

Afterword

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The past

Earlier this year I attended a conference in Göteborg, Sweden, on integrating language teaching into the disciplines – nothing overtly to do with social justice or the public good. One evening after a long and tiring day mulling over the conference proceedings, a group of conference goers, including two from South Africa, one from Spain and one from the United States, settled down for a drink and a (hopefully) frivolous conversation. The conversation soon became serious. We talked about South Africa and apartheid and the past; about Spain and its right-wing dictatorship; and about the United States and resistance to the Vietnam war. Each of us expressed our strong feelings about the injustices in our own countries that we had to endure and grapple with somehow. We found ourselves comparing our attitudes towards these ‘pasts’ with those of the younger generation that had been born after these periods of extreme injustice. Some of our children or students were interested in what we had to say, but sometimes they resisted this ‘harping on’ about the past. In South Africa the term ‘born frees’ has been coined to discuss the lives of young people born since apartheid ended.

The tone of the group quickly became serious, almost reverent and intimate, as we realised how much we had in common and how much brought us together despite our different home languages, accents, religions or geographical origins. In South Africa we often accuse ourselves of being particularistic when we talk about our challenges or history, as if our issues are unique. Soudien deals with this directly when he writes: ‘There is an intensity in the South African discussion which is not as evident in many systems elsewhere.’

One issue which is central to discussion about social justice and the public good in South Africa, and evidently also to concerns about social justice

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worldwide, is precisely that of the past. It has surfaced in this book in the contributions by Koopman and Nicholls and Rohleder, who refer to the past as a hurt, a trauma that has to be acknowledged and confronted. It has to be confronted by those who are directly harmed and discriminated against, as well as by those who belonged to the category perpetuating harm. Costandius, for example, takes the active step of exploring her own biography and constructedness. The research and teaching team with which Nicholls and Rohleder participated, meanwhile, dealt with this issue at length (Swartz *et al*, 2009). Swartz *et al* conclude (2009:498/9):

In discussing the question of how professionals engage with issues of diversity and multiculturalism in contemporary Britain, Kai and his colleagues (2007) have recently shown the extent to which trying to act in a culturally appropriate way has become a source of anxiety to some health professionals, who may feel paralysed about not knowing how to do the right cultural thing and to cause least offence. In a similar way, conversations amongst our students have shown that it may be similarly possible to become paralysed by the question of politics in an unequal and historically unjust society. Professionals and professionals in training, we believe, need safe spaces within which to discuss these difficult issues, without the threat of being chastised for their uncertainties, their differences of opinion and even their understandable reluctance to speak of difficult things.

In addition to showing the relevance of this research for an international audience, this extract stresses another significant theme for higher education for the public good: the need for a safe space. This is not, according to Costandius, the same as 'safe speech'. The extract signals another theme which is relevant to furthering the public good via higher education: the kind of exploration that an individual or groups have to undergo is at times uncomfortable, if not downright painful. Discomfort does not only apply to issues of evident oppression. Gierdien's contribution displays his willingness to confront discomfort amongst his students who do not share his worldview, and by exposing himself to their expressions of discomfort, he allows himself to become discomfited in turn. Thus teaching for the public good can entail long and difficult work, and requires individuals to be prepared to experience moments of extreme vulnerability.

Agency

The past is not only a psychic spectre to be confronted. It influences the present by virtue of the social inequality and power differentials that are the legacies of a phenomenon of legalised oppression such as apartheid. Such

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legacies are alluded to in the introduction to this book, and in contributions by Lange and Soudien, amongst others. Soudien and Lange demonstrate how difficult it appears to be to move forward and deal constructively with the present, such that the past is no longer purely a bulwark against transformation. A concept dealt with briefly in this book, but receiving increasing attention internationally, is that of agency. Debates about the relevance of agency, and the extent to which one can circumvent constraints posed by one's circumstances and upbringing, have been ongoing, at least since Karl Marx's time. Useful contributions to this debate have been made by Margaret Archer, who argues that except for the most dire, most constraints can be circumnavigated. Archer writes that the constraints require varying degrees of effort to circumnavigate, which implies elements of choice or even reflexivity to resolve to act against such conditions (1982:2000). The question which remains for educationists to consider is this: how much effort do we believe it is worth expending on higher education, such that it can deliver on the 'promise' to contribute to the public good? If the answer is 'a great deal', then the next step is to work in whatever sphere in which we conduct our activities to realise this aim. As this book has attempted to demonstrate, we should come together across spheres, across disciplines and even across geographical territories to achieve this end.

Competence

Agency has also been described in somewhat more deterministic terms by sociologist of education Basil Bernstein (1990), who points out that agency is not free-floating and is limited by what one is able to do. Margaret Archer might have moved the conversation forward somewhat, but it remains the case that though human action for transformation, creativity, autonomy and social mobility requires a sense of agency, the importance of competence, expertise or the ability to accomplish tasks should not be underestimated. The concept of capabilities and functions is discussed by Walker, Hall and Bozalek and Leibowitz. There is a link between functionings as elucidated by the capabilities approach and the kinds of practices or skills contained in the idea of graduate attributes as discussed by van Schalkwyk, Herman and Müller. Lange points out that the ability to exercise citizenship, regarded by many as a cornerstone of work on higher education for the public good, relies on the acquisition of dominant skills and practices. Thus any attempt to embed a pro-public-good approach in teaching and learning cannot ignore issues of competence and what is referred to in South African discourse as 'epistemological access' (Morrow, 2009).

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Competence relates also to the ability to implement a change strategy or policy. The contributions in this book feature examples of policies that are not effective – both at institutional level (van Schalkwyk, Herman and Müller), at national level, and even in the schoolroom (Waghid). The failure to implement them successfully is the responsibility of educationists, or it is due to the inappropriateness of the policies themselves. Change strategies or policies require both competence and the will to achieve change, be this motivated by sense of what is right, or by guilt (Costandius), by a sense of accountability (Leibowitz and Holgate) or by a ‘politics of humanity’ (Waghid) as an absence of disgust or shame. Such motivations contrast with the impetus for change outlined by Zembylas (2008), who writes about the value of mobilising affect in education in post-conflict situations, most notably that of anger. To understand the role of affect in higher education, and what a ‘safe space’ might be and how it differs from avoidance, is a valuable arena for further exploration, and invites action based research in teaching and learning settings.

Inside v. outside

Soudien mentions two views on the university: the ‘outside-looking-in view’ – in which ‘the university is just another site of social practice’ – and the ‘inside-looking-out view’ – in which the university as an institution is inherently different and particular. The contributions in this book show how the university is intimately linked to other spheres of society, for which it prepares students to teach, be a social worker or engineer (Gierdien, Waghied, Subreenduth, Boni, MacDonald and Peris, and Walker). Sometimes these worlds are in conflict (Gierdien), and most of the time one has to use what one learns whilst at university to find ways to contribute towards the betterment of those ‘outside’ worlds, through courses on ethics (Boni, MacDonald and Peris) or through practising criticality and tolerance for ambiguity (Koopman, Waghid) or care (Bozalek and Leibowitz).

If they are to teach for the public good, with space for democratic deliberation, lecturers require the opportunity – as well as the agency – to become the teachers they need to be to make this happen. This is the message contained in the contributions by Leibowitz and Holgate and Wisker. Perhaps there is a third view of the university: a view in which the spheres from the macro to the micro are interrelated and in which all borders are porous. In this view everything is connected and the influence is multi-directional. Accordingly, whilst the university is influenced by and related to society, it is also particular and special: it is a place where there is the opportunity to experiment, take risks and, above all, learn. Learn how to agitate for a better future for all.

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