

CHAPTER 7

Equity and access: a curricular perspective

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Introduction

This chapter is concerned with equity and access to the curriculum, which has been shown by numerous analyses of statistics, as well as experience of those of us who are concerned to improve the state of education in South Africa, to be extremely problematic with unequal levels of student success.

The view of ‘curriculum’ adopted in this chapter is an expanded one. It proposes the idea of the curriculum as an “active conceptual force” (Le Grange 2016:8). ‘Pedagogy’ and ‘curriculum’ can be plotted on a continuum from design choices at the micro level to choices at the macro level. Clearly the curriculum, even the expanded view, is embedded within a broader ecology of learning and living phenomena. However, for the purposes of this short chapter, the ‘learning’ dimensions are focussed upon.

Equity and equality, it is proposed, are advanced within a conceptualisation of cognitive justice, which is itself interrelated with the notion of ‘social justice’ (de Sousa Santos 2014). Fraser’s (2009) description of social justice is extremely useful. She equates social justice with the ability to interact on an equal footing with social peers. In order to achieve this participatory parity in a higher education context, social arrangements would have to be put in place, which would make it possible for individuals to interact on a par with one other. The three dimensions of social justice, which are interrelated and mutually dependent, are: recognition, which refers mostly to the cultural domain and the recognition of the status of groups; distribution, which pertains mostly to the material domain, to resources such as computers, parents’ salaries to finance higher education; and, representation, which is more political, and includes who is regarded as a legitimate citizen, who may participate in political processes, and who is entitled to voice needs.

The current wave of student protest has affirmed the relevance of the three dimensions of social justice as advanced by Fraser. Calls for decolonising knowledge in the present era in South Africa have been expressed in relation to all three domains: recognition, redistribution and representation. Students aspire to be recognised or to see themselves in the knowledge systems. At the end of the first panel on decolonising the curriculum at the University of Johannesburg, for example, the student speaker said, ‘please let us see ourselves within the degrees that are taught – otherwise UJ – how is it an African university?’ (<http://sotlfor-social-justice.blogspot.co.za/2016/03/first-seminar-at-uj-decolonizing>). With regard to distribution, in terms of cultural capital as well as material resources, countless stories were told by students at the same panel and others, about not having the material or cultural resources in order to be able to study successfully at university. So ‘fees must fall’ is interrelated with ‘Rhodes must fall’. But students have also been expressing the need for power, and to have their voices heard.

It is important to situate the call for cognitive justice or even decolonising the curriculum within a broader concern for social justice, as this helps to outline the manner in which the curriculum should be conceptualised, and to distinguish the usefulness of various conceptions of the curriculum or of learning.

Cognitive justice

Decolonising the curriculum can mean many things to many people. Given the various overtones and contestations surrounding the term, it might be more useful, rather, to deploy the term ‘cognitive justice’. The idea that cognitive justice will promote student engagement with knowledge and academic success, and is thus a form of social justice, is an attractive one, but this has not been shown conclusively via education interventions on a large scale. This is not a reason not to advance the idea of cognitive justice, but rather, to proceed to do so, in order to ascertain what is required to make such a task succeed.

The call for cognitive justice is in the first instance an objection to the hegemony of western epistemologies that have been rendered powerful via colonialism. Their hegemony has been perpetuated via a variety of means, including global capitalism and standard setting practices such as university ranking systems and

professional associations for fields including the health sciences, engineering or accountancy. The objection to this hegemony lies in the destructive power of these epistemologies, with negative consequence including the “disqualification” of those that operate according to other knowledges (de Sousa Santos 2014:153), general alienation (Nyamnjoh 2012) as well as a sense of estrangement or foreignness for the new student to university (Jansen 2009).

Allied to the problem of the hegemonisation of knowledge is the idea that knowledge systems are, or should be kept separate, and that some knowledge systems are inherently superior or inferior to one another. However, knowledge systems can and should be treated as complementary, integrated or as existing side by side. They can be hybridised or creolised, just like languages (Ndebele 1986; Van der Waal 2012). We can learn by embracing varied knowledge systems. Comaroff and Comaroff (2014) showed in how many ways Europe can learn from Africa. We can also learn from comparing knowledges: “through knowledge we question the limitations of a single culture/nationalistic identity” (Anzaldúa 2015:91). We can also use knowledges to answer questions or plug the gaps created by unitary knowledge systems (de Sousa Santos 2014). Finally, as an alternative to the multiplicity of knowledges approach, one can build *one* coherent knowledge system that is based on various knowledges (Connell 2007:vii).

