
Introduction - Part II

Decolonising the university curriculum given a dysfunctional school system?

Jonathan Jansen

I recently had occasion to visit one of the top girls' schools in Zimbabwe. This high school of young black women produced some of the leading graduates in the sciences and mathematics on the continent. Their matriculants could be found top of class in South Africa's leading research universities in math-requirement disciplines like actuarial science, human genetics and computer science. Since I was early I wandered through the school grounds and found myself in the simple but spacious school chapel. Behind the seats in every pew there was a Christian hymn book, as could be expected in an independent church school that survived both colonial rule and the nominally Marxist government following independence. I sat down, opened the hymn book and there was the opening song: 'God save our gracious King'. If this school was in South Africa during the student protest movement, I thought to myself, there was a good chance the hymnals would be burnt, if not the chapel, in the name of decolonisation. That the school produced outstanding black graduates in challenging disciplines would be irrelevant.

In the 2015–16 student protest movement on South African university campuses there was a short but intense period of demands for the decolonisation of former white institutions and, in particular, a call for the decolonisation of the curriculum. While the curriculum call was quickly superseded by more basic demands such as free higher education for all students, it left in its wake a series of institutional energies that took the original demand at its word. An American foundation made millions available for decolonisation research and some of the more established universities brought to life curriculum committees to act on the demand for decolonisation. It was not surprising, therefore, that four of the six articles submitted to this *Special Issue* deal with the vexing problem of the curriculum question in South African universities.

What is the significance of the call for the decolonisation of curriculum? Will it make a difference to the institutional curriculum? In other words, is the call

itself sustainable within the fast-changing agendas of student politics and the direction of government policy in relation to higher education? Or was the promise of a ‘decolonial turn’¹ merely a passing fad that offered a potentially exciting moment in the politics of knowledge but one that would – like so many other earlier initiatives – collapse under the weight of curriculum stasis?

Lis Lange, in this collection, takes the long view. As she correctly notes, a series of curriculum reforms since the 1990s changed the exoskeleton of the curriculum but left the soft and sensitive inner parts – the endoskeleton – untouched.² That outer frame of changes came down to refined debates about learning outcomes tailored to the production of high-level skills for economic growth. There would be a progressive, ladder-like qualifications structure that would allow enable seamless passage for workers from sweeper to engineer, in the heady language of those times. The policy goals of the new country were breathtaking in their ambitions but as Lange concludes, nothing fundamentally changed in terms of the substance (content, pedagogy, assessment) of curriculum. In her telling of the curriculum narrative, the enormous investment in a national qualifications framework, and its exit-level outcomes, would come to be replaced by more immediate and ‘practical’ concerns about efficiency – addressing the low throughput and graduation rates of university-enrolled students. What Lange does not address is why this was the case; that is, was the real curriculum debate simply deferred for the sake of the transitional peace or was the transformation of knowledge assumed to be part and parcel of these union-inspired policy reforms focused on workplace transformation?

That there is a knowledge problem in South African universities is not in question.³ Long before some students raised the flag about ‘decolonisation’ of the curriculum various scholars had made the point repeatedly that the

¹ It is Saleem Badat who boldly inserts the term into the ferment of debates on the transformation of higher education in the wake of the student protest movement; Badat, S. (2017) Trepidation, longing, and belonging: Liberating the curriculum at universities in South Africa, University of Pretoria, Public Lecture Series on *Curriculum Transformation Matters: The Decolonial Turn*, 10 April.

² For the first use of the metaphor, see J.D. Jansen (2009), *Knowledge in the Blood*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, p.174.

³ Jansen, J.D. (2017b), The lost scholarship of changing curricula, *South African Journal of Science*, 113 (5,6).

institutional curriculum remained unaltered.⁴ Sayed and others, in this volume, argue that position in relation to teacher education curricula across a sample of South African universities. The curriculum problem matters in terms of content and its relevance to African conditions but also because of the ethnocentric character of curriculum authorship; in other words, who teaches what to whom and where – raising, in the last instance, the institutional complexity (or what they call ‘multi-layered struggles’) under which curriculum change is pursued. In other words, curriculum transformation is limited by institutional conditions like the decline in state funding and the prior socialisation of academic teachers. What is required, these three authors argue, is a much more ‘expansive imagination’ when it comes to thinking about curriculum work.

