#Decolonise!

Design educators reflecting on the call for the decolonisation of education

Don't Touch Me on My Discipline! Decolonisation, Disciplinarity and the Problem of Curricular Coherence.

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Abstract

Since the mid 1990's, recurriculation efforts in South Africa have been marked by ideological complexity. Although there is general agreement, post-apartheid, that curriculum should contribute to the construction of a just, equitable and democratic post-apartheid society, the question of how to get there is not straightforward. Broadly speaking, in the new South Africa, curriculum reform has been oriented around a liberal democratic notion of transformation. Within this framework, social justice is imagined in terms of equal opportunity and here, the notion of access key. Arguments have been made that curricular coherence and thus disciplinarity are essential to various forms of "access"). Well-designed curricula are said to facilitate epistemological access (Morrow 2009), promote deep learning and foster academic development). Coherent curriculum promotes learner-centeredness, increases social mobility and individual empowerment. The question that remains unanswered is how the liberal-democratic social justice agenda of redress, inclusivity, epistemic access squares with the radicalism of decolonisation (Tuck & Yang 2012, Patel 2015). Using two seminal reports produced in 2013 as departure points – "The Report of the ministerial committee for the review of the funding of universities" and (Nzimande 2013) and "A Proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa I argue that that although disciplinary access is a social justice issues is vital to transform in when this encounters decolonisation tensions and contradiction emerge. This may be because decolonisation is a discourse that is fundamentally and paradigmatically disruptive and decentering of Western rationality. Decolonisation might be said to fundamentally challenge progressive social justice This means making a long-term commitment to experimenting with novel forms of curricular coherence and inventing new approaches to teaching and learning.

Keywords:

Disciplinarity, curricular coherence, design, decolonisation, social justice, recurriculation, South African Higher Education.

Introduction

This paper grew out of insider reflections on two processes taking place in our Faculty. The first was the review of the Undergraduate Design Studies programme offered at the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture to design departments. The other source of reflection was a series of formal Faculty functions whose purpose it was to responding to the call to decolonize.

I gathered from the observing interactions in these events, that many, although identifying as progressive educators saw access to their discipline as *the* key social justice issue. Design academics committed to social justice put access to their discipline first, arguing that it was from gaining access that marginalised and excluded groups, gain mastery in their disciplines so that they come to be creatively and economically empowered. I noticed that progressive educators would "decolonise" on the condition that the integrity of their discipline remain intact. Decolonisation is important, but only in so far as it made what the discipline stronger and enabled educators to align their pedagogies more strongly with facilitating access for marginalised students. Decolonisation might be incorporated into progressive courses, but only it was seen to facilitate the achievement of mastery *within* the discipline itself. It is acceptable to introduce material into courses that challenge the cannon but only if it could be established that these additions enhanced access *in* the discipline.

Why is notion of access in social justice problematic? Decolonial theorists are at pains to emphasise that decolonisation is not just a political project of delinking (Mignolo 2011), inclusion, disruption or destabilisation. Nor is it a tokenistic process of transformation. Rather decolonisation means entertaining a deep *paradigmatic* challenge to Western thought itself. Decolonisation means deliberately challenging the very notion of disciplinarity itself as a Western construct. As a result of the depth and directness of the decolonial challenge, transformation must necessarily be difficult and involve careful and long-term reform of the disciplines. Because decolonisation challenges the fundamental structure of the discipline itself and often its social purpose, it is inevitable that it will sit uncomfortably with many progressive academics who prize epistemological access, curricular coherence of central concerns in their practice.

In what follows I problematize this view and argue that encounters between social justice, access approaches in higher education there is bound to enter a politics of recognition and misrecognition.

Context and background: disruption through the "perpetuation of misrecognition"

The student protests of 2015 might have forced the academy to recognize that apartheid is not an abstraction left to the past but something that continues to be experienced as an oppressive, lived reality for youth participating in higher education. Student activists pointed out that social justice has not been realised under the conditions of a negotiated settlement, that the so-called dividends of liberal democracy have not materialism. Two decades after the first democratic elections the poor, working class black population remains as much a concern as ever. Student activists often remarked that the broader national problem is reflected on an institutional level and in the higher education (HE) system itself. Student activists reminded us that South Africa is not an integrated nor reconciled society and demonstrated this by "inventing" (Brown 2015) new communication contexts on campuses whilst debunking from dominant academic narratives.

