



# #FREE YOUR MIND: INTERROGATING OUR EPISTEMOLOGIES IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

*The most powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed (Steven Bantu Biko)*

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# BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

- Decolonisation discussions have been smouldering prior to the demise of apartheid (see Jansen, 1991 – Knowledge and Power in SA)
- #fees must fall 2015/2016 created the momentum required to intensify the discussions in higher education institutions (Booyesen, 2017)

- #FMF not the only student uprising since 1994
- But one that got the world's attention
- Davids and Waghid (2016) argue that previously disadvantaged institutions have been routinely protesting with little or no media coverage
- But when the historically advantaged institutions strike then the maximum media coverage is a “stark reminder of post apartheid South Africa's embedded inequalities” (Davids & Waghid, 2016).

- Apartheid university mergers were counterproductive to the intention of levelling the playing fields
- Students migrated away from disadvantaged institutions to seek the greener pastures of well resourced institutions
- Message of hope from our democratic leaders - education = better life
- If your child can access a university education then your family would achieve some redemption from poverty

- Indeed a grave mistake but fed into the age old colonial and apartheid tradition of brainwashing the less privileged
- Inside the walls of higher education - robust action in respect of transformation was anticipated (curriculum, assessments, pedagogies, etc)
- Alas, transformation amounted to increased Black student intake - everything else remained the same (eg. 12 students to 100 students with 6 f/t staff @ historically advantaged institution)

Question!!....where were OUR academic voices in catalyzing socially just change in HEIs?

How responsible were we in upholding the human rights of students?

- The Black student is seen to be in need of being brought up to “standard” (Ralekhetho, 1991)...whose and what standard?

- We continue to use our colonial knowledge acquisition as power over the Black student
- Developing bridging modules is testimony to this...the Black student must be brought up to standard so that quality education can be ensured (Vilakazi & Tema, 1991).
- Are the terms “standards” and “quality” bandages for protecting ourselves from the perceived 3<sup>rd</sup> degree burns we may encounter if we create open spaces for conversations with our post merger student population - without first interrogating where knowledge comes from (iow our epistemologies)

- Now I stand accused as an academic because never did I stand up at a Faculty Board meeting and say that I am violating social justice and human rights because I am a colonially educated academic and have not been emancipated from the clutches of colonial epistemology
- How about you?

# MAINTAINING COLONIAL KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS IN SOCIAL WORK

- Some contextually relevant SA social work texts were written post 1994
- but literature in these texts still draw heavily on European and American knowledge
- This points to limited Black student and community voices informing the research that led to the information contained in the texts
- For eg. recent discussions with students revealed that the history of social work is not documented from an African perspective; where do children's feelings feature in African cultures

- Numerous articles have been written by a slowly increasing number of Black African academics
- But our 2 SA journals are housed, managed and administered from historically advantaged institutions with little representation on editorial boards of academics from historically disadvantaged institutions

# HAS THE BSW MOVED US FORWARD?

- In social work we have advanced
- We have one national undergrad qualification - BSW
- Post apartheid victory - all graduates will now exit with one qualification with “African aligned” ELOs....mainly pertaining to the SA Constitution & Bill of Human Rights
- Theory, skills and off campus practice learning still characterize the qualification

- As do the methods of casework, groupwork, community devpt, research, admin and supervision
- How relevant are these methods of practice in the SA context?
- In addition, the social development approach was cosmetically infused in some modules but is more prominent and integrated now in re-curriculated modules

- question...is S/D the route to follow?
- What about emancipation of communities and freedom of choice?

The story of the pig and the tree

# WHAT ARE OUR BSW ACADEMIC TRUTHS?

- Constrained practicum placements if we find them at all in social work organisations
- Students report that they are “glorified admin officers” and seen as “foster care officials”
- Very few report that they can successfully convene and run a therapeutic group and comm devpt program according to the S/D approach
- Hard to pin down experienced supervisors in the field to give undivided attention to student supervision

- Research projects are daunting in 4<sup>th</sup> yr. with additional challenges of working in groups - academic supervisors and group members are overstretched
- Class attendance dwindles - institute registers so that we have an audience ... as if attendance = learning
- Assessments perplex students - don't know what lecturers want and academics dread the volume of marking and make up assessments

# COULD WE HAVE USED THE AUDITS DIFFERENTLY?

- With the somewhat bitter taste of the SACSSP and CHE audits still lingering...

Did we think critically enough so as to turn the audits into opportunities to “showcase” our glaring systemic and structural challenges and

To request collaborative thinking from our peers on the panels on how to decolonize the curriculum

OR

Did we convince ourselves whilst on the conveyor belt, rummaging and producing in the technocratic tradition... that we are actually doing a sterling job in the delivery of our BSW qualification

It is time to stop the conveyor belt so that we can critically reflect on our epistemologies (where does knowledge come from?)

