

**Accessing Powerful Knowledge:
A Comparative Study of Two First Year Sociology Courses in a South African
University**

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study of two first year sociology courses run at an elite South African university in order to speak to student perspectives on the sociology curriculum. The paper provides a comparative analysis of the academic experiences of extended degree (ED) students registered on two first year courses, one of which drew on literature and sociological theory which was mainly Euro-American in origin, and the other of which attempted to situate sociological theory within local contexts. In so doing, it contributes to debates on the role of identity in teaching sociology. We highlight the tension that occurs between the need to make content accessible and relevant for students – particularly for first generation students – and the need to also give students access to the powerful knowledge (Young, 2009) that comes with familiarity with the theory-dense sociological canon.

Keywords: curriculum, decolonisation, education development, identity, powerful knowledge, sociology.

2015 was a tumultuous year for South African universities. The early months of the year saw the birth of the #RhodesMustFall Movement at the University of Cape Town, which challenged the ontological orientation of the institution. Initially this occurred through protest against physical manifestations of coloniality¹ on the campus such as the prominent statue of Cecil John Rhodes, but later through protest against the wider norms and structures of the institution itself, from the curriculum to fees to staffing (see #RhodesMustFall, 2015). Over the course of the year, student movements with similar calls proliferated across the country's universities. In October 2015 this culminated in the birth of the nationwide #FeesMustFall Movement, which challenged the structural inequalities of post-apartheid South Africa and their effects on students' access to, and experiences of, higher education. Universities across the country were brought to a close at the end of the academic year, with initially peaceful

¹ The idea of coloniality comes from the work of Latin American critical theorists such as Anibal Quijano (1999) and Walter D. Mignolo (2012), and refers to the idea that while the temporal moment of colonialism might have been and gone, the ideological manifestations of imperialism are still apparent across the globe.

protests escalating into episodes of increasingly violent conflict between police and students, and increasing anger from the student body. Historical inequities are surfacing in the present in our universities, which were (and are) experienced by certain sectors of the student body as alienating, exclusionary, and structurally violent. This is despite shifts within the demographics of enrollment at universities, such that both historically black universities and historically white universities in South Africa now have a majority black student enrollment (Habib, 2016). Clearly, it is not enough to shift demographics, and students are calling for more radical change. Universities reopened to students in the first semester of 2016, with varying degrees of success, but issues of institutional transformation were still hotly debated. In 2016 and 2017, protests broke out in universities across the country again, with the situation still unresolved at the time of writing.

The calls being made by South African students to ‘decolonise’ universities are not new, and nor were they unexpected. The research on which this article is based was undertaken as part of a broader research project on the curriculum that was established in 2014² in recognition of the fact that many black South African students felt that course materials were designed for someone other than them. While the issues lying behind this broader project are large, the paper draws on a particular case study of two first year sociology courses run at an elite South African university in order to speak to student perspectives on the sociology curriculum within the university. It should be noted that neither author is a sociologist: one of us is an anthropologist who works in Education Development and the other is situated in Development Studies. We are thus not in a position to make disciplinary value-judgements about the content of the curriculum; rather, we are interested in thinking through how the courses are experienced by black students, particularly in light of current debates about decolonisation and curriculum change.

The paper thus provides a comparative analysis of the academic experiences of extended degree (ED) students registered on two first year courses, one of which drew on literature and sociological theory which was mainly Euro-American in origin, and the other of which attempted to situate sociological theory within local contexts. In so doing, it contributes to debates on the role of identity in teaching sociology; and the role the discipline of sociology might have to play in creating a particular kind of social citizen. We highlight the tension that occurs between the need to make content accessible and relevant for students – particularly for first generation students – and the need to also give students access to the powerful knowledge (Young, 2009) that comes with familiarity with the theory-dense sociological canon. We begin by historically situating higher education in South Africa and discussing the rise of academic development and the extended degree.

Background

Higher Education in South Africa and the Extended Degree

South Africa became a constitutional democracy in 1994. Prior to that, the national policy of apartheid allocated resources differentially according to race or population groups as defined

² The authors wish to thankfully acknowledge the support of the National Research Foundation (Grant Number 90376).

by the state (Ngcobo, 2011). The highest state per capita expenditure was allocated to Whites, then Indians, and then people of so-called mixed race, with the lowest expenditure being allocated to the majority population comprising indigenous Black Africans (Ngcobo, 2011).³ The ramifications of this are still being felt in South Africa today, particularly as social inequality has grown in the country, and race and class have remained closely entangled (Habib, 2013).