One can select those aspects of a culture or epistemology that advance one’s ethical project. Makgoba and Seepe (2004:14) argue that to Africanise requires identifying within African epistemology “that which is emancipatory and liberatory”. The focus on the ‘how’ or attributes of knowledge makers and knowledge seekers is an important contribution to cognitive justice, as it could have implications for how one might want students to learn (for example, that they are more active participants in the class, or that the power relations are attended to). This encourages knowledge makers, users or acquirers from the global South to adopt a confident and agentic stand in relation to knowledge (Ndebele 2016).

Powerful knowledge as ‘capital’

There are few theories on the curriculum that offer a coherent position on how teaching and learning should be approached. One such theory, which is influential in South African education thinking, is social realism. It draws on the trenchant

critique of modern Western education by Basil Bernstein. There are probably many reasons for its popularity. One interesting possibility is due to its association with critiques of modern capitalist schooling, in which the metaphor of education as ‘capital’ is popularised. This is mostly due to the work of Bourdieu, and his deployment of the concepts ‘social’, and ‘cultural’ capital, and their role in social reproduction.

Bernstein does not use the term ‘capital’ but his account of the role of social relations in influencing the acquisition of knowledge and the outcome of education, similarly stresses the manner in which education is part of society’s reproductive process, impacting on students’ access to status and power:

Finally, social class relations through distributive regulation, distribute unequally, discursive, material and social resources which in turn create categories of the included and excluded (Bernstein 2000:207)

Similarly, Wheelahan (2010:9) uses the concept of distribution, or “distributive justice” which admittedly is not equated with status and wealth, but with access to powerful knowledge and the ability to participate in the creation thereof.

This notion of powerful knowledge as a form of capital has informed much intellectual and academic development work undertaken in South Africa over the past three decades. It is one of the possible reasons why so much academic development work has focused on making adaptations to the curriculum so that students from ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds can be successful within the current system, rather than on transforming higher education more substantially. The concept of ‘capital’, whether educational, cultural or social, has been interpreted extremely broadly, and spans work of the social capital theorists, which are in a decidedly more liberal or a-social camp than the critical account of capital advanced by Bourdieu (Hughes and Blaxter 2007). As the next section will show, the metaphor of capital and distribution does not work as well when one attempts to consider how we should restructure the curriculum, going forward. This is to do with key elements of the social realist approach to knowledge.

Limitations of a social realist approach

One problem with the social realist view is that what is originally stated as a problem – that the organisation of knowledge was influenced by social relations, leading to inequality, becomes the basis of the solution – that social relations and the organisation of knowledge should be the basis of the organisation of the curriculum:

If knowledge is not epiphenomenal but real, differentiated and possessing emergent structural qualities, then it follows that curriculum and pedagogy should be structured to take into account of those qualities, such as the sequencing of knowledge through a curriculum (Maton and Moore 2010:7).

However, if the “inherent sociality of knowledge” (Young 2008:31) and the contextual nature of its production is what renders it unjust and elitist, in the first place, then by setting so much store by this, are we not reproducing these inequalities? This appears to be far more reproductive than transformative. It is very possibly why attempts at epistemological access, worked at so hard by academic developers and foundation programmes in South Africa, almost inevitably sound deficiency-based, however well intentioned.

A second limitation of the social realist approach is the trend of writing amongst the social realists which emphasises the rational, cognitive, and the importance of theoretical propositions:

it is only when we understand the rules that we can meaningfully and purposefully change the rules. This is why theoretical knowledge must be at the centre of all educational qualifications, including occupational qualifications (Wheeler 2010:145).

Writing on anti-oppressive education from a post-structuralist viewpoint, Kumashiro (2015) says that rationalism takes our attention away from knowledge as surprise and the unexpected. Becoming critical does not only occur via learning rules first. It can occur via being provided space to experiment and even unlearn.

