

Transforming Higher Education: Towards a Socially Just Pedagogy

Ruksana Osman and David J. Hornsby

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines ideas pertaining to transforming learning in higher education. Starting with an introduction to a body of ideas as they have emerged and developed, we continue to a series of chapters which will take up a number of these ideas—conceptually and empirically—in a variety of contexts. In particular this chapter tackles some of the meanings and conceptions associated with transforming higher education in relation to national and global demands on the one hand, and touching on pedagogic possibilities on the other hand. The transformation-pedagogy nexus as taken up in this chapter aims at using pedagogy as a change process and transforming the pedagogical practices of higher education. The two key issues to be taken up here will relate to what constitutes transformative pedagogies or socially just pedagogies, and what is their transformative potential for institutions of higher learning.

Universities could face the prospect of becoming redundant unless the way teaching and learning takes place changes. The call for transformation

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in South Africa and elsewhere in the world is reflective of a perception and deep dissatisfaction with the role universities are playing in encouraging social change. The call for transformation influenced by the dissatisfaction may also be an indication of the structural limitations of our universities and may be a moment that recognises that some of societal solutions are indeed possible inside the university.

Whichever way one looks at this, movements like the #RhodesMustFall campaign argue that South African universities are not taking into account contextual understandings, rather reflecting ideas espoused from elsewhere and reinforcing ways of thinking and understanding that do not empower those disadvantaged. That higher education reflects an environment that is more concerned with the canon of disciplines largely developed in the global north than how we prepare our students to be thoughtful, reflective and critical thinkers is concerning. The need for linking the local call and struggle for a decolonised university sector, to local needs and aspirations and global concerns could be a critical and creative moment, if daunting in transforming our society as a whole. The fact that we see higher education in this moment is not unique. Gramsci (1971, p. 35) raised concerns that the education system was disconnected, theoretical and irrelevant to everyday lived experience, resulting in passivity amongst students rather than active engagement in societal problems. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (2005) echoes Gramsci's concerns linking the role of education and how we teach to the persistence of inequality in societies.

Freire's (2005) vision of a pedagogy that is rooted in the lived experience of the masses is increasingly relevant to present-day debates globally. Freire (2005) argues that we need to confront inequality through inspiring students to question, challenge and agitate around existing power structures. He believed that education was about addressing the needs of the masses and to teach them to make a better society by addressing inequality.

Universities across the world are also under considerable pressure from student movements calling for greater access to better quality of education which is less expensive and free. Here one needs to think back to the protests at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in India (Burke 2016) demanding better access for poor students; the student protests in Chile (BBC 2016) demanding higher quality secondary schooling and university education; the demand for renaming of building that reflects a colonial past at Oxford University and Yale University (Flood 2016; Rhoden-Paul

2016); and the “black lives matter” movement in the US and more recently in the UK (The Guardian 2016).

The global call for better education, driven fiercely by student movements, highlights the need to reposition ourselves as university teachers, particularly in relation to what we teach, how we teach and why we teach. This repositioning also provides universities with an opportunity to rethink education for social change, reforming university education to foster social awareness and societal betterment by preparing citizens who are able to take their place in a transforming society and world and inspiring students to aspire for a world that is socially just, where socio-economic and institutional arrangements would transform to reflect the changes in ideas, thinking, consciousness, and sensibilities and lived experiences. These calls are shaping student politics the world over and opening up new possibilities for universities and pedagogies. These calls present creative and critical moments for thinking of universities across the world relationally and then to come up with organised and collective pedagogical responses from our own locations and histories. We are inspired by Sylvia Wynter (McKittrick 2014) who has emphasised the importance of creative resistance as an important condition for making epistemic shifts and by implication pedagogic shifts in university teaching and learning.

