.at/epu/research/Ross.pdf. (Accessed December 19 2011).

Samuel, M & R Vithal 2011. Emergent Frameworks of Research Teaching and Learning in a Cohort-based Doctoral Programme. *Perspectives in Education* 29,3: 76-87.

Priya Narismulu
English Studies
School of Literary Studies, Media and Creative Arts
University of KwaZulu-Natal
narismulug@ukzn.ac.za

Rubby Dhunpath
Director: Projects
University Teaching & Learning Office
University of KwaZulu-Natal
dhunpath@ukzn.ac.za