

Book Review

Quinn, L. (ed.) 2019. *Re-imagining Curriculum: Spaces for Disruption*. Cape Town: Sun Media

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This book is in some ways a continuation of the conversation begun with *Reimagining Academic Staff Development: Spaces for Disruption* (2012), also edited by Lynn Quinn. But the 2019 volume takes a much wider viewpoint including, as it does, twenty chapters by forty-two authors who are academics and academic developers across institutional types from Australia, Canada, South Africa, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and the West Indies.

Quinn and Vorster (2019: 2) state in Chapter One that the purpose of the book is 'to share theoretical perspectives and practical ideas for ways in which academic developers (and academic leaders) can work in partnership with lecturers and students to respond to the urgent calls for curriculum transformation and decolonisation'. This captures the four threads that run throughout the collection.

1. The need for theorized approaches to curriculum

Monnapula-Mapasela et al. (2019: 43) suggest that there is generally a 'lack of recognition of the role of strong curriculum theory' and decry the reliance on 'common-sense ideologies, ideas, assumptions and beliefs' (2019: 246). Our engagement with curriculum development is informed by our own experiences and personal projects (Matthews, 2019: 45) and also conditioned by the large social structures within which it takes place. Various chapters draw on theorists such as Bhaskar, Archer, Fraser, and others to elucidate the complexity of curriculum development as a social activity shaped by the desires and assumptions of individuals, and by national histories, institutional cultures, and the allocation of resources.

The theories drawn upon in the book are many: Bernstein (Chapters 2 and 5) is used to show how the powerful have the economic, political, and cultural resources 'to set the rules for what counts as legitimate curriculum knowledge' (Lockett, et al., 2019: 34). Academic Literacies Theory (Dison and Hess-April, Abegglen, et al., and others) is used to show how the reading and writing practices of the academy are particular and value-laden and Easton, et al. (2019: 151) describe the 'Decoding the Disciplines' process with much the same goal of enabling academics to make explicit that which has become familiar and internalized.

Valdez and Thurab-Nkhosi (Chapter 10), in a chapter about using online and blended spaces to disrupt established practices, urge us to consider new ways of defining, sourcing, and sharing knowledge. In this pre-Covid publication, Tshuma's chapter points out that technology's predicted system-wide disruption of teaching had not really come to pass with the 'sage on the stage' model often simply being converted into online versions thereof. Now



that we have had a year of ‘emergency online teaching’ , it is the perfect time to look again at how technology might attend to social justice issues rather than simply being used to sustain the status quo in a pandemic.

Winberg draws on Legitimation Code Theory in her chapter to focus on the role that knowledge plays in the practices of the field and the dispositions of those deemed legitimate within it. Wolff’ s chapter shows how Legitimation Code Theory informed moves to decolonize an Engineering curriculum. There is a strong focus on knowledge in these and many other chapters, a focus which is ironically often lacking in texts on curriculum development. Monnapula-Mapasela et al. argue that the emphasis on the generic in concepts such as outcomes-based, soft skills and graduate attributes, has served to shift the focus away from knowledge. Knowledge matters and any genuine consideration of curriculum needs to have a theory of knowledge at its centre. As this book consistently reminds us, providing access to knowledge is not a generic endeavour that can be achieved through the implementation of ‘best practice’ or through supplementary skills courses offered by people without understanding of the target knowledge (Quinn and Vorster, 2019: 9).

But, however much knowledge matters, it cannot account for the whole of the curriculum. Bozalek (2019: 173) (Chapter 9) draws on feminist new materialism and posthumanist theories to warn that it is a mistake to focus on epistemology, or theories of knowledge, separately from ontology, or theories of being and becoming. She calls for an ethico-onto-epistemological entanglement in ways which disrupt the role of academic development in ‘enabling epistemological access to powerful knowledge’ . This echoes a point made in Leibowitz’ s (2019: 409) chapter which ends the book, where she points out that much of the focus of academic development work has been on adapting the curriculum ‘so that students from “disadvantaged” backgrounds can be successful in the current system, rather than on transforming higher education and its content more substantially’ .

While I agree with these positions wholly, I worry that the argument against the valorising of the powerful in the academy can be (mis)taken to be a call to strip powerful knowledge from the curriculum. It is of course no easy task to distinguish between, on the one hand, the curriculum as limited colonial artefact guarding whose knowledges count and, on the other hand, the curriculum as enabling abstracted powerful knowledge to which all should have access in the name of social justice. We have seen too many failed curriculum projects designed for ‘widening access’ to close off this fraught conversation too quickly or to take polarized positions within its complexity. The Bozalek and Liebowitz chapters in particular serve to keep the conversation going.

2. Partnerships between academic developers and academics

Behari-Leak’ s chapter speaks to the value and richness of academics and academic developers working together in generative and collaborative ways. But working collaboratively requires a particular institutional culture. ‘Modernity’ s objectification and calculation of time and space in the curriculum militate against making space for ... interpersonal work’ (Luckett, et al. 2019:

38). Curriculum review is often seen to be about ‘counting numbers’ leaving little space for ‘curriculum intellectualism’ (Matthews, 2019: 49). Behari-Leak also raises the concern about who participates in curriculum conversations and who elects to be absent (Chapter 4).

