

WORKING DOCUMENT/THINKPIECE

For discussion at the April meeting of the STUDY OF EDUCATION AT UJ group

WHAT IS THE CALL FOR THE DECOLONISATION OF KNOWLEDGE REALLY ABOUT?

Inquiry notes by Gert van der Westhuizen, 15 3 16

1. The calls to decolonize knowledge became more prominent in 2015, led by students, followed by politicians and academics. At UJ the response to the call is being taken seriously on an institutional level. The real challenge however, is on the level practice; what staff members make of this individually and collectively, and what they do about it.
2. It is a serious call – an allegation, accusation, ‘aanklag’ that changes in education around and after 1994 have not made any difference in communities. The prevalence of raw racism, continued discrimination, new forms of othering and subjugation confirms the seriousness, and the need for healing (Odora Hoppers).
3. The need for healing in education is deep-seated – we have generations of South Africans, including people from the rural areas, who have been systematically excluded and who have not participated in knowledge building in society. Healing is necessary of wounds resulting from exclusion, of not knowing, of being subjugated, of growing up without the benefits of rich languages and cultures of all South Africans.
4. Universities, as places of knowledge building, have pursued their science mission in traditional, historic, and mainly Western ways of doing, rewarded and reinforced by the education system, university management, and government funding.
5. The call for decolonizing knowledge/curriculum begs the question – what is the problem with knowledge/curriculum? Accepting that knowledge is central to university work, this is a question about the problems with the whole knowledge development enterprise – from identifying knowledge needs, prioritizing research foci/topics, agreeing purposes, and decisions about methodologies and required outcomes of research. What is problematic in current research practice? What are the assumptions and worldviews dictating methodological choices and practices? What are the intended and unintended hurting and suffering consequences of the endeavors of the whole enterprise of science?
6. The call for decolonizing knowledge is a call for cognitive justice – for the right of knowledges to exist, be valued, and used in society for projects of human development and democracy (Odora Hoppers; Visvanathan). It is also about reconfiguring the understanding of what knowledge is valued, i.e. not only ‘scientific knowledge’, but also

community knowledge developed by thought leaders/community knowledge holders. Decolonization is about taking action to bring justice to conceptions of knowledge, how knowledge is valued, and how knowledge is produced and developed.

7. The educational knowledge that is officially valued, and used in schooling to shape curricula, textbooks, teaching methods, is the result of the educational research in Faculties of Education. Research priorities and practices, research methodologies and paradigms, and the knowledge about good teaching and education is the core of Education specialists and researchers in Faculties of Education. They shape the whole schooling system and the education of future generations.
8. The call “decolonize the curriculum” can be taken as the answer to the question of how relevant, responsive, appropriate, authentic is the curriculum? Deliberations about these questions need to keep in mind the politics of knowledge (Weiler, Cross); how curricula serve social interests and act as “disciplining technology” (Apple, Popkewitz); the morality of knowledge in pedagogic interactions (Stivers); how knowledge is used for ‘othering’ (Fataar, Keet); pedagogic discourse as political acts (Sawchuk); science as the political economy of ‘othering’ (Odora Hoppers); cultural underpinnings of knowledge (Saurette); universities’ social contract with society (Odora Hoppers and Sandgren); the social epistemology of educational research and the historically generated principles of teacher education (Popkewitz); how teacher educators produce research which dictate notions of good practice (Biesta); knowledge for the public good (Stiglitz), and so on.
9. The question of decolonization is a political question. It is also a question of relevance, authenticity and democratic ideals. What is good education? What is education for? Who benefits? How can education be transformed to be “education for all” in the true sense of the word? What is really involved in education for democracy, social and moral justice, citizenship; education [not just schooling] that brings and holds people together at the deepest level?
10. Behind/before the question of decolonizing knowledge there are questions about the make-up of the academy, traditions of science which privilege western worldviews and our thinking about what is valuable knowledge, and the need to expand knowledge work to include community knowledge holders, rethink knowledge processes, etc.
11. Faculties of Education have a leading role to play in the intellectual work on decolonizing knowledge – to help understand and problematize curriculum transformation, build capacity for conversational leadership (to shift from debate to conversation), conceptual clarifications (knowledge and curriculum politics),

transforming notions of good teaching, introducing indigenous research paradigms and methodologies, etc.

PROPOSALS FOR WAYS FORWARD

1. Thinking about the problem and the imperatives of restorative actions need to be deepened. What is the knowledge problem in education and in teacher education, in terms of research, and curriculum thinking?
2. Thinking about the need for restorative actions need to be deepened. What would it take to work towards cognitive justice, i.e. the acknowledgement and development of multiple knowledges?
3. Deepening thinking can be facilitated by means of commissioned inquiries, and inquiry conversations.
4. Inquiry conversations are interactions where people share an interest in a problem/question that is worth considering, and where they have space to pursue their personal inquiries – about relevant, related questions on their minds, and where they study their own experiences of practice, share with others, and use the insights in plenary to work with others to answer the original question. A meaningful inquiry conversation works with one question, allows individual and collective inquiries, and produces collective answers.

Inquiry conversations are not debates – debates serve ego needs, and encourage confrontation and winning, while inquiry conversations work towards collective insights.

5. Given the national call for the decolonization of knowledge and the curriculum, what is the role of Faculties of Education in institutional transformation? How can we advance deeper levels of inquiry, across Faculties, into the challenge of curriculum transformation, in terms of relevance, responsiveness, authenticity?