

ON BORDERS, BOUNDARIES AND BEING A CHAMELEON: METAPHORS FOR REFRAMING THE ACADEMIC PROJECT

Prof Susan van Schalkwyk

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Prof Susan van Schalkwyk
Centre for Health Professions Education
Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences
Stellenbosch University

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Susan van Schalkwyk, MPhil PhD, is Professor in Health Professions Education and Director of the Centre for Health Professions Education in the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (FMHS) at Stellenbosch University, where she is involved in supervision of Master's and PhD students, and faculty development. Her research interests cover a range of aspects relating to teaching and learning, with a specific focus on postgraduate studies and academic writing. In this context, Susan regularly contributes to the FMHS pre-doctoral programme as well as the African Doctoral Academy's winter and summer schools. In addition, she has facilitated more than ten writing workshops and retreats, across South Africa as well as in several sub-Saharan countries. She is a founding member of the Bellagio Global Health Education Initiative, an interdisciplinary, multinational effort to advance global health education worldwide. Susan is active in health professions education, both nationally and internationally, and is currently a member of the AMEE (Association of Medical Educationalists) Research Committee, the Best Evidence Medical Education Review Committee, on the editorial board of MedEdPublish, and an associate editor for BMC Medical Education and the African Journal of Health Professions Education. In 2016, she received a National Research Foundation rating and has authored or co-authored more than 50 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters.

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“We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibres connect us with one another; and along these fibres, as sympathetic threads, our actions run as causes, and they come back to us as effects”.

(paraphrased from Rev H Melvill, 1855)

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ON BORDERS, BOUNDARIES AND BEING A CHAMELEON: METAPHORS FOR REFRAMING THE ACADEMIC PROJECT

INTRODUCTION

Academia is a strange place – particularly for those looking in from the outside. Those of us who reside within its borders have created, and then perpetuated, this strangeness over decades, in some instances even over centuries, by holding to very particular ways of being and doing. This has significant implications for the academic project¹ – for the teaching that is practised, for the learning that occurs, and for the research that is undertaken. It also has implications for the way in which the academic project moves forward, how it evolves or ‘moves with the times’, and responds to global, national and local imperatives. In this time of significant uncertainty and instability in higher education in South Africa, the way in which academia is positioning itself in terms of the academic project requires our urgent attention. Questions need to be asked about our entrenched practices, yes, the things we hold dear, and to consider the extent to which these might be complicit in the uncertainty and instability. We also need to ask how academia can use its considerable influence to chart a new way forward, to help reframe the way in which we think about the academic project.

These are weighty, complex issues, too weighty and too complex for a single conversation. But they are significant and this evening I thought we could spend time unravelling some of the threads at the very edge of these debates: threads that consider issues of access and participation; threads that relate to learning, meaning making and knowing; threads that expose the matters of power and social justice; threads that ultimately speak to the very heart of the academic project. Therefore, as I acknowledge my insider-outsider role as an educationalist in a faculty of medicine and health sciences, I would like to share some reflections, hopefully trigger some questions, and then propose some suggestions for a way forward. To do so, I will draw on the ideas and understandings that have emerged from my own work as academic and researcher in academia, this strange place, over the past twenty years.

WHY BORDERS AND BOUNDARIES?