The prevalence of extensive socioeconomic inequalities in current day South Africa has had various effects on higher education. Following independence, the higher education sector underwent educational reforms, and this resulted in the formulation and implementation of extended degree and diploma programmes (CHE, 2013). By 2001, most universities in South Africa had some sort of government-funded programme for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (where race was held as proxy for disadvantage) who did not meet the necessary requirements for mainstream degrees (CHE, 2013). Extended Degree programmes are therefore racialised by the very terms that government sets for their funding. While this is intended as positive discrimination, from the point of view of students such racialisation can be interpreted as negative, in that they feel that universities are ‘segregating’ poor black students in separate degree programmes from the mainstream. Whilst the shape of such programmes has varied across contexts and over times (Lockett, 2012), they were typically “add on”, meaning that additional courses and other forms of support were provided to help students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds to adapt to, and potentially thrive in, universities. Over time, the nature of the support has become more closely integrated into the mainstream curriculum than it was initially, but the Academic Development (AD) programmes that typically offer such support still tend to be marginalised within universities (Lockett, 2012).

The institution from which this case study is drawn runs one such programme within the Humanities Faculty⁴, which sees students take their degrees over an extra year, with additional academic support provided intensively in first year, and less intensively in second, third and fourth, through a combination of introductory courses and augmented tutorials which provide extra time on task, and closer engagement with the materials in a small group environment. The two sociology courses being examined here offer an augmented tutorial component and are thus taken by students on the Extended Degree program⁵. As such, they are a fruitful site for investigating the ways in which students who are defined as ‘previously disadvantaged’ by the state experience the sociology curriculum, and the role played by shifting curriculum content such that it is more culturally responsive.

³ In South Africa, racial categories originated in colonialism and were solidified during Apartheid. While recognising that racial categories are social constructs, we draw on them here as they still form part of the bureaucratic and lived habitus of present day South Africa (Alexander, 2013). The widely recognised ‘racial groups’ in SA are Black, White, Indian and Coloured as inherited from the Apartheid system of governance.

⁴ This faculty incorporates both the arts and the social sciences.

⁵ Aside from the augmented tutorial, the courses taken by Extended Degree and 3 year students are identical: students on the three year or the four year degree attend the same lectures, are set the same readings, and do the same assessments as one another. Extended degree students simply receive one additional tutorial per week as academic support.

The Theory Behind ED practice: Formal and Epistemic Access to Education

A key focus of the policies introduced from 1994 onwards by the African National Congress (ANC) government to reduce institutionalised inequalities in the higher education sector (Ngcaweni, 2014) was thus the opening up of formal access to tertiary education. However, it quickly became apparent that formal access – the physical admission of individuals to universities who had previously been structurally restricted (Muller, 2012) - was not the only barrier to education. Once in the institution, such students did not necessarily succeed. A longitudinal study of a cohort of students that entered all South African contact universities in the year 2000 showed that only 38% had obtained a bachelor's degree after five years with a large difference in graduation rates for White and black African students of 64% and 32% respectively (Ngcobo, 2011). More than formal access was clearly needed. Morrow's (2009) notion of epistemic access can be useful here – while higher education reform might have opened the doors of institutions, they did not necessarily provide access to 'the goods' of the university, as curricula and teaching praxis continued to disadvantage students from poor families. One focus of Academic Development programmes was thus to provide epistemic access to the disciplines, even while individual departments and academics continue to set the curricula within the disciplines themselves.

That the overt and the hidden curriculum might disadvantage students from particular social backgrounds is not deeply surprising: as long ago as the 1970s, Bourdieu's notions of social and cultural capital were developed with regard to education to argue that education often worked to maintain elites, not to flatten social stratification (Bourdieu, 1971; Bourdieu, 1974). Social capital - 'the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Sullivan, 2002: 33) – is thus often exclusionary. In South Africa, the entanglements of class and race ensure that access to the forms of social capital that are considered valid within the university are racialised. It is for reasons such as this that black student movements have referred to institutional practices and norms as 'White', in that they reflect a particular cultural positioning. Formal access to the institution is thus inadequate, and even where epistemic access is provided, it might be that students are being given access to what is a particularly Eurocentric worldview (Amin, 1989). In other words, if disciplinary practices reflect a particular worldview, providing epistemic access to that worldview might still result in alienation of the students to whom it is not a familiar one.