This chapter then examines and presents ideas pertaining to transforming the knowledge project in higher education with a social justice agenda. Incorporating social justice ideas into teaching and learning requires that we develop pedagogical approaches that take into account student needs and encourage what Fraser (2009) calls “participatory parity.” Liebowitz et al., (in this volume) expand on this idea but briefly; this requires pedagogical stances that treat all as equal in the classroom and ideally outside too. Fraser (2009, p. 16) argues “[o]vercoming injustice means dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction.” Ultimately this means that teaching and learning approaches in what and how we teach need to be tailored so as to overcome institutionalised exclusions if we are serious about transforming society. This means moving beyond what Liebowitz (2009, p. 87) laments as an overemphasis on focusing “solely on the material, or on the affective and relational, or on the more directly academic and cognitive experiences” in our teaching and learning environments. Both Fraser (2009) and Liebowitz (2009) argue for a broader vision for teaching and learning that considers

structural factors like the distribution of resources, fostering of participation, and recognition of identity, cultural affiliation or social status in our pedagogical practices.

Distribution in a teaching and learning context refers to ensuring that all have access to similar materials and resources in higher education. Participation speaks to ensuring our teaching and learning environments account for the fact that students come to the learning environments with contextualised understandings and pick up academic concepts and ideas through activities that resonate with their experiences of the world (Northedge 2003; Haggis 2006). This means that lecturers need to permit space for different approaches to learning to ensure participation as a key attribute of socially just pedagogies. Importantly, knowledge is situated given the contextual nature of knowing and of course constructed by the situated knower (teacher and learner/student) in a particular time and space.

Finally, recognition speaks to how we as lecturers ensure students feel safe and welcome within an institutional teaching and learning space. Given that differences exist amongst the student body in social class, identity and cultural affiliation it is important to recognise this and how it can affect a learning space. For example, Erasmus (2006) notes that racism can affect how black students learn—a lack of recognition of students' background and experiences can make them withdraw from teaching and learning. Waghid (2009) argues that openness and dialogue are really important for achieving recognition and encourages lecturers and students to develop a space to understand commonalities through teaching and learning. Whilst it is clear that there is no one way of doing social justice or one pedagogy, such work is about presenting pedagogical alternatives at the level of pedagogic ideas and pedagogical actions that fit most clearly within a frame of recognition and participation. But transformation in this context can also be seen as the redistribution of influence in learning and teaching in the university classroom, where the classroom is not only a microcosm of what society is but what it can be if we take social justice seriously.

There are also normative ways which can be engaged with in order to achieve a socially just pedagogy. Maringe (in this volume) argues that we need to develop a moral and ethical purpose to our teaching practice, seek to delete cultural relativism and ethnocentrism, liberate the learner from conformity, promote dialogical learning and challenge learning cultures and spaces. Both Mupotsa and Kiguwa

(each in this volume) add to the normative aspects by proposing that to transform our learning spaces and effect social justice, the assumptions of students need to be disturbed or disrupted through our pedagogical practices. Either way, structurally or normatively, with ideas driven by a social justice agenda, supported by transformative pedagogies and effective teaching, a socially just university and society is possible, albeit a tall order. It is about keeping the human spirit alive to new possibilities.

In thinking through transformative pedagogies with a social justice framing calls for a range of theorised understandings can be called upon or recruited in deliberations on teaching and learning for social justice. It is through offering and exploring substantive theoretical and practical resources for the social justice project of teaching and learning that wider social change even becomes possible.

Framed this way the university classroom becomes a powerful space for organised and collective social change. Transformation is at the level of ideas and consciousness and not just pedagogic action. Such a framing helps create a space for reasoning and dialogue and the deliberation of pedagogical alternatives to the current pressures for change and transformation.

To our mind this way of framing and responding to the current pressures on higher education is more suitable for transforming higher education and society more broadly than just pressure from authoritarian populism. After all, universities too are living in conditions of neoliberal globalisation and they too remain central to the transformation project. The university classroom seems to be the ideal place and space for enacting and imagining new futures and opening up possibilities of mutuality.

TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGIES IN CONTEXT

The notion of transformative pedagogies can be linked historically to the ideas of critical pedagogy and critical agency. Drawing upon and critiquing early Marxism, the idea of critical pedagogy is based on the understanding that education in capitalist societies tends to reproduce relations of inequality and acts as ideological mechanisms of the state. Critical pedagogy then raises awareness about the workings of capitalism and foregrounds the importance of an education for emancipation (Freire 2005), as opposed to an education for domination (Nkomo 1990) and indoctrination. Freire (2005) noted that education in capitalist society, which is based on “banking methods” of teaching and learning, does not

promote critical thinking. It is critical pedagogies which are based on critical thinking and democratic participation that enable possible transformations and change of capitalist societies. In this regard, then, transformative pedagogies are about being critical, thinking critically, enabling democratic educational relations and empowering people to be critical agents in order to transform unequal capitalist orders.

Transformative pedagogies link up currently with notions of liberal pedagogies (Young 2000), emancipatory pedagogies (Torress and Morrow 1995) and border pedagogies (Giroux 1988). Such notions of pedagogies attempt to engage with what critical pedagogy could mean in advanced capitalist, postmodern and post-colonial conditions. These types of pedagogies all assume the importance of critical thinking as the basis for enabling critical agency for transformation. As such, they presuppose several things: from relations between structures and agents; what constitutes alternatives in transformative terms; to individual and collective forms of action. In many ways as well, these presuppositions are being called to question because they point to shifts from colonial to post-colonial situations (see Mbembe 2001) and from modern to postmodern conditions (see Hall et al. 1992), locally and globally, and the kind of social actions they enable. Transformative pedagogies are about developing and fostering critical thinking to enable people in such conditions to exercise critical agency in order to transform contemporary orders on the basis of social justice. It is about being propelled by a passion to create a just society—“one that . . . links struggle to a new set of human possibilities” (Giroux 1983, p. 242). Said famously reminds us that critique and “dedicated consciousness” are essential in fighting for our rights and our future.

The Pedagogic Is Personal

So, whilst the vision for transformative pedagogies to facilitate critical thinkers capable of nurturing social change is a noble one, this brings to the fore a variety of complex issues which relate to the individual nature of knowing, learning and teaching on the one hand, and the personal and affective dimensions of knowing, learning and teaching on the other. Such pedagogies unsettle the familiar divisions between knower and known and between teacher and student. Such pedagogies challenge academe to consider multiple ways of knowing (from the teacher and the student) emanating from countless sites of practice and with the personal and the

emotional ever present. Given this complexity the danger always exists that transformative pedagogies for social justice can become an empty label or of assuming that linking transformative pedagogies to a just social vision is automatic.

It may also appear to some that the pedagogic encounter is being padded with ideas that sound or feel personal, emotional and subjective, and that academic and disciplinary integrity is devalued in the face of the affect and subjectivity. Doing social justice work will certainly engender moments of self-doubt for teachers and students about epistemology and pedagogy, both crucial to transformative pedagogies in higher education in South Africa and elsewhere in the world.

On another level, these complexities around the personal and the affective raise questions about the nature of higher education institutions as institutions for social justice. They point to the structural limitations of universities. For example, how does the institutional culture impact on the capacity of such institutions to be responsive? What acts of resistance are required of staff to facilitate equity and redress through education? What are the costs to staff as they come in direct conflict with normative values, beliefs and assumptions prevalent in higher education institutions? Whilst this chapter does not fully take up all of these questions, it is making visible critical issues about the culture of institutions, which are inextricably linked to lived experience of academics and students alike. Various chapters in this volume take up these questions more directly.

In spite of the complexities discussed above, an important aspect of transformative practice for social justice is for university teachers to place their practices, interpretations and biases before others for scrutiny. It could mean being open to present one's pedagogical practices for wider examinations by colleagues working in similar contexts. This kind of scholarly approach to social justice work falls well within the scholarship of teaching and learning paradigm (SoTL). SoTL provides an opportunity to re-examine and in some instances confirm one's epistemological and philosophical orientation as teachers as well as recognise the political nature of our work (see Liebowitz et al., in this volume). Or it could also be related to ensuring student voices are heard and strengthened through our pedagogical practices (see in this volume, Mupotsa; Kiguwa, Cloete and Brenner; Iqani and Falkof; Maringe; Kurup and Singai; Carrim; and Tremblay and Bagelman).