First, some definitions. For our purposes this evening, let us accept a definition of ‘Academia’ as the environment or community concerned with the pursuit of education, scholarship and community engagement. The trouble is, however, that in reality there is Academia (with a capital A) – the over-arching community, and then there is academia (perhaps with a small a) – the many sub-communities that exist within it. Academia, therefore, could be likened to a federation, made up of many different states – our disciplines – each vying for legitimacy, claiming for themselves a set of norms and values. Of course, it potentially can become even more complex. In this faculty of medicine and health sciences, for example, we have a consortium of disciplines. We also have a range of professions that intersect with some, or even all, of the different components within the consortium. Barnett (2009:239) describes these ‘states’ as fields that “have been built up over time through communities and ... have an underpinning in a research literature. Such fields are identifiable in their having their own key concepts, truth criteria and forms of life, for example, in their modes of reason and judgement. This is to say that they have their own standards embedded in them”. These ‘standards’ can however change, sometimes quite rapidly, in an ongoing struggle for legitimacy – but more of this later. These fields, argues Barnett (2009:239) “produce a measure of strangeness; they offer perspectives on the world not ordinarily available”. If you wish to belong to academia, to be a member of the ‘epistemic [or knowledge] community’, you typically need to subscribe to the ‘truths’ of that community. For those seeking entry into the community, such as our students, but also newcomers to the institution, citizenship is reliant on the extent to which one can effectively engage within the new state.

¹ The academic project: about the development of knowledge and knowers in ways that are good for the public and the planet. This would subsume matters of social justice, environmental sustainability, the nurturing of critical citizens, the extension of disciplinary boundaries, and the development of blue sky knowledge (McKenna, 2017).

An inevitable by-product of having such communities is that of borders. Borders can be important. They maintain the integrity of what is within, defining what constitutes knowledge (the epistemology) and knowing how to be within a discipline (the ontology). The concept of borders, and their associated boundaries, is therefore also useful in understanding how disciplines and professions come to be distinguished from one another (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Borders can also exclude and alienate; boundaries create insiders and outsiders. They not only define who belongs, they also define who does not.

ALIENATION

In his most recent book entitled *As by fire*, Jonathan Jansen (2017) argues that while financial exclusion can be regarded as 'root of the crisis' #1, 'cultural alienation' is 'root of the crisis' #2. His chapter on this topic speaks to physical monuments of our past, and the memories that we carry with us because of this past. He explores issues of symbols and class, and of language, its potential to alienate, and its inherent power. Jansen's work is known to many in this room. He is often regarded as controversial, even disruptive. Nevertheless, I believe his focus on cultural alienation is a crucial one and has relevance for our discussion about borders.

Alienation, and its nemesis, engagement, are well-developed constructs in higher education. In 2007, Jenni Case from UCT broadly categorised the experiences of undergraduate Engineering students into those that were alienating (in that they experienced an absence of the sort of relationships that they might have wished for or expected) and those that were engaging (facilitated the building of relationships) (Case, 2008). This idea was later explored among postgraduate students in the health sciences by colleagues Bezuidenhout, Cilliers, Van Heusden, Wasserman and Burch (2011), and more recently by one of our MPhil in HPE graduates, Dr Francis Ooko at the University of Limpopo. Their work identified a range of factors that might influence the extent to which a postgraduate student may feel alienated or engaged during her or his studies. These studies highlighted the importance of relationships and of personal histories, hinting at the sort of cultural alienation that Jansen is referring to in his book.

The need to build relationships with our students that will ensure meaningful educational experiences is self-evident. However, establishing these relationships assumes an environment that is enabling, playing fields that are equal and rules that are transparent. It assumes that our students, having accessed higher education, can also belong in that space.

BELONGING WITHIN THE BORDER

What does it mean to 'belong' in academia and how does one get to 'belong'? In his work on social learning systems, Wenger (2000) introduced the notion of communities of practice, a community to which one can 'belong'. A community of practice is defined by what it regards as competence, and members share a 'joint enterprise', have set ways of interaction, and share norms and conventions. They also share a 'language' – a consideration that I will address later. Competence in a community, says Wenger (2000:229), requires "understanding the enterprise well enough to be able to contribute to it ... being able to engage with the community and be trusted as a partner ... to have access to [a shared] repertoire and be able to use it appropriately". According to Wenger, 'belonging' is enabled in three ways: through *engagement*, *imagination and alignment*. These are exciting concepts as they offer insight into how academia moves forward, how novices can potentially obtain membership in a disciplinary space, and how they might influence that space. *Engagement* in this context is seen as doing things with others within that community of practice. *Imagination* refers to a cognitive act of seeing oneself as a member of that community (a reconstruction of an existing identity or the construction of a new identity or identities). *Alignment* speaks to facilitating a synergy between the new ways of thinking and doing that a newcomer may introduce, and the more established practices within the community. His idea of alignment is central as it emphasises that 'legitimate participation' in the community will not exist if newcomers simply adopt an entrenched canon. Former identities need not be shed. Rather, suggests Wenger (2000:239), "our ability to deal productively with boundaries depends on our ability to engage and suspend our identities ... opening up our identities to other ways of being in the world". Rao, Monin and Durand (2005) further point out that what is necessary in sustaining borders is not that the 'insider' should conform to all the conventions of the domain all the time, but rather that she must conform to some of the conventions most of the time. This has relevance for our teaching. Thinking about our work in terms of engagement, imagination and alignment can significantly shift the way in which we approach our work with our students.