Arguably, the resurgence of student dissent, the entrance of the EFF onto the political scene, and the spectacular corruption of the ANC have foregrounded a politics of both recognition and misrecognition in South African public life. It was armed with this kind of politics that

black students, especially at historically white university campuses such as the University of the Witswatersrand, Rhodes University, the University of Cape Town, The University of the North-West and others confronted what they considered to be an untransformed academia.

With a university management on the one hand insisting on "due process" (Rensburg as cited by Jansen 2017, pp. 91, 93-94) and academics erecting notions of discipline, scientificity, objectivity, universality and progress as a defense against them on the other hand, we had, in 2015, a recipe for further and ongoing campus conflict. As Brown rightly observes, "tensions between the university and students tended to decline when the administration engaged within 'invented' spaces, but ratcheted upwards when it sought to bypass them". In heated exchanges that took place between management, academics and students, the terms of misrecognition were perhaps reversed so that it was the academic and managerial habitus itself that was now out of sync with the new forms of legitimacy student activists were "inventing" on the fly, feeling what it means to be alienated.

In staging face-to-face conflicts between themselves, university managements, state officials, academics radical students were able to make a spectacle of their concerns resulting in a mushrooming of student activism across the country over the course of 2015 and 2016. By combining a suite of disruptive tactics and by successfully launching a strategic decolonisation campaign, students activists arguably subverted taken-for-granted "categories of thought" (Bourdieu 1990, p. 141) privileged in the academy. Arguably misrecognition played a key role here in student activism. Through a strategy of deliberately "perpetuating misrecognition" Bourdieu students were able invent spaces in which existing categories of thought might be subverted

> By modifying the classifications in which they are expressed and legitimated, and those who have an interest in perpetuating misrecognition, an alienated cognition that looks at the world through categories the world imposes, and apprehends the social world as a natural world. This mis-cognition, unaware that it produces what it organized, does not want to know that what makes the most intrinsic charm of its object, its charisma, is merely the product of the countless crediting operations through which agents attribute to the object the powers to which they submit. The specific efficacy of subversive action consists in the power to bring to consciousness, and so modify, the categories of thought which help to orient individual and collective practices and in particular the categories thought which distributions are perceived and appreciated (Bourdieu 1990, p. 141).

The irony in this was that two years preceding student action, two reports had been published that might, if implemented might have averted mass protest. I believe that if the Ministry of Higher Education had taken two reports published in 2013 seriously the student protests the 2015/2016 might have been averted.

Access and success as social justice issues in South African Higher Education.

The reports identified the key problems that have been plaguing the higher education sector for the past two decades in South Africa and are exemplars of a social justice approach to transformation. The first is the "Report of the ministerial committee for the review of the funding of universities" (Nzimande 2013). The second is "a proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: the case for a flexible curriculum structure (Ndebele et al 2013).

Taken together, the recommendations from both reports, if implemented, might have transformed the higher education sector for the better. The first report is concerned with issues of material and financial access to HE whilst the second is more concerned with

academic success in the undergraduate HE. Both reports are concerned by the inability of the higher education sector to broadly transform and be transformed terms of notions of access and success. The first report argues that "of great concern is the fact that the participation rates of African and coloured students in higher education remain low compared to whites and Indians" (Nzimande 2013, p. 3). The second report ties this failure of access various structural material problems (Ndebele et al. 2013, p. 32-38) which when combined with the "differentials in students' educational backgrounds" (Ndebele et al. 2013, p. 152) makes realising social justice in the higher education system exceedingly difficult. However, neither report shies away from these problems in their recommendations.

The recommendations of the first report is for a revised funding model that would see the full cost of study for poor families covered by a grant, similar to Ikusasa Student Financial Aid Programme (Steyn, 2017) and the funding for the so-called missing middle increased along with increased subsidy to public universities and the development of more efficient mechanisms to achieve this. Key to this would be,

> [...] revising the NSFAS allocation formula to reflect actual levels of financial need [...]
> This will not only benefit increased numbers of deserving students – including the so-
> called 'missing middle' – but will also assist in addressing the unacceptably high levels
> of student debt especially in the HDIs (Nzimande 2013, p. 27).