Brenda Leibowitz takes up this challenge with her review of a powerful set of concepts for the re-imagination of curriculum thought and practice. For her the ‘social realist’ position on knowledge and curriculum is the problem; she charges social realism with separating knowledge from doing, learning from experience, and cognition from emotion. In its place Leibowitz argues for cognitive justice – a normative position that advances the equal treatment of all forms of knowledge. The domination of Western knowledge, she insists, has marginalised, even museumified, alternative knowledges. We take as self-evident the organising principles and internal logics of dominant knowledge formations across the disciplines. Recognising other knowledge forms, bringing them into dialogue and tying these to an ethical commitment, such as social justice, not only broadens the knowledge repertoires available to students but remedies vital absences from the public curriculum.

While these conceptual forays into curriculum thought are invaluable in the present period, students on Monday morning still show up for classes and this is where Eunice Nyamupandengu takes off in her contribution to this edited collection of journal articles. An academic teacher of genetics, the author decides to open up what she calls ‘social dialogues’ with her students. Her opening question in the engagement with students is as simple as it is rare among university teachers anywhere: What do you expect from me as your lecturer for this genetics course? Student expectations are, unsurprisingly, concerned with the practical and the immediate – to know what will be taught

⁴ Jansen, J.D. (2009); see also M. Mamdani (1998) Is African Studies to be turned into a new home for Bantu Education at UCT? *Social Dynamics*, 24(2), 63–75.

and to be well-taught and fairly assessed. Nyamupandengu is concerned with how her very diverse body of students can access specialist ideas – or epistemological knowledge, as she calls this borrowed term. In lectures and the laboratories, how can students access and command complex knowledge in the field of genetics? To answer such questions, she asks her students.

These four contributions add value because they enter the debate from very different vantage points – as a curriculum developer (Liebowitz), a policy maker (Lange), a geneticist (Nyamupandengu) and as teacher educators (Sayed *et al.*). They each define curriculum differently and give differential weight to discussions about the theoretical and the practical when it comes to decolonisation. Together they advance our thinking on curriculum change. But there are questions and I wish to raise and reference them in relation to various studies which I have published in other places as contributions to *curriculum criticism* in South Africa.⁵

To begin with, I am not at all convinced that the call for the decolonisation of curriculum carried much practical import among the student protestors. In other writings I have spent time considering the enormous symbolic value of curriculum in the politics of education that has little to do with the problematics of change.⁶ The curriculum, in short, is a familiar weapon drawn in battles between students and authorities, politicians and universities, churches and schools, scientists and educators. When there is a moral panic of any kind, the curriculum is both the problem and the solution to resolving public tensions. It is useful in this regard to think of a curriculum as a flag – it is carried into battle to signal intentions even though the flag itself matters little in the context of the broader struggles being fought. For this reason the rapid shift in student politics from demands for the decolonisation of curriculum to demands for material relief under the banner of fees-must-fall

⁵ By *curriculum criticism* I mean a critical assessment of the qualities of concepts, their underlying arguments and assumptions, their histories and aesthetics, their values and politics, as expressed through curriculum claims made in different public forms

⁶ See chapter 7 in J.D. Jansen (2017a), *Sense and Non-sense in the decolonisation of curriculum*. In author's *As by fire: The end of the South African university*, pp153–171. Cape Town: Tafelberg Publishers; see also J.D. Jansen (2002) Political symbolism as policy craft: Explaining non-reform in South African education after apartheid, *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(2), 199–215.
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02680930110116534?journalCode=tedp20>

did not surprise me at all. The curriculum had done its flag-waving duties, so to speak.

On the one hand, Lange is correct that the curriculum call by students still has ‘importance and impact’ despite its displacement by the fees movement, and Liebowitz is also on the mark when she mentions the ‘abstract’ value of curriculum thought beyond immediate practicalities such as design matters. But my deep concern is that the reaction by progressive academics has been completely out of proportion to what the students raised in the first place. It was, to be blunt, an opportunistic reaction to what for most of the protesting students was a flag-waving exercise.