CROSSING BORDERS?

It could be argued that while borders and boundaries separate, they are also there to be crossed – to go forth, to explore. Conceptually, ‘border crossing’ deals with the construct of political frontiers and relates to the identity work which those who seek to cross physical borders engage in at the border (Prokkola, 2009). In the context of interdisciplinary work, Klein (1996) and others have argued that the tension that exists between disciplines can be a ‘productive tension’ and thus has relevance for science and practice. However, *crossing borders* can be difficult. It requires negotiation – ‘identity work’. It also requires effort and may involve great risk. Even if you gain entry, you perhaps do not bring the correct currency (the sort of knowledge that is valued) or do not speak the ‘language’. Risk is a key concept to consider in the context of the academic project, in terms of its potential for success as well as for failure.

This idea of risk, and the potential for failure, probably resonates with the experience of many of our postgraduate students. My own work in the Faculty focusses largely on postgraduate studies. Over the years I have developed a keen interest in the way in which postgraduate students navigate their academic journeys, how they experience their transition into their chosen disciplinary community, what sort of barriers (borders) they encounter, how they attempt to cross these borders and how they construct an academic identity within them. A strong disciplinary identity can serve as a catalyst for scholarly and scientific endeavour, and for academic success. Thus, our students’ ‘being’ within a particular discipline or profession (indeed, our own as well) is inescapably intertwined with the extent of their knowing about that particular discipline (Dall’Alba & Barnacle, 2007) and this ‘knowing’ extends far beyond having a solid grasp of the repository of content knowledge that defines the particular discipline. This knowing that facilitates membership also gives students the confidence that they can “put their hands on their hips” (Kamler & Thomson, 2014) because they believe they have come to a point where they have something “worth saying” (Clark & Ivanič, 1997:152). Striving towards having ‘something worth saying’ is implicit in all postgraduate endeavours. Getting to that place signals an arrival, a specific milestone in one’s academic journey.

In academic discourses, having an opinion “is constructed out of scholarship, which involves examining the work of authorities and building a case that is personally meaningful out of their work and one’s own research” (Bougey, 2005:645). Such scholarship is demonstrated, most typically, in the written text,

whether the thesis or the journal article. These texts have to stand up to the scrutiny of peers; peers who represent what is regarded as ‘worth saying’ – following a tradition that had developed over years. In essence, the published written text has become the currency in which academia trades, the vehicle that we use to demonstrate scholarliness and to share the output of our research with others in the field. Writing, therefore, is high stakes for all of us.

WRITING AS A CURRENCY

Writing, however, requires language and language is not neutral. It is much more than a set of technical and grammatical rules. It is the way in which meaning is made and, therefore, the way through which we can contribute to the body of knowledge. It serves as evidence of the intricacies of our thinking – the way in which we conceptualise and rationalise – and the criticality of our reasoning. Its practices are socially embedded, representing the ‘ways of doing’ within the different disciplinary communities described earlier. The choices that we make about the words that we use and the way in which we use them are therefore influenced by the conventions of the group that the individual aligns herself with. In a chapter entitled ‘Academic literacy revisited: A space for emerging postgraduate voices?’, I argued that “language has a powerful symbolic presence in South Africa across the many strata of our culturally rich, yet unequal, society representing both freedom and oppression depending on which language and who is speaking. In the context of higher education, language becomes a weapon of powerful knowledge, and can serve to subjugate and exclude” (Van Schalkwyk, 2016:148). Thus, we see the potential for alienation mentioned earlier.