Nyamnjoh (2012: 131) has argued that in the social sciences, colonial epistemology has privileged an ahistorical mode of thinking about Africa, which 'sacrifices pluriversity for university'. This ensures that students who come to the university with other ways of knowing, or with the wrong social capital, are positioned as other (Morreira, 2017), whether or not they are given formal *and* epistemic access to the university. There is thus a necessity within Academic Development work, and within the disciplines more broadly, to recognise not just the need to provide epistemic access to disciplinary viewpoints, but to shift the terms of engagement of the academic disciplines, such that they are open to a wider epistemological range.

This matters particularly to disciplines like sociology because in the Humanities and Social Sciences in particular, identity can be deeply embroiled in learning. Basil Bernstein (1999) provides a useful lens for examining the ways in which knowledge is structured in higher education. Bernstein argues that knowledge is organised differently in the natural sciences, the social sciences and the Humanities. The natural sciences consist of what he terms a hierarchical knowledge structure, in which knowledge is cumulative and the relationship between an object and knowledge about that object dominates. The Humanities, on the other hand, are categorised as a horizontal knowledge structure: one in which knowledge is segmented rather than cumulative, and the capacities and dispositions of the knower are central to the way a hierarchy of knowledge is created. In other words, the relationship between the knower (the subject) and knowledge is more important than in the natural sciences— the Humanities are thus intrinsically social. The social sciences lie somewhere between these two ends of the continuum – they are both social (subject-knowledge relationships) and science (object-knowledge relationships). We can see this when thinking through the sorts of ideas that sociology students are exposed to in their first year in university. The courses that students take require them to look anew at their social worlds, and to think about how they are structured: the basic sociological concept of the “sociological imagination” that students are exposed to at first year level, for instance, is concerned with learning to see the strange in the familiar, and the familiar in the strange (Macionis and Plummer, 2008). As such, sociology curricula require teachers to draw on student’s experiences in their teaching, and students’ backgrounds and identity will influence how they experience those curricula. For Msila (2007: 47), then, ‘education is not a neutral act’ in that it both draws on existent student identities, and attempts to construct certain identities in learners.

Why does this matter to the teaching of sociology in South Africa? Ngcaweni (2013) argues that colonialism and apartheid emphasised the worldview of the coloniser over that of the colonised; as such, the social sciences in South Africa are strongly influenced by European studies and epistemologies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Nyamnjoh, 2012) such that curricula emphasise particular ontological positions, and expect students to reproduce those positions in their own work. Samir Amin terms this ontological positioning ‘Eurocentrism’ (Amin, 1989). Recent critical theory to emerge from other parts of the global South has emphasised that while the temporal period of colonialism might be over, coloniality – the underlying hierarchising logic which places peoples and knowledges into a classificatory framework such that non-European ontologies are invalidated – remains (Mignolo, 2012). Within the social sciences, this is reflected by a focus on European theory to the exclusion of a wider view of the world (Alatas, 2005). Ramoupi (2014) notes that mainstream first year sociology within South Africa is particularly attentive to introducing students to the ‘big names’ in the discipline: these tend to be European scholars. In a Bernsteinian view, giving students access to the work and theory presented by canonical authors provides access to vertical discourse: the difficult, higher level knowledge that is powerful within the discipline (Bernstein, 1999). For educators in South Africa there is thus an imperative that all students are given epistemological access to this canon, irrespective of background, in order that they are able to mobilise powerful knowledge and progress in the discipline locally and globally. Ramoupi (2014), however, argues that students receive the impression that little valid social

science has emerged from Africa or Asia, as the powerful knowledge is usually Euro-American in origin.

McLennan (2012: 7) argues that the field of sociology may be in a ‘post-colonial predicament’. McLennan (2012) compares sociology to the disciplines of anthropology and history; and concludes that sociology has been comparatively slow in embracing issues around the importance of context and reflexivity in knowledge production in and about the postcolony. Whilst he argues that sociology is an essential field in the social sciences, it is sometimes not ‘contextually credible’ in non-western contexts because the powerful knowledge is situated in Western ideas. In his critical assessment of sociology McLennan (2012: 17) maintains that the elements of universality, objectivity and cross-contextual validity pose a significant problem because knowledge is always unmistakably ‘situated’ and this threatens the intellectual authority of Eurocentric epistemology that sociology largely stipulates. McLennan (2012) proposes that a critical engagement with sociological theories and concepts is needed in the current post-colonial moment so as to realise the limitations of Eurocentric knowledge systems.