To begin with this, the call for the decolonisation of curriculum came from a very small group of protestors from for the most part 3–4 universities. That some progressive scholars ran with the label (decolonisation) and started important curriculum conversations said more about academic enthusiasm than about student persistence. The overwhelming majority of students in South African universities speak and demand like Nyamupandengu’s students – ‘to be provided with sufficient notes’. Their expectations of higher education are instrumental and immediatist in the narrowest of senses, a problem I explored in some depth in relation to the only university-wide interdisciplinary core curriculum for all first-year students at the University of the Free State.⁷ The resistance was intense especially from student leaders who in political terms considered themselves to be part of the progressive left. All of this happen, at considerable costs, before the 2015/16 student protests.

Having made the demands – for decolonisation of the curriculum – many universities complained about getting students into those critical curriculum conversations on a consistent basis to take forward such important dialogues and to change the institutional curriculum. If the curriculum is a flag to fight other battles, then such frustration on the part of committed curriculum workers is inevitable. Of course the problem is also more than that. Students have limited time and they are there to achieve their degrees. Curriculum work demands enormous sacrifices and an investment of learning time for those who are not experts in the relevant fields. Students come and go, seniors graduate and leave. So curriculum committees with elaborate names are not

⁷ Jansen, J.D. (2016), *Leading for change: race, intimacy and leadership on divided university campuses*. London: Routledge.

going to survive among transient students whose agendas change from one period to the next.

There remains, however, a more serious problem in the academic reaction to the decolonisation demands. It was the carelessness with which the term itself was embraced without the kinds of conceptual (and also political) interrogation that was urgently required. One of the tasks of a critical scholarship is to test the veracity of emerging concepts and ideas as they surface within society in general and universities in particular. So when a handful of protestors lobbed the term 'decolonisation of curriculum' into the corridors of some prominent universities, what followed was an almost slavish acceptance of student language and a feverish determination to give it traction in academic practice. But what does decolonisation even mean? Is it the kind of language that adequately describes curriculum stasis in South Africa? If those are the terms, what exactly is the colonial project more than two decades into democracy? And what is the colonial project in a context where, as one scholar puts it, colonialism is non-resident?⁸

One of the reasons for the conceptual muddle that followed was that the persons punting the language of decolonisation were not curriculum theorists in the first place. They were everybody – from undergraduate activists to engineers and linguists to anthropologists and postgraduate communication science students. Conceptions of curriculum were all over the place as were the few attempts to even give meaning to decolonisation or decolonisation of curriculum. No disciplinarian, such as a social psychologist or vertebrate anatomist, would take kindly to non-specialists delving uninvited into the concepts and methods of their field with militant opinions about what should be; but this was curriculum theory where everyone believes they know. As a result, a long history of grappling with these ideas were ignored and the fervent politics of the moment overrode any attention to curricular meanings, methods and motivations.⁹

⁸ Francis, B. Nyamnjoh (2016) *#RhodesMustFall: Nibbling at resilient colonialism in South Africa*. Bamenda, Cameroon: Langa RPCIG (Research & Publishing Common Initiative Group), p.1.

⁹ In response I tried to unravel some of these social meanings of decolonial thought and associated terms in curriculum history; see Jansen (2017a).

One manifestation of the conceptual clumsiness in these debates is reflected in the position that everything wrong with the university curriculum is now presumed to be ‘colonial’ since the urgent political task is to replace or reposition repugnant knowledge. But the dilemmas of curriculum often referenced – such as the under-teaching of poor students or the privileging of scientific rationality – are universal problems that cannot be reduced to colonial roots or apartheid motivations. Such knee-jerk responses to global problems of knowledge and identity were on display at the embarrassing science panel at UCT where a non-science student demanded attention for alternative scientific explanations for elders in her community summoning lightning to deal with their enemies. The only thing sadder than that display of ignorance were the fawning attempts by some academics, no less, to seek justification for the student’s reasoning.

Another conceptual sleight-of-hand in ‘decolonial’ activism in South Africa is to set alight and then hose down a curriculum straw man – that Western forms of knowledge is one thing, such as the separation of cognition from experience, and what is therefore needed is an African-centered knowledge of the indigenous variety that will correct such Cartesian views of the world. This is of course misleading, to put it mildly, for it is the so-called West that spawned over more than a century a wide range of curriculum responses to establishment theory whether Cartesian or Taylorist or Reproductionist in their claims on knowledge and society. Those curricular responses range from the liberal standpoints of John Dewey in *Experience and Education*¹⁰ to the radical positions of Michael Apple in *Ideology and Curriculum*¹¹ and countless others under the broad curriculum umbrella of the resistance theory¹² and the broad band of alternative theorists once called reconceptualists.¹³ In fact the most profound responses to colonial knowledge (to coin a phrase) came from within the West itself as several of us showed in

¹⁰ John Dewey (1938) *Experience and education*. New York: Macmillan.