Social realists do not pronounce how students should be encouraged to learn. They specify that their sphere of concern is the curriculum and the place of knowledge within that. However, they do imply that it is possible for all students to be able

to access powerful forms of knowledge: "...all students should be provided with equality of access to the most powerful forms of knowledge through the means that most reliably enable that access" (Maton and Moore 2010:8). This does depend, however, on what knowledge is understood to be. Thus a third limitation is the way (powerful) knowledge is described, very much more as a real 'thing' rather than embedded in context, the body or emotions. According to Young (2008:183) social realism "[s]tresses the externality of knowledge that is separate from the processes of knowing and doing". This once again denies the contextuality of coming to know so aptly demonstrated in the work of theorists on practice demonstrated by Heath (1983) or Lave (2011). Schooled knowledge that is too far removed from the contextual worlds of learners, does not become integrated into the schemata and worldviews of students. What would be the means for students who do not share social worlds with the world where such theory is developed, to engage with this knowledge? How would they come to know it?

Admittedly one cannot hope for learners to experience viscerally and via physical or emotional means, everything they need to come to know. However, one important domain of experience, alluded to by practice theorists, is that of shared meanings within practical activity (Schatzki 2001). If learners lived or worked in social contexts where functions of particular practices were self evident to them, they would indeed come closer to experiencing the knowledge, even the theory or rules they need to acquire. If they do not experience these living conditions, one needs to create learning opportunities in which they can engage in the practices, thus acquire the shared meanings and sense of purpose.

A fourth limitation with the social realist view is linked to the logic that because something came to be in a certain way, that is the way it should be. The best example of this is an extract from Young about the importance of disciplinary boundaries:

These specialist forms of social organisation remain the major social bases for guaranteeing the objectivity of knowledge and the standards achieved as the proportion of each cohort of school students entering examinations increase (Young 2008:31).

Granted, this statement does not say ‘which knowledge’ is powerful and should be selected, but rather, it argues that the way knowledge is organised, should remain. Wheelahan also provides an argument for a distributive justice approach in relation to the present dispensation:

The working class needs access to powerful knowledge if it is to participate in society’s conversation. Theorizing the nature of knowledge is thus a key task of the sociology of education, because this provides an understanding of the way it should be structured in curriculum so that there is equitable access to it (Wheelahan 2010:17).

Conclusion

In what way would Fraser’s approach to social justice be contradicted by a social realist approach? More space than the current short chapter would be necessary to answer this comprehensively. Nonetheless here are some pointers: a social realist approach would encourage malrecognition of learners’ prior experiences and cultural affiliations, which might directly or indirectly, be invalidated. It would encourage maldistribution if learners are unable to enter the powerful knowledges, and if less rationalist, rule bound or cognitivist remain centre stage – as is the case in the present era. It would discourage voice and representation, as learners and their communities would remain the objects, rather than confident subjects, of knowledge production.

The following are pointers to a way forward. First, an approach in pursuit of cognitive justice in education would acknowledge that cognitive justice is reliant on social justice, thus that universities should play a role more broadly in society, to advance social justice. Since universities and their curricula are tied to disciplinary and professional associations, there is a particular role to play amongst academics within these associations, to decentre some of the standards that uphold a colonial approach.

Second, cognitive justice calls for the unseating of the present polarities between formal, institutional and often global knowledge, and informal, local or traditional knowledge. It implies a renegotiation of the hierarchized boundaries between knowledges. This does not imply that there are no boundaries, but calls for a far

more careful investigation into the relationships between knowledge systems, how they can interrelate, where comparison is useful, where accretion or bridging from one on to another is useful, and where these lie alongside each other, to be selected as appropriate.

If it is indeed the case, that presently powerful knowledges are not jettisoned, but would remain part of the panoply of knowledges students might engage with, then there will be boundaries that students need to learn to negotiate. Enabling students from working class, rural and unemployed homes and related schooling, to cross these boundaries has not been a striking success in South Africa. The solution will be easier to attain if the concept of 'knowledge' is viewed in a more dynamic, contextually embedded manner. Attendant from an understanding of knowledge as dynamic, not divorced from activity, practice and emotion, is the need for the cultivation of the attributes of those who engage with knowledge.

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