Research Methods

With this theoretical background in mind, then, the study presented here set out to explore the academic experiences of first year sociology students on an Extended Degree program; specifically, their experiences of two courses that approached the introduction of sociology slightly differently, with one drawing mainly on the Euro-American canon and the other attempting to situate sociological theory within local contexts. The study thus focused on student perceptions of curriculum content rather than on an analysis of curriculum content per se, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the broad critiques made against ‘the curriculum’ during student protests.⁶ In other words, we were interested in conducting a qualitative analysis of students’ experiences with two specific course curricula as a case study through which to better understand the broad dissatisfaction with university curricula being voiced at present. In this paper, academic experiences were defined as the ways in which students engaged with the curricula they encountered in courses, both in terms of qualitative engagement, as seen through their evaluations of the material, and in terms of the quantitative outcome of their engagement with the course, as seen through the grades they received. The research thus set out to explore whether there was a difference in how students engaged with the content of the curriculum of the two courses and, if so, in what ways. The study further investigated whether there was a correspondent difference in the grades students received on the two courses.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the conveners of each course; the Education Development Teaching Assistant affiliated to the courses (who worked with conveners’ curricula to design augmenting tutorials which aimed to provide academic support to Extended Degree students through more time on task and deeper engagement with the materials); and with 10 extended degree students who had taken both courses in the

⁶ For example, one of #RhodesMustFall’s original demands was that the university ‘implement a curriculum which critically centres Africa and the subaltern’ (RMF, 2015).

preceding academic year. Both conveners were white males; the Teaching Assistant was a black male; and the student sample was composed of seven black women and three black men. The student sample was purposive, chosen on the basis of registration on the extended degree program and completion of the two courses; these factors in combination with a low response rate to a call for respondents who fit the criteria constrained sample size and affected gender ratios. However, in-depth interviews with the sample respondents provided ample qualitative data on students' subjective experiences of the course. The semi-structured interview schedules for students aimed at exploring students' subjective experiences of the courses, and at eliciting information on whether students' identities and backgrounds (social/cultural capital) influenced how they interacted and engaged with the curricula of the two courses. This data was augmented with a quantitative analysis of the coursework, exam and final marks of all extended degree students registered on the courses. Finally, course materials such as outlines, tutorial tasks, assignments and marking memos were also examined in order to give better insight into the content of the courses themselves.

Findings and Analysis

Similarities and Differences Between the Two Courses

Both the courses examined were full semester courses, comprising twelve weeks of material, and had an identical structure in terms of teaching input per week, made up of three 45 minute large-group lectures designed and given by academic staff to over one hundred students; one 45 minute small- group tutorial designed by the convener of the course and run by a tutor (usually a postgraduate student in the department) for approximately fifteen to twenty students; and a second 45 minute small-group tutorial designed by the ED Teaching Assistant and run by an experienced postgraduate tutor. Both courses form part of the first year of the sociology major at the university; and students majoring in sociology are required to take at least one of the first year courses towards their major, although many opt to take both.

The first semester course introduced students to the sociological study of society, and in so-doing discussed the intellectual origins of sociology. The first part of the course (Weeks 1 to 4) examined how individual behaviour and action is constrained by institutions, processes and structures in society. The concepts that were covered in the first four weeks of the course were power, socialisation, cultural formation, discrimination, labelling and stigma. The second part of the course lasted for another four weeks, and its primary focus was the relationship that exists between the market and society. Under this theme, students were introduced to Adam Smith and the intricate perspectives of the changing patterns of society and the development of capitalism. This part of the course also focused on Marx and Engels' theorisations of industrialisation, labour and historical materialism. The third and last section of the course explored the origins and methods of Sociology as a social science by looking at classic theories and the early sociologists such as Auguste Comte, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. This section also focused on the establishment of sociology as a discipline and its intricate links to the European Enlightenment era (1685-1815), with its focus on science, reason and human progress that led intellectuals to attempt to create 'a Science of man'. The key ideas of the Enlightenment era were briefly introduced as inspired by Comte's positivism, as it is generally recognised as a foundation of sociology as a discipline. The course thereafter

explored Weber's analysis of the centrality of modernity and theories of religion and bureaucracy. The topics covered were chosen in order to help students understand the historical development of sociology and its contemporary applications, but this was not done from a reflexive perspective that placed the discipline of sociology within the history of colonialism and the power relations that accompanied modernity (Mignolo, 2012), with far-reaching effects for Africa. In other words, the history of sociology was not problematised for students but instead Euro-American theorists were presented as canonical.