¹¹ Michael Apple (2004). *Ideology and curriculum* (3rd edition). Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

¹² The classic text here remains Henry Giroux’s (2001) *Theory and resistance in education: a pedagogy for the opposition* (2nd edition). Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

¹³ Pinar, W. (1978). The reconceptualization of curriculum studies. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 10(3), 205–214.

much earlier writings on the subject.¹⁴ The critical tune in South Africa's curriculum resistance that holds up the evil West against the noble African sounds, at least in epistemological terms, false.

Then, if you believe the decolonialists, the curriculum has not changed at all since 1994. But as I have indicated elsewhere,¹⁵ there have been some remarkable curriculum reforms across universities in South Africa in recent times led by African scholars often in partnership with colleagues in universities across the world.¹⁶ The examples given were cardiovascular research led by Bongani Mayosi at UCT, as well as AIDS research inspired by Quarraisha Abdool Karim and Salim Karim at UKZN, and the critical histories of mining in Southern Africa at the UFS under the leadership of Ian Phimister. These are massively funded research programmes producing African graduates from across the continent. These research programmes are not controlled by knowledge agencies in the North working with junior partners in the South. Benefits are reciprocal and learning is mutual. In these and many other cases knowledge is entangled in mutual interests and collaborations rather than imposed on innocent and impotent victims of external powers. These changing relations of knowledge/power remain under-theorised in the curriculum literature but what they do perform, for now, is a different and more complex set of relationships across borders that the dated language of 'decolonialism' simply cannot account for.

The very language of decolonisation of curriculum is therefore inappropriate and even misleading in 21st Century South Africa. Unless of course white South Africans are colonialists who should be driven into the sea and who's outsized influence on the public curriculum hold us hostage in a black majority country under black governance for two decades. Our curriculum problems are much deeper than such one-dimensional frames as decolonisation. And by the way, we trap already disadvantaged children and

¹⁴ See the edited collection under Jansen, J.D. (Ed.). (1991). *Knowledge and power: critical perspectives across the disciplines*. Johannesburg: Skotaville Press.

¹⁵ Jansen, J.D. (2017b). The lost scholarship of changing curricula. *South African Journal of Science*, 113(5,6).

¹⁶ Jansen, J.D. (2018). Decolonising the curriculum and the Monday morning problem. Foreword to Chaunda, L. Scott and Eunice N. Ivala (Eds), *The status of transformation in higher education institutions in post-apartheid South Africa*. London: Routledge.

youth in a curriculum cul-de-sac when we reduce essential and powerful disciplinary knowledge to the everyday experiences of students – ‘it must be about me and my world’ – with all the chauvinism that entails.¹⁷

Which brings me back to that girls’ school in Harare, Zimbabwe.

In South Africa we are fighting the wrong battles. Surely the most powerful statement on decolonisation would be to provide every school student with a high quality education that enables them to engage the world of science, knowledge and authority with confidence and competence. In a society where schools are systemically dysfunctional for the majority, we are in danger of imposing an elegant, even profound, language of decolonisation on a broken school system whose products (sic) show up angry and inarticulate in our public universities. In other words, we are gripping the wrong end of the political stick when it comes to the daunting task of curriculum change in schools and universities.

Of course that does not mean that the knowledge question in curriculum goes away; it is about setting priorities and then doing both. For now the curriculum anxiety among the minority of political protestors represent a symbol of other things that are not working. As flag bearer, the curriculum stands in for the paucity of black professors, the narrowing pipeline of graduates from school to baccalaureate studies to the PhD, the estrangement of the institutional cultures of former white universities, the impoverishment of whole communities whose children might never finish school let alone access our best universities and the affordability of higher education in a poor country. That is why the named ‘decolonial turn’ with respect to curriculum was not a turn at all.