Writing represents a very specific border for many if not most of our postgraduates. It represents a border for many of us as well. In the context of higher education, the issue becomes particularly complex and plays out along both a vertical and horizontal axis. Firstly, there is a cross-cutting concern with ‘academic’ or ‘scientific’ language which is characterised by an over-arching set of principles, norms and conventions that are generic. This axis is intersected by our different disciplines and professions which further refine these norms and conventions. This results in a layered complexity that is often opaque to those seeking entry into the disciplinary domain. Thus, there is an ideological dimension to what it means to have the requisite literacies in a particular discipline. James Gee, who has conducted seminal work in this field, describes these ‘socially recognisable activities’

as discourses. A discourse, writes Gee (1990:142), “is a sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognise”. Engaging legitimately in the discipline requires the student to have ‘academic literacies’, a knowledge and understanding of these values, norms and conventions (Jacobs, 2005). When we give students a written assignment, we are inviting them to join an academic conversation. Bartholomae (in Shay, Bond & Hughes, 1994:27) argues that when students engage with academic writing, they have to “invent the university for the occasion ... learn to speak our language ... appropriate a specialised discourse”. Gee’s book, *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*, now in its fourth edition, speaks to the power residing in these discourses. And, as we have seen earlier, we value these discourses, set a premium on them, they have specific symbolic meaning and they become privileged. Access to the discourse requires successfully crossing borders.

ON BEING A CHAMELEON

A brief interlude is needed at this point to explain the chameleon metaphor from my title. So far, I have focussed on the implications of having access to disciplinary knowledge and dominant discourses, particularly for postgraduate students and novice researchers – potentially seen as ‘outsiders’ – and with specific reference to the role that writing plays in enabling becoming an ‘insider’. But, as hinted at earlier, these issues play out in cross-disciplinary and interprofessional contexts as well. My own experience on entering a faculty of health sciences without a clinical or a bio-sciences background is a case in point. In 2015, I collaborated with a colleague from the Faculty of Dentistry at UWC, a fellow educationalist, to conduct a duo-ethnography in which we explored our individual experiences of border crossing from one disciplinary space to another. In our study, we drew on the work of Pecukonis, Doyle and Bliss (2008) who, using slightly different language to that of Wenger and Gee, emphasised the cultural practices, characterised by a common set of symbols, values, customs, even dress, that personify the different professions. The distribution of power is often determined by these practices, which then also inform judgements regarding the value and worth of contributions made by the professionals, coming back to the nature of the body of knowledge that is privileged within that profession. At the time, I described my experience of moving back and forth

across the disciplinary or professional ‘border’ as being ‘chameleon-like’ as I sought to take on the mantle of my new home, while still trying to hold on to my former safe space (Van Schalkwyk & McMillan, 2016). We spoke about the challenges we faced in establishing ourselves within these new and different communities, despite the standing we had in our former communities.

It has become axiomatic to talk of the need for interdisciplinary approaches to respond to the complex problems currently besetting the world. Equally, in the context of health sciences, the need for interprofessional practice is no longer questioned. This suggests that many more of us may need to adopt a chameleon-like approach to living on both sides of our disciplinary and professional borders, and demonstrate a willingness to enter into intentional dialogue with one another. Such engagement has the potential to generate introspection and to challenge the beliefs we may hold about one another, adopting an appreciative approach to what the ‘other’ can bring. This can hold true for our postgraduate students as well – particularly those following programmes in health professions or higher education – who enter a new disciplinary space while already holding an established position elsewhere.