The recommendations of this report covering the material and non-material problems in the HE system would go someway in dealing decisively with the problem of a chronically underfunded higher education system (see Jansen 2017). The recommendation put forward by the second report was for the duration of the undergraduate degree to be increased by one year (Ndebele et al. 2013, p. 20) so that it might be made more coherent, flexible and additional content space found for the development of foundational academic literacy. According to the report, the basic problems of success in the system cannot be addressed by access alone (as is addressed in the first report), for the majority of student intake in a massified HE system are unprepared for the demands of university. Despite this, their findings have generally overlooked by policy makers and university leadership since they were published. What neither report does is interrogating why reform must be about access and success and why within this social justice framework, the discipline remains untouched.

As both reports rightly point out, a central problem to the lack of transformation in the HE sector is the "articulation gap" (Ndebele et al. 2013, p. 60) between secondary school subject competence and the disciplinary competences demanded from tertiary education and this certainly has serious curricular and ideological implications. This is not a new problem. Since the mid 1990's, recurriculation efforts in South Africa, certainly at secondary school level, have been marked in their conceptualisation by ideological complexity (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2007; Christie, 2006; Cross, Mungadi & Rouhani, 2002; Jansen, 1998). Although there is general agreement that curriculum should contribute to the construction of a just, equitable and democratic post-apartheid society, the question of how to get there been messy. Broadly speaking, curriculum reform in South Africa has been oriented around liberal democratic notions of transformation on centered on access meaning that the discipline as a construct has remained valorised. Interestingly, decolonisation never really featured as a key 'imperative' in post-1994 recurriculation debates. Was this because, as a sub-imperial power in its own right (Bond 2013) in geopolitical terms South Africa is in no position to decolonize. Or was decolonisation overlooked because it has been "arrested" (Omoyele 2017) by nationalist elites.

Commentators such as Tikly (2003, p. 171) and Muller and Young (2014) point out that "skills-based", technocratic, globalisation, human capital neoliberal discourse that foregrounds access have been most dominant voice in curriculum reform efforts in the new South Africa and have ostensibly crowded out other imperatives such as that for

decolonisation. Outcomes-based education, the National Qualifications Framework are good expression of an access and competency understanding of education in which disciplinarity features strongly and access is foregrounded.

The neutral instrumentalist-behaviourist underpinning of such approaches to access (see Gray 2006, 2011) sideline tricky questions of ideological conflicts and paradigmatic contestations. This might mean that *colonial legacy of the disciplines, as Western constructs,* are left interrogated and thus left in place. So when reports such as these speak of "access" and "success" we might be skeptical and ask, following the line of a decentering and delinking decolonial thought: access and inclusion into what (Patel 2015, p. 93), and how would we organised success as such, and whose version of success are we talking about? How are notions of access and success tied to settler colonial ideologies?

Although a most compelling approach in a context of need such as South Africa, access even if it is a problematic term, is not an uncomplicated affair and not easily realisable, because access is multidimensional. It has a material, epistemological (Morrow 2009) and semiotic dimensions (Muller & Young 2013, pp. 57-72). And as Patel (2015, pp. 34–40) has argued, in contexts of settler colonialism ideas of access to resources, knowledge and research are shot through with territorialism and settler logics. Who decides what counts as knowledge and valuable knowledge at that? A further complication is that resources exist in contexts of mediation and access to the materials are subject to processes of misrecognition. One might argue that the recontextualisation of pedagogical codes and other mediating codes means that knowledge cannot be understood as a resource to be 'accessed', pure and simple or invested in in a capitalist sense. If knowledge is organised into structures as constructivism suggests then what gets lost and gained in the process when knowledge is decolonised and vitally what advances in social justice might be lost in the decolonisation process? We might ask why that if knowledge has a structure inseparable from the knower it is treated as a resource to be found, moved, relocated and packaged – – then what are the implications for learning when following settler logic is characterised as a commodity, a service to be acquired and accumulated or a resource to appropriate for oneself? In overdetermining access the discipline remains a site of colonial privilege and one essentially protected from transformation.