Pedagogy, Race, Class, Gender and Location

Transformative pedagogies cushioned under a social justice approach also cast doubt on the myth of the autonomous subject (knower), highlighting instead that “each of us, though unique as individuals, is positioned within society, along hierarchies of power constructed around . . . class, caste, race, gender, age and sexuality” (Brah and Hoy 1989, p. 71). Philosophically and pedagogically a transformative approach acknowledges the material positions of teachers and students in terms of race, class and gender and even location. It foregrounds the politics of difference and knowledge, power and inequality are firmly on the agenda. It pushes the boundaries so that the academy and the university classroom are the places for asking what, why, why not and where amongst other questions.

Such approaches, whilst daunting for teachers and students, create opportunities and space to talk about and propose curricula that are open and empowering to the world in which students’ knowledge is constructed. In this moment possibilities of mutuality are made and acted upon. Teaching and assessment practices are selected for their capacity to take into account knowledges that are usually invisible in the institution, thereby enriching the knowledge project. Various methods are used and could include focus group discussions, talking and listening, argument and speculation, research seminars, community projects, re-enactments, collages, dialogue, narrative, life histories and other forms of self-expression such as music and dance. Whatever the pedagogic stance selected, sharing and reciprocity and mutual constitution are the underpinnings rather than domination and authority. In addition, students themselves are empowered to engage with the contested nature of knowledge. Such approaches and process weave the private and public lives of teachers and students into integrated and whole realities and call into question dichotomies that are ever present in our classrooms (see in this volume Iqani and Falkof; Mupotsa; Kiguwa; and Wintjes).

Pedagogy and Agency

The theme of agency as central to transformative pedagogies and social change cannot be overstated. Agency speaks to the empowerment of individuals who are marginalised for various reasons. Pedagogical stances that enhance agency naturally counter oppressive systems and actions

fostering societal transformation. For example, pedagogical approaches that relate the idea of social change to ideas that nothing is fixed, that change can be achieved if individual and collective agency is appreciated and activated, can be transformative (Carrim, in this volume). Further, a pedagogy that seeks to affirm can be transformative as it can build confidence in students helping them to realise or unlock their capabilities (Mupotsa; and Liebowitz et al., in this volume). Pedagogical strategies that challenge students to confront their own prejudices around issues of race can also enhance agency as they build awareness of how they limit the space for others (Maringe; Iqani and Falkof; and Kiguwa, in this volume). Finally, agency as inherent in pedagogy works towards national projects to reconcile difficult pasts or assert rights of particular groups within communities (see in this volume: Kurup and Singai; Tremblay and Bagelman; and Wintjes). Social change and the centrality of human agency in such change epitomise transformative pedagogies. Of course some will question the capacity for transformative pedagogies to challenge hegemonic discourses that permeate the university. It is our contention that in spaces where there is a history of flexibility around curriculum change and in contexts where there is pressure for change transformative pedagogies stand a good chance. Here the idea of small wins is pertinent, as small wins enable individuals or groups of people to “identify a series of controllable opportunities of modest size that produce visible results” (Weick 1984, p. 40). Small wins also contribute to individuals and groups feeling confident about their work, and this has the potential to impact on the environment in which such work takes place. It’s about organised and collective responses to our struggles in academe.

SUPPORTING TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGIES

Engaging in transformative pedagogies is hard work. It often places the teacher in difficult and uncomfortable positions. It as much challenges those responsible for constructing a learning environment as it does for those engaging and participating in it. As such, it is also important to think through how best to support colleagues and institutions to adopt transformative pedagogies. Indeed, what are the conditions required for transformative pedagogies to thrive? What are the institutional conditions that facilitate or constrain the creation of “just” classrooms?