ISSUES OF POWER AND KNOWLEDGE

Palmer (1987:22) has argued that “the way we know has powerful implications for the way we live” and “every mode of knowing contains its own moral trajectory, its own ethical direction and outcomes”. This perspective suggests that all knowledge, therefore, should be seen to have value in terms of how we think and act. However, from the discussion thus far it should be evident that there are caveats. That in an academic context, the power is dependent on what knowledge it is, i.e. whether it is knowledge that is valued in that particular domain, and on who the ‘knower’ is, i.e. whether the person is seen as resident within the particular community of practice and therefore has access to the requisite academic literacy (Maton, 2014). Issues of power and knowledge in the context of learning are currently taking centre stage in many debates across the world and particularly in South Africa. Calls for the decolonisation of curricula and for a ‘cognitive justice’ (Leibowitz, 2016), while often focused at undergraduate level, have equal relevance for postgraduate students and for those wishing to enter academia.

In addition, we have seen that because we typically demonstrate our mastery of the discipline through the

medium of the written, printed or digital word, writing also serves as a powerful tool. In this context, we therefore need to ask, who is managing the knowledge; who might be, whether intentionally or unintentionally, acting as a gatekeeper; and to what extent there is room for the novice or newcomer to manoeuvre. Contrary to the sort of alignment advocated by Wenger, Starfield has suggested that in reality the identity of the student writer often becomes lost in the skewed power relationship that exists between supervisor and student, between expert and novice. The written work of the student becomes “a dialogue between unequal participants ... as [t]he lecturer, the institution and the discipline can be seen to map the parameters of both the topic and what might constitute an acceptable response ... [W]hat space is there in this tightly bounded sequence for students to challenge or respond asserting their authority?” asks Starfield (2004:67).

Writing is also a political act. In South Africa, given its complex cultural heritage, it is particularly difficult to ignore the often powerful socio-political overtones that inevitably become part of the debate about academic literacy and, in particular, academic writing. For many postgraduate students in South Africa today, their entry into this boundary space has an additional complexity as it occurs in a second or even third language – a reality that can have further implications as one seeks to progress towards becoming an insider. As noted earlier, our students often come to us with established identities that often have both stature and value in their communities, but that may or may not prove to be enabling when they seek entry into a chosen disciplinary community (Canagarajah, 2002). This entry hinges on the adoption of the dominant discourse and ironically, in the quest for the scholarly voice their own voice can be silenced. Heartbreakingly, Thesen (2013:1) describes how many students in their attempt to sound scholarly will make many compromises in their writing. “In the process of writing,” she argues, “various experiences and modes of expression are revised or erased along the way. In the contemporary higher education landscape ... this problem of erasures and silences is a deeply political issue. What forms and knowledges are being erased? Why? Who benefits, and who remains silent?” These are

crucial questions that require our urgent consideration.

Grada Kilomba, a Portuguese writer, scholar and artist, presents the following in a video entitled “While I write”.

I know that while I write, each word I choose will be examined, and maybe even invalidated.

So, why do I write? I have to.

I am embedded in a history of imposed silences, tortured voices, disrupted languages, forced idioms and, interrupted speeches.

I write, almost as an obligation, to find myself. While I write, I am not the ‘Other’, but the self, not the object, but the subject.

I become the describer, and not the described.

I become the author, and the authority on my own history.

I become the absolute opposition of what the colonial project has predetermined.

I become me.