Without asking fundamental questions such as these, those that center on the social function of the disciplines themselves, (their structures, origins, bias and so forth design educations) we might not appreciate the true magnitude of practical work that needs to be done in achieving access especially in contexts of radical cultural, linguistic and socio-economic diversity such as are present in South Africa and more to the point the greater challenge of retrieving knowledge from its status as a commodity or resource. The difficulties in surmounting these problems – problems of access, success and decolonisation- are considerable especially in our unique local context of severe poverty, inequality, uneven development. The authors of the second report rightfully make a centrally important recommendation, without which not much transformation work can be done in higher education including the work of decolonisation. The addition of an additional undergraduate year and/or a flexible curriculum would not only allow the university to address conventional social justice concerns but provide the material and organisational base from which it can take place.

But how is realising solutions to problems of access, success and decolonisation possible if the disciplines as already constructed are to begin with as closed entities, closed by the very forms of coherence that make their existence possible?

All these factors work together, as John Dewey (2004) has argued to, to create a complex relationship between teaching, learning, subject and society in which the question of power must be interrogated. The discipline 'disciplines' as Michel Foucault suggests. What makes

decolonisation interesting is that it is a political discourse capable of reconfiguring knowledge structures through disruption and thus has the power of misrecognition to unsettle and contest established power. This is perhaps why it will be so difficult for the 'decolonisation of knowledge' to take place. The discipline like the academic habitus might be too resistant to change to every be meaningfully decolonised.

The key issue at stake in the discussions about power in learning is that epistemological access is, as Muller argues, mediated by levels of paradigmicity. In harder and pure applied subjects where paradigmicity is high, knowledge and knower are separate, because there are high levels of consensus whereas in softer subjects, knowledge is held by knower and difficult to separate. Paradigmicity might refer to degrees of codification but it also speaks to issues of cultural consensus (Khun as cited by Muller 2009, p. 210) and thus to the culture and values of societies and communities come to shape what knowledge is, what it means and its value. Regardless of whether its integrity as structures are internally or externally defined hard or soft, applied or not applies, the curriculum always carries and encodes cultural values. Thus as Muller (2009, p. 211) asserts, disciplines might be understood as cultures or perhaps more aptly as "tribes" territorialising learning and knowledge producing their own practices of social closure and so on. There are limits and boundaries drawn around each discipline articulating a community of knowers belonging in the disciplines and rejected from it. This applies to knowledge structures in the design disciplines (Giloi & Belluigi, 2017) – that are already culturally inflected. This is true also of the professions which depending on their quality of instrumentalism construct their 'disciplinary-ness"' differently. As Muller remarks,

> Professions like teaching, clinical psychology and social work have joined the traditional professions, and have developed their regional knowledge bases, aspiring to the autonomy and stability of the traditionals but not (yet) in their league, both in terms of their social organisation and their disciplinary robustness (Muller 2009, p. 214).

Whether being pure disciplines, professions, areas or trades there are certainly always customs at play in disciplinary access meaning that some areas out of bounds to hot to "touch", taboos and this is no different than when it comes to design.

The problem of decolonisation for a social justice of access and success

> "Cultural imperialism rests on the power to universalise particularisms linked to a singular historical tradition by causing them to be misrecognised as such" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1999, p. 41).

The invitation to decolonize design calls on us is to recognise the extent to which the knowledge structures such as it is expressed in discipline is in fact an ideological construct wound up with the exercise of social power. One would be hard-pressed to find an example of one 'discipline' – regardless of its qualities - whose structure was not disciplining in the sense of being linked to the enterprise of colonialism. Design played a key role in entrenching colonial dominance through design of public buildings, symbols. The British empire was successful largely due to the fact that it was able to create systems and structures that consolidated colonial rule. In this designers were indispensable in terms of the imposition of foreign symbols, uniforms, architectural structures. From engineering, to linguistics, to the establishment of English literature and anthropology departments, in the hard pure and hard applied subjects, there are ideological forces at play in the construction of the discipline itself and its application.