Matthews (Chapter 3) provides constructive guidance for academic developers from her mainstream disciplinary vantage point, which makes for a pleasant change from academic developers advising academics. She acknowledges (2019: 61) that the ability of academic developers to meaningfully engage in curriculum development initiatives depends on both the support they get from institutional management and the academic credibility of the academic developers themselves.

‘Curriculum renewal ought to be informed by both disciplinary knowledge as well as knowledge of curriculum’ (Jacobs, 2019: 357). We need partnerships to ensure that both kinds of knowledge are drawn upon. Academic developers can help academics understand the often-tacit norms and values of their fields and the ways in which these emerge as unarticulated expectations of students (Clarence, Chapter 5). This is important not only for teaching explicitly towards epistemological access but also because practices need to be exposed in order for them to be critiqued (Clarence, Chapter 5). Easton et al. (2019: 153) echo this point when they suggest that the purpose of decoding the disciplines is to disrupt them, and not ‘merely to uncover their inner workings [in order to] socialize students into disciplinary norms better’.

Partnerships between academics and academic developers can also work against the neoliberal agenda ‘even as we recognize that we are entangled in the power structures of our institutions’ (Cook-Sather, et al., 2019: 121). Easton et al. (Chapter 8) point out that our complicity with global, national and institutional structures of injustice should be made explicit so that we can work against it.

Winberg (2019: 297) calls for academic development to provide a ‘transaction space’ that moves the conversation beyond the binaries of practice and theory to consider target knowledges and related practices. Each party can bring different specialist fields which can illuminate the other for strongly theorized meaningful curriculum development (Jacobs, 2019: 347) but these are rarely brought together, and when they are there is rarely an articulated deliberation about what each field offers to the conversation.

3. Decolonisation

Bozalek (Chapter 9) highlights the relationship between ‘development’ and ‘colonialism’ in a way which requires significant reflection by those of us who have worked in academic development for decades. Teaching for epistemological access is central to ensuring genuine redistribution and representational justice. But this cannot simply mean socializing students ‘as quickly as possible into middle-class mores and practices of the university, encouraging them to silence their troublesome voices and disguise their troublesome selves as quickly as possible’ (Abegglen, et al., 2019: 308). While enabling access to the ‘very particular’ literacy practices of the academy is central to any social justice agenda, this needs to be undertaken with a critical

awareness of the ‘very narrow ways’ in which literacy practices are enacted in the university (Abegglen, et al., 2019: 309). Such deliberations are central to the decolonial project.

Few academics have sufficient grasp of both curriculum theory and decolonial theory ‘with which to undertake curriculum reform’ (Luckett, et al., 2019: 27). The need for academic developers to engage in depth with the work of decolonial scholars is increasingly self-evident. This book makes the link between decoloniality and addressing the public good purpose of higher education more generally (Quinn and Vorster Chapter 1), which can be challenging because as academics we have invested years to develop an expertise in ‘the canon’, with our identities strongly tied to safeguarding its boundaries (Cameron and Padayachee, 20219: 391).

Valdez and Thurab-Nkhosi (Chapter 10) draw on De Lissovoy’s ‘pedagogy of lovingness’ to argue that while confronting colonialism is essential work, this needs to be done within an understanding of the interconnectedness of the world. Gordon and Lincoln (Chapter 13) illustrate how the activism embedded in the professional field of Town Planning enabled a critical approach to curriculum transformation and to engaging with deliberations about decolonisation. But in fields where such issues may seem unrelated to the task at hand, the academic developer needs to make connections to the decolonial agenda explicit for the academics tasked with curriculum development who may resist such engagements.

4. Context matters

The fourth theme of the book is of course tightly interwoven with those already discussed: the need to consider the structure of the target knowledge, the need to understand how curriculum dispenses access to knowledge, and the ways in which colonial forces constrain what counts as knowledge. Added to these contextual issues was the deliberation about how increased managerialism and bureaucracy can mean that one’s performativity in relation to course guides, online sites, module outcomes and student evaluations outweighs the value of teaching (Quinn and Vorster, 2019: 6).

Gordon and Lincoln look at how massive demand for higher education and increases in student numbers have occurred alongside increased administrative loads and the managerialist agenda of surveillance and evaluation. Pressure to function within the global publication market and to teach in responsive ways are often in tension with each other (Luckett, et al., 2019: 30). Bozalek (Chapter 10) questions the focus on assessment in our courses, for example, in particular its focus on mastery and judgement and calls for approaches such as ‘slow reading’ which are entirely at odds with the toxic performativity that has many of us in its grasp.

This text provides a rich conversation about the theoretically informed and critically inclined approach academic developers need to take.

Reviewed by

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