STOP producing technically competent graduates who do not have a say in their acquisition of knowledge...just like we didn't have a say all those years ago

# EPISTEMOLOGY

- Study of our method of acquiring knowledge encompassing nature of concepts, constructing of concepts, validity of the senses, logical reasoning, thoughts and ideas
- Summed up as the “theoretical knowledge base and our underlying assumptions about the process of knowing”
- Begs the question: what are the principles and rules by which I believe reality should be known?

# MY EPISTEMOLOGICAL STANCE

- Social reality is best understood by the students voices since they are the actors in their daily worlds and most able to deliver their truths with sufficient depth and detail
- Therefore I argue that epistemology interrogation is a pre requisite in our employment because...
- **ACADEMICS GET PAID TO THINK** (Blignaut, 2016) and thereby generate knowledge

- We fall into technocratic traps because compliance and conformity are safe strategies
- education is commodified and excellence prophecised as the destination
- Rarely pausing to question and interrogate with our students and colleagues, the answers to for eg: why a therapeutic group may be difficult to convene?

# WHAT DO HIGH PASS RATES INDICATE?

- Success and effectiveness of teaching and learning?
- the deeper reality is that we have successfully and effectively plied students into colonized moulds and made them technicians of learning (Mamdani, 2016)
- We have taught them to master how and what to learn from our own epistemologies which were shaped by colonial knowledge systems

# CRITICAL SELF REFLECTION AND CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING...EPISTEMOLOGY INTERROGATORS

Issues for academic self reflection....

- Have we knowingly or unknowingly been using prescriptive (theoretical) and predictive (experiential) knowledge as instruments of power?
- Do we control our students with the knowledge we possess?
- Are we experts?
- How do historical academic rituals (eg. initiations, prizegivings) dehumanize and marginalise masses of students?
- How does a marking memo limit knowledge creation?

# CRITICAL SELF REFLECTION (MEZIROW, 1990)

- CSR means to become critically aware of our own presuppositions
- Involves challenging established and habitual patterns of expectation
- Challenging institutionally accepted methods of problem solving
- Reorienting problem solving efforts in a more thoughtful and just manner

- CSR requires time and emotional investment
- Involves asking the reasons for and the consequences of what we do and not how to do (technical solutions)
- Freire (1970): the adult educator is a precipitator and facilitator of learning

- My CSR reveals that we have been facilitators of colonial knowledge systems for far too long
- Creation of African knowledge production incubators are long overdue
- These incubators can make us precipitators of indigenous knowledge

# CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING (HART, 1990)

- CR with and among students and academics is geared towards emancipation
- Once our minds are free, possibilities to think creatively and consciously will abound
- Steve Biko lived and died upholding Black Consciousness trying to transform Black peoples' thinking to reflect ownership of their lives and land

- CR is premised on intrapersonal and then social transformation
- Derived from experiences of oppression as opposed to a coherent body of theory
- SA situation is suited to similar methods of theory and knowledge generation in our fertile academic research grounds
- Against the background of SA HEIs, a call for “positive discrimination” must be sounded to foreground anti oppressive theories, structural theory, critical theory, feminist theory to name a few
- This will unmute students and encourage open sharing of experiences

# USING THE PRINCIPLES OF CR TO GENERATE INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

The principles of CR:

1. Acknowledgement of oppression
2. Importance of personal experience
3. Homogeneity of the learning group

## 1. Acknowledgement of oppression:

- Work with a willing group are representative of a marginalized, oppressed population
- Principle rests with the academic's interpretation of what constitutes oppression
- Identify and acknowledge how you may be complicit in upholding oppressive practices such as technocratic operational systems
- Acknowledge that you hold power in the form of colonial knowledge systems which is inherently oppressive

## 2. The importance of personal experience

- Allows students to identify with the academic's personal experience relative to the students' personal experiences
- Academic identifies as either oppressed or privileged to move forward
- Non rushed process, no pressure to take decisions
- Calls for the academic to “undo” ways of knowing before CR can be meaningful
- Points to extreme CSR for both parties

### 3. Homogeneity of the learning group

- CR needs an emotionally safe space to incubate
- Conditions of mutuality and reciprocity must exist
- Because power relations exist between academic-student relss, major differences and inequalities must be acknowledged
- Consciously raise similarities in experiences - enhances homogeneity
- Rotate leadership roles, group tasks, and equal say in group processes to enable cohesion for CR to begin

- Unequal power relations are a barrier in the academic-student relationship
- Freire (1970) advises that the academic's display of sincere commitment to the social context of oppression and the common vision of emancipation will remove this barrier
- Personal experience is the basis of CR but must co exist with anti oppressive theoretical constructs to make deeper sense of our experiences and generate new knowledge

- CSR and CR are interdependent
- Aim is to arrive at an awareness of reality
- By unlearning safe knowledge (interrogating our epistemologies), questioning and discarding normative, irrelevant traditions and fostering inclusion of all human beings then we can generate and sustain socially just indigenous knowledge
- Our students hold the keys...let us put the locks on the table

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