Fanon (2007) gives an illustrative example of how the cultural conformity encouraged in disciplinary thinking can lead to racism. In Wretched of the Earth he makes the example of

[E]ugenics, where what was taught as a scientific discipline in European universities, only to be found later as a 'discipline' complicit in the exercise and dissemination of of racism. The call to decolonise is perhaps asking us to historicise 'the' disciplines and in so doing recognise the role that they have played in the past in dominating certain groups in in naturalising dominance of the privileged, the extent to which they are wound up in geopolitical dynamics of imperialism, colonialism. This means admitting on the one hand that there is no discipline pure and simple, a neutral knowledge, construct but rather that knowledge is always wound up with power.

This is usually expressed in paradigmicity. Paradigmicity is wound up by the extent to which a discipline recognises the other whether it be everyday life, the subjects it conducts its upon. The level of recognition a given to a discipline gives to those outside of its ambit has great bearing on its ability to impede or facilitate learning through a denial of participation:

> On the one hand, people can be impeded from full participation by economic structures that deny them the resources they need in order to interact with others as peers; in that case they suffer from distributive injustice or maldistribution. On the other hand, people can also be prevented from interacting on terms of parity by institutionalised hierarchies of cultural value that deny them the requisite standing; in that case they suffer from status inequality or misrecognition (Fraser 2007, p. 20).

The discipline seen as a collection of practices and grammars to which students are given entry (Muller 2014, p. 259) can powerfully determine the terms of interaction and thus exclusion as well as have identity forming effects.

The notion of access to "powerful knowledges" (Young 2008) when informed by human capital theory, for instance, might become considerably elitist. Within this framework, social justice is imagined in terms of equal opportunity and here again, the notion of disciplinary access remains key. I have presented arguments that curricular coherence (Muller, 2009) are essential to various forms of access (Ndebele et al. 2013), that well-designed curricula are crucial to facilitate epistemological access (Morrow 2009), promote deep learning and foster academic development. Coherent curricula promote learner-centeredness, increases social mobility and individual empowerment. The question that remains unanswered is how the liberal-democratic social justice agenda emblematised in the idea of access and success squares with the call for decolonisation given the already fraught relationship between these approaches (Tuck & Yang 2012; Pate, 2015). Decolonised curriculum might produce forms of knowledge that are more progressive than those based on redress, inclusivity and epistemic access. Taking on decolonisation demands a long-term commitment to inventing and experimenting with novel forms of coherence.

Decolonisation, decoloniality is a discourse that is fundamentally and paradigmatically disruptive and thus must as is implied by my argument, logically challenge the very idea of the disciplinarity. In its radical critique of Western rationality (Maldonado-Torres 2007), decolonisation theory challenges the settler logic of access. It calls - if such a thing might be possible - for a return to knowledges that have been lost and the creation of new, deterritorialised forms of being in the world (Mignolo 2009). This can threaten both the ontological and epistemological basis for the discipline as well as the teaching and learning strategies developed by teaching academics to enhance what has been termed epistemological access. There is a certain enunciative irresistibility about decolonisation as a fact as (Tuck & Yang 2012, p. 4) suggest:

> When metaphor invades decolonisation, it kills the very possibility of decolonisation; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future. Decolonise (a verb) and decolonisation (a

noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks. The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonisation is yet another form of settler appropriation. When we write about decolonisation, we are not offering it as a metaphor; it is not an approximation of other experiences of oppression. Decolonisation is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. Decolonisation doesn't have a synonym.

Conclusion

How is decolonial thinking useful as a social justice approach?

Decolonial theory forces us as academics, educator, students to ask difficult questions about the histories, origins and ontologies of 'our' so-called 'disciplines' - art, design, architecture:

- Whose knowledge is important?
- Whose history is important?
- Whose creativity is important?

Although powerfully relevant a decolonial approach must be evaluated by its ability to make sense of the big problems and struggles in 'our' society regardless of whether it challenges innocence. Is this be adequately done in design through a decolonial approach? Will decolonisation assist design students and academics to solve deep structural problems in South Africa of poverty, xenophobia, unemployment, inequality, domination, racism, sexism, climate-change, land and control, sovereignty, the nature of the state, democracy, the destruction of habitat? Similarly, how do discourses of access and success, as discourses tinged by cultural imperialism, deal with the struggles and problems of our time? I have suggested in this paper that the idea of disciplinarity as a social justice issue must be problematised if we hope to advance decolonial struggles.

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