These powerful words should jolt us into a realisation that while I have been talking to structures and cultures that can enable or constrain access to and participation in the academic space, I have probably done so in a relatively sterile and disconnected manner. This should not allow us to distance ourselves from the experience of alienation and exclusion that is very real for many of our students. Thesen (2013) questions whether, in the process of requiring students to conform to entrenched practices, we acknowledge or recognise the potential impact of removing someone’s sense of self, silencing them completely. And even if there is opportunity for engagement, few students will challenge the disciplinary hegemony that dominates. Few will attempt to ‘rock the boat’. Postgraduate studies, especially at the level of the PhD, can be “very high stakes for such ‘rocking’” (McKenna, 2017). As large numbers of postgraduate students drop out, or remain ‘stuck’ in the system, the question is to what extent we are complicit in so focussing our endeavours to strengthen the internal coherence of our disciplines and professions, that there is little space of the sort of engagement, imagination and alignment that Wenger argued for. Equally ironic is that even our well-meant efforts at intentionally making overt the expectations with regard to academic writing, and the tenets of what scholarship looks like in that field, can serve to entrench the power differential rather than seek to close the gap. So somehow, we need to find a way to negotiate these tensions, to find a balance, and to carve out a way forward.

I have previously argued that I cannot believe that those of us responsible for postgraduate students would deliberately, and with intent, work to negate the knowledge capital that our students bring with them to the academic space. However, it is probably happening all the time, albeit subconsciously. We take very seriously our role as “custodians of the discipline, who have contributed to developing the scholarly and scientific stature of the discipline” (Van Schalkwyk, 2016:147) and we believe it is our responsibility to maintain what we perceive to be its integrity. In so doing, in our supervisory roles, we may function “as gatekeepers to protect the status quo, making decisions about what does or does not contribute to the body of knowledge in our fields” (Van Schalkwyk, 2016:147). We need to guard against being rigid in our thinking and be mindful of how this influences access and success across the sector.

It is not difficult to consider that the calls for decolonisation in recent times could have their origin in the issues raised here. I do not wish in any way to claim an understanding of the many complexities that characterise the decolonisation debates, but I am convinced that the power that resides in the knowledge that we valorise and the discourses that we use to frame it are embedded in that complexity. Wenger (2000:230) has cautioned that communities of practice “are born of learning, but they can also learn not to learn. They are the cradles of the human spirit, but they can also be its cages”. This has implications for access and for legitimate participation in higher education. We therefore cannot ignore the backlash that has been experienced in recent times. We need to ask ourselves if the protests may also to an extent be a form of resistance to the hegemony that has characterised academia for so long. Mignolo (2011) offers strong words arguing that decoloniality implies ‘epistemic disobedience’ – a challenge of the dominant canon. He continues by completely pulling the rug out from under my argument about border crossing and the experience of students seeking to join the disciplinary conversation. Rather, he suggests that “border thinking is by definition thinking in exteriority” and thus he sweeps us away from a focus on the inside, pointing to the potential of what lies beyond.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

I often tell my students that learning should transform the way you see the world. Mezirow describes this far more eloquently when he states that “[t]ransformative learning is learning that transforms problematic frames of reference – sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning, perspectives, mindsets) – to

make [the students] more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (2003:58). Recently, Bitzer and Matimbo (2017) have argued that ‘academic capital’ has value “because of its potential to transform thinking and acting at the individual and societal level”. The idea of students being exposed to transformative learning experiences such that they might contribute to a public good has particular relevance in the context of health professions education. In their Lancet Commission publication entitled *Health professionals for a new century: Transforming education to strengthen health systems in an interdependent world*, Frenk, Chen and colleagues (2010:6) identified transformative learning as being about “developing leadership attributes; its purpose is to produce enlightened change agents”. That agency would be in the interests of health care – access for all and equity across the health care system. In that context, the training of the future health workforce ought to be underpinned by issues of social accountability and social justice. Swanwick (2014) has described health professions education as “a busy, clamorous place, where a host of pedagogical practices, educational philosophies and conceptual frameworks collide ... AND it is a place of increasing accountability and regulation because of its proximity to one of the prime socio-political concerns of government, that of the health of its people”. Bringing a social justice agenda into this discussion is therefore unavoidable.

Social justice has been described as an imperative for higher education in South Africa in the post-apartheid era with the White Paper on Higher Education of 1997 calling for the sector to take on the charge of restructuring an unequal society. So, what could social justice look like in the higher education space? Nancy Fraser (2009) offers a three-dimensional framework to help our understanding. She speaks to the issue of *recognition* – in terms of today’s conversation this would relate to ‘hearing’ and acknowledging the voices of others; *distribution*, of resources and opportunities; and finally, *representation*, legitimately being able to participate in academia’s conversations. These are tangible, do-able concepts that offer a way forward for academia.

