

The decolonized humanities curriculum imagined: an exploratory research study

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Why am I doing this research?

- Background in Education
- Interested in what catalyses students to engage and find learning meaningful
- I want to learn from Africa (and for eg. Latin America) centred knowledges
- Are there ways of doing knowledge production together, while being aware of power differences and histories of oppression?

This presentation

- What might be learnt through other experiences of 'decolonising' curricula?
- What might a participatory research project into curriculum reform look like?

What might be learnt through other experiences of 'decolonising' curricula?

- Edward Said, 1991 TB Davie lecture at UCT; published in *Boundary 2*, 21(3) (1994)
-Reflections from the Arab world
- The 'culture wars' in the USA

Edward Said, 1991 TB Davie lecture at UCT; published in *Boundary 2*, 21(3) (1994)

“It is important to understand the passion that went into reclaiming educational territory that for so long had been dominated by foreign rulers in the Arab world and it is equally important to understand the tremendous spiritual wound felt by so many of us because of the sustained presence in our midst of domineering foreigners who taught us to respect distant norms and values more than our own. Our culture was felt to be of a lower grade, inferior and something of which to be ashamed...the Arab-Islamic tradition is one of the great cultural contributions to humanity...in the old universities of Fez and al Azhar as well as various madrasas throughout the Arab world, a rich educational experience has been provided to countless generations of students.”

- Post colonial/conflict societies: The importance of education as fostering pride in one's own culture
- The role of education in healing wounds; after long-term subordination

Edward Said, 1991 IB Davie lecture at UCT; published in *Boundary 2*, 21(3) (1994)

“Yet it is also true to say that in the newly independent countries of the Arab world, the national universities were reconceived as extensions of the newly established security state...all societies accord a remarkable privilege to the university and school as crucibles for shaping national identity...(but) all too often in the Arab world, true education was short-circuited...whereas in the past young Arabs fell prey to the intervention of foreign ideas and norms, now they were to be remade in the image of the ruling party”

- In the Arab worlds as elsewhere, education used to shape national identity
- Politics impinges on the academy

Edward Said cont.

“For those of us emerging from marginality and persecution, nationalism is a necessary thing: long deferred and denied identity needs to come out into the open and take its place among other human identities. But that is only the first step. To assume that the ends of education are best advanced by focusing principally on *our own* separateness...places us where as subaltern, inferior or lesser races we had been placed by nineteenth century racial theory, unable to share in the general riches of human culture.”

- Is it possible to do both? To foster pride and criticality? Teach both about ourselves and others?
- What if who the ‘we’ is, is being contested?

Edward Said cont.

“Is there any possibility of bridging the gap between the ivory tower of contemplative rationality...and our own urgent need for self-realization and self-assertion with a history of repression and denial?”

- This project an exploration of whether the academy can ‘bridge this gap’...

John Searle

The storm over the university.

New York review of books: www.ditext.com/searle/searle1.html.

- Allan Bloom (1987): “The closing of the American mind: how higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today’s students”
 - top of the New York Times bestseller list for over 6 months
- The ‘culture wars’: enlightenment curriculum versus new social movements centered around gender, race, post-colonial studies

John Searle

The problem is not simply one of 'representaiton'

- “If the objection to the “canon” is that it consists almost entirely of works by white males, specifically white males of European (including North American) origin, then there would appear to be an easy and common-sense solution to the problem: simply open the doors to admit the work of talented writers who are not white, or not male, or not European...”

National identity and 'quality'

- Also about national identity:
 - Knowing certain texts from the Western canon seen as a part of understanding the foundation and values inherent in America as a society
- John Searle: if we create a new canon, what are the criteria for inclusion?

The 'culture wars'

- Are Western canon texts taught in context? Not as universals but as emerging out of particular circumstances, conditions?
- The framing of 'theory' and 'case studies'

Questions from Said and Searle

- Can curricula both, simultaneously affirm previously oppressed identities and open up new worlds?
- What is the relationship between (contested) national identity and course curricula?
- How do we assess issues of representation in course materials?
- How to contextualise readings and courses?

An exploratory research project: UCT as a case-study

- 1) Look at particular conflicts and unrest:
In departments
Through the student movements
- 2) Case study of a university led intervention:
decoloniality course

Observation and participation: New course in decoloniality

“If you have been intrigued, impassioned or perplexed by the recent debates surrounding decolonisation and the fall of Cecil John Rhodes at UCT, you are warmly invited to enrol for the following course, taking place in the second semester (2015), which will introduce you to a heritage of radical and anti-colonial thought and scholarship from Africa and Latin America. Decoloniality is a brand new graduate course hosted by the African Studies department at UCT. We are living through the twilight of the old colonial idols, a time in which the statue of Cecil John Rhodes no longer looms over us with the permanence and righteousness of an outmoded faith that the sacrifices and brutalisations of colonialism have delivered us into a juster epoch. This course is designed to elaborate a decolonial perspective on contemporary issues from the vantage of Africa. We will introduce students to a range of anti-colonial themes including the critique of western modernity and progress; the institutionalisation of racism within culture and the state; the continued peripheralisation of Africa within a neo-colonial world-system; patriarchy and coloniality as forces which invade being and the very senses, and many others.”

- This course is a response from the university; how successful is it? How do they contextualise the course and its materials
- what texts generate debate, do students relate to and lead to interest in further reading, particularly in other, connected contexts

“Decoloniality” course

- Observations, paying attention to student reactions to materials, texts students identify with, readings that generate vigorous discussion and issues raised
- Is the course an example of “asserting identity **and** opening students to new worlds”

On animism, modernity, coloniality and the African order of knowledge , in *Contested*
own: HSRC.

8): *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (excerpt). London: Heinemann.

Towards a Decolonial Aesthetics (Matthew)

14): “Decolonial aesthetics/aesthesis has become a connector across the continents”. Interview

rary And: Platform from Contemporary Art from African Perspectives. Walter Mignolo (2004):

Colonial horizon of modernity: Fred Wilson’s *Mining The Museum* (1992)”, in *Globalization in*

Edited by J. Harris. London: Wiley-Blackwell. pp. 71-85.

1 Rolando Vàsquez (2013): “Decolonial aesthesis: colonial wounds/decolonial healings”. *Social*

Researching curriculum change by “following the fault lines, going into the conflict zones”

- Student frustrations from specific departments: economics, English and sociology departments.
- Interviews with these students, questioning what they dislike about current curricula, texts that they found relevant and proposed changes to courses.

Participatory research project

- With student activists
- A collaborative, participatory piece of research consisting of 15 interviews with their peers
- Texts students experience as most meaningful in their courses and what they are reading outside of their official university studies.
- Interviews aim to explore the intellectual resources brought into the classroom by students from their own life and academic experiences; connect in meaningful ways to students' experiences.

Why this method?

- If the students in these movements are the ones most acutely feeling the disconnect, perhaps they will provide clues as to points of departure and reconciliation
- Are there clues in what they are reading and engaging with, as to how we can both facilitate asserting pride and connect with other traditions, knowledges?