Regardless of the symbolic significance of the call to decolonise curriculum, the activist students and academics are silent on the problem of implementation. How will all of this happen? It will not. To change the curriculum requires a political will at the centre of the university system to

¹⁷ Two pieces by Michael Young make the point about ‘powerful knowledge’ in the face of a seemingly progressive call for the privileging of experience in a weak version of critical pedagogy. See M. Young (2013). Overcoming the crisis in curriculum theory: a knowledge-based approach. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 45(2), 101–118; and M. Young (2014) Curriculum theory: what it is and why it is important, *Cad Pesqui* (online) 44(51), 190–202. http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?pid=S0100-15742014000100010&script=sci_arttext&tlng=en

drive deep change even if only at the level of content; that is, changes in the representation of curriculum knowledge towards an Africa-centered knowledge system. It also requires reckoning with the power of institutions and their autonomy in a loosely coupled system of higher education. An engineering dean at UCT or an architecture professor at the UFS or an accounting department head at Fort Hare is not going to change board-certified curricula because a group of student and staff activist demand decolonisation; they are unlikely to even know what that means in their disciplines nor would their Senates bend in political obedience to what they might well consider to be noise. It is one thing to remove an obnoxious statue; it is a completely different matter to change an institutional curriculum.

Curriculum stasis is a problem everywhere and especially in institutions concerned with much more immediate problems such as the quality of their offerings and the success rates of their graduates. The decolonisation moment was, in retrospect, a fleeting act of hubris in a largely dysfunctional education system that works for the few and requires much more basic reconstruction for system-wide curriculum reforms to even take hold.

But curriculum is, by any definition, much more than content. It is about the critical engagement with knowledge between teachers and students. As a transactional event, the curriculum is what is taught but more importantly what is learnt and the consequences of that knowledge for personal and social change. This curriculum-in-action requires academic teachers who understand and embrace the new demands on their teaching – such as in the form of a decolonised curriculum – and make that work in the process of student learning. Where, might I ask, are those academic teachers? They do not exist except in small enclaves of professors and programmes, even whole departments, in some cases, who design and teach what is better described as a critical curriculum that is inclusive of rival knowledge traditions and responsive to the real-life experiences and desires of a new generation of students.

But that is not a decolonial curriculum. In broad terms, it is a critical theory of education that through the knowledge transaction across the disciplines recognises history, race, class, gender and power in ways that advance social justice in the classroom. Such teaching is incredibly difficult even for those who subscribe to critical perspectives in the social, natural and biomedical sciences. It is even more challenging for those who do not buy into this particular perspective on curriculum, knowledge and society. Which of course raises the ethical question: since this is one view on curriculum, can it be

required of those who teach in open institutions called universities and in democratic societies such as South Africa?

We might, in fact, have to settle for a more liberal version of a just curriculum. One in which every young adult entering university has access to high quality education and who is prepared with the capabilities to acquire critical knowledge and succeed in post-school studies. If we fall at this first hurdle, everything else becomes an exercise in curriculum angst and anger that scapegoats the past rather than develops the future.

One marked, moreover, by a curriculum that is inclusive of the store of human knowledges anchored in the African experience but richly engaged with and related to other knowledges of the South. One distinguished by a relational study of curriculum that recognises the social and epistemological entanglements of knowledge from the North and the South, and how this has changed over time beyond colonial/decolonial narratives that are both simplistic and anachronistic as I have tried to show in this essay.

All of which raises a final and troubling question for radical change in our universities. If in fact the curriculum problem is one in which African-centered knowledge displaces Western forms of knowledge, where are the new intellectual authorities to displace resident powers? Let's start with South Africa. Who are the prominent black South African theorists of education or philosophers of knowledge? Where are the black curriculum theorists – their books, journals and creative works that frame alternative ways of thinking about learning, teaching and leading in public schools? We can and should demand more black professors in the academy, and we can and should insist on more black authorities in the curriculum from social anthropology to molecular genetics. But that does not happen without PhDs to begin with and then, following post-doctoral years of academic labour, without research productive *and* intellectually imaginative (not the same thing) black scholars in the academy in South Africa and the continent of which it forms a part. There are no shortcuts to producing the weighty corpus of advanced knowledge across the disciplines that we so desperately need from this side of the world.

Professor Jonathan Jansen
Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences
Stanford University
USA

jj@ufs.ac.za