REFRAMING THE ACADEMIC PROJECT

My focus this evening has been on the academic project, the development of knowledge and knowers, and the way in which this development plays out across different disciplines and professions. I have argued that knowledge is powerful, and that the guardians of the knowledge – the recognised knowers, the knowledge

community – are therefore equally powerful. I have problematised the way in which language and discourse are not neutral, but rather deeply symbolic and complex, and that this has specific implications for those who seek to represent their knowing within written texts, particularly when they may be less familiar with the norms, values and conventions that characterise the discipline. Ultimately, I have suggested that these issues can represent borders or boundaries that our students, specifically our postgraduate students, have to negotiate crossing over and into their chosen health sciences disciplinary community practice.

Mezirow (2003:60) has cautioned that transformative learning is premised on students' ability to engage in both critical reflection and what he describes as "critical-dialectical discourse" that fosters self-awareness and awareness of others. This assumes that all our students, our aspiring knowers, are able to engage equally in this potentially powerful form of discourse, irrespective of their social, cultural or economic standing. It assumes "cognitive justice" (Leibowitz, 2016). It also assumes a system that is prepared to evolve, shift, tilt, change.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In their special report on Health and Health Care in South Africa published in 2014 in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Mayosi and Benatar painted a stark picture of South Africa's current reality. The article presents a cautionary that the "reversal of legislated racial discrimination" is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for narrowing "the disparities in wealth, health, and education" (2014:1351). They argue that our "complex (perhaps even intractable) local and global health problems require transdisciplinary sociopolitical-economic research projects that could reframe the nature of progress and perspectives of ourselves as local and global citizens". I believe we could say something similar in response to the issues that I have set out this evening. However, "since scientific knowledge is not distributed in a socially equitable way, its interventions in the real world tend to serve the social groups having more access to such knowledge" (de Sousa Santos, 2015:189). We need to think very carefully about what this means for healing, literally, our nation.

We also need to think about what this means for our teaching, and for the academic project. Twelve years ago, Cecilia Jacobs (2005:485) argued for transformative approaches that would lead to the creation of "a 'community of practice' of tertiary educators which transcends the narrow confines of disciplinary boundaries and the compartmentalized nature of HE

academic departments". She also called for "sustainable discursive spaces where dialogue, collaboration and the development of a critical consciousness can take place in an ongoing debate". Her entreaties are possibly more relevant now than ever before, and imply a different way of doing and of being. Zembylas (2013:183-185) has suggested that we seek engagements that would push both student and teacher beyond their comfort zone to a place of 'pedagogic discomfort' where we might interrogate long-held positions; secondly, that we explore areas of 'mutual vulnerability' emerging from the hurt and trauma that many students, and some staff, carry with them as a result of our troubled past; and finally, that we acknowledge the value of compassion and 'strategic empathy' that has the potential to bring student and teacher closer together. Either way, we in higher education are probably in for a rocky ride. The way in which we respond will determine our future.

Currently academia remains a strange place for many in our country. Calls for decolonising the curriculum speaks to the borders and boundaries that have been drawn around the work that we do. Rather than seeking conformity, our endeavours should be towards enabling new voices, achieving "liberating literacy" (Jacobs, 2005) and affirming different knowledges that will challenge dominant thinking and, in so doing, take science forward.

Who will be given social agency is both an epistemological and political question. Whose experience of the past and whose vision of the future will be considered credible? Whose modes of testimony will be allowed to contribute to a shared understanding of the nature of the world? If we are to dream a better future, we will have to attend to practical knowledge and local wisdom. We will have to give many more people access to formal knowledge. And we will have to learn to live in a world in which both of those things are true. (Mickelson, 2004:27)

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