A condition that we consider paramount is the idea of the classroom as a dialogical space where teachers and students alike can explore and build

understanding around the issue at hand without silencing particular voices. In effect, we need to reinvigorate the traditional social compact in university spaces where academic freedom, freedom of expression and openness to differences are valued and encouraged and where authoritarian populism is challenged.

Another condition apparent is a commitment for individual institutions to place resources into support for curriculum reform and staff development in line with the integration of social justice practices. Resources can range from moral and financial support, to the establishment of considered and protected spaces to discuss and think through how transformative pedagogies could take shape and be most effective. To reframe our learning spaces to focus on the notion of social justice requires a degree of encouragement from institutional structures, so as to overcome those who are resistant to change. Osman and Hornsby (2016) and Liebowitz et al. (in this volume) discuss the importance of encouraging research-led teaching through SoTL as a mechanism to build space, understanding and institutional support in this respect. Whilst there are other ways to promote change, we consider SoTL to be an effective way to experiment with socially just pedagogies. Such a way allows for moving away from a purely institutional view of just pedagogies to a larger “balcony view” of socially just pedagogies. Essed (1991) reminds us that a balcony view allows one to experiment outside the fray of university politics and the structural limitations of universities.

THE GLOBAL RELEVANCE OF TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGIES

We argue that what and the way we teach matters significantly to the social justice mission inherent in higher education. We have constructed a set of arguments in this chapter that seek to clearly link social justice and transformation with pedagogy. We also made reference to some of the complexities associated with such pedagogy. Whilst our location and experience are primarily guided by the South African experience, we noted that social justice, transformative pedagogies and higher education are linked no matter one’s location and history. We pointed out that the South African moment is linked to a global moment for change and transformation. If you consider that transformative pedagogies for social justice are about challenging and changing taken-for-granted approaches to knowledge, teaching, learning and assessing then the ideas presented here have purchase in any higher education environment in the world.

From the chapters in this book there are several global connections that can be made. Irrespective of the writers coming from different geographic regions in the world (India, Canada, South Africa) there are common threads across geographies from the use of theorists like Fanon, Freire and hooks, to the recruitment of pedagogical approaches and across a variety of disciplinary areas of study. Indeed, if you consider transformative pedagogies to be about questioning the value-laden nature of knowledge and knowledge production and disrupting the assumption that knowledge is universal and neutral, and that those who teach and assess this knowledge are rational and objective in the teaching and assessment process, the chapters in this book tackle these issues irrespective of the history and geography of the writers.

The current climate in higher education globally and in South Africa in particular provides a rich opportunity for theorising education for social justice. Thinking of transformative pedagogies for social justice is an innovation in higher education that requires a variety of shifts. Given a chance this philosophical and pedagogical orientation requires an institutional culture that is responsive to different ways of seeing and being and where pedagogy and social innovation meet. Of course such approaches are likely to put pressure on existing curricula within institutions, and they are likely to challenge the nature of knowledge making and the knowledge project of the university. Such an approach also requires an academic cohort engaged and committed to the idea of social justice through transformative pedagogies. The transformative potential of higher education is clear to us, but we acknowledge that this may not be immediately apparent to all colleagues, particularly those who believe higher education is about the transfer of disciplinary content and credentialing rather than expanding understandings and questioning knowledge and knowledge traditions. This means that without explicit buy-in and acceptance from colleagues, implementing transformative pedagogies as a rule, rather than exception, is difficult and requires concerted emphasis and focus. From our perspective, this is necessary and important in ensuring higher education stays relevant to societal needs and demands going forward.

In the pages that follow, the theme taken up in this chapter is extended and elaborated on in ways to offer insights and experiences of engaging with the idea of just pedagogies and the university classroom. By no means is this an exhaustive account of how transformative pedagogies can be employed for the purpose of social justice. Rather, we hope that the experiences and ideas expanded on here provoke the

making of new knowledge and encourage those interested in the social mission of higher education, wherever they may be, to advocate for changing the way we engage with teaching and learning and to return to the idea that higher education and social justice can be achieved through positioning the idea of transformation at the heart of pedagogy.

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