The second semester course also broadly examined the relationship between the individual and the social, but did so by a different means. The course focused on the structured social inequalities that are prevalent in South African society and also examined the selected social processes, structures, institutions and behaviours that help in the understanding of these broad issues. As such, it was South Africa centered in its perspective. The first section of the course focused on the ways in which family has been theorised in sociology, exploring how concepts such as gender, race, and social class influence people's family experiences. Students were challenged to think about the composition of a family and how it looks and feels for both men and women, for different generations, racial groups and for wealthy and poor people. The second section of the course focused on education. Whilst the case study was located in South Africa, the underlying theory being taught – Bourdieu's (1974) notion of cultural reproduction in the context of education - was from the conventional sociological canon. Students were set questions for discussion such as: 'What cultural capital can young adults from different backgrounds in South Africa take with them to school? How can that influence their educational outcomes?' From here, the course moved to health and health care in South Africa. Students were introduced to South Africa's health systems and the country's predominant health problems. This part of the course thus also engaged students with South African case studies in order to explore how social structures such as socioeconomic and physical environments play a role in affecting patterns of health and disease, including an inquiry into how health and healthcare are linked to social inequality and poverty in South Africa. The second semester course thus also used mainstream sociological concepts and theories but in so doing it drew on literature that revolved around South Africa as a point of departure, instead of the Euro-American literature. Ranaweera (1990) terms this 'context relevant' education.

Data from interviews with conveners showed that they were aware of the strengths and limitations of the curricula. The convener of the first semester course (Convener A) acknowledged that although the course intended to 'start from the immediate to the general' it had challenges with contextually delivering the content due to the theoretical weight of the course. When asked about the reason behind this, Convener A maintained that the course did not have extensive local literature because

'No South African has done what mainstream sociologists have done in terms of rich sociology. There's no literature. You can use South African literature for illustrations. But the only African theorist is Fanon.'

This is in keeping with Alatas's (2005) assertion that the politics of global knowledge production at present situate Africa as a space of case studies, not of theorising. To solve the problem of lack of local content, Convener A stated that

'We need a proliferation of nuanced studies of the experience of transitions, transformations, happening now. If we have that literature, we'll pour it into the curriculum. But it is a long process.'

Convener A thus saw a need to shift the sociology curricula, but was not able, due to various institutional and disciplinary constraints, to stretch beyond the conventional canon to do so. The idea of powerful knowledge (Young, 2009) is useful here: Convener A is aware that students need to access high-level sociological knowledge. In the South African and international academy at present, that high-level knowledge is Euro-American in origin. There is a tension that occurs between the need to make content accessible and relevant for students – particularly for first generation students – and the need to also give students access to the powerful knowledge (Young, 2009) that comes with familiarity with the theory-dense sociological canon.

Convener B placed his emphasis on local relevance firmly within the realm of good teaching practice, not in political debates about decolonising the discipline. He stated that *'local literature is important because when you are introducing people to broader abstract issues, it's a general pedagogical principle'*. He further stated that

I don't think you can deal with abstract concepts without locating them in time and space. So they have to have a historical sense in their development and they have to be located in some way. One reason for that is to try to make it easier for students to identify with issues being discussed in abstract form. That is because we also want students to be able to lift themselves out in time and space. So if you deepen an understanding of "somewhere" it should also assist in the process from moving from that specific "somewhere" to look more deeply elsewhere. They are in Africa, and their institution is in Africa.

The second course thus made greater use of local, contextual examples to situate also-complex theory (such as Bourdieu) for pedagogical reasons. In other words, the second course was also aiming to give students access to powerful knowledge, but did so through the use of contextualised examples.

The ED TA had an overarching view of the two courses, as he was intimately involved in both. His responses are interesting in that they show an awareness of the challenges that face Extended Degree students in particular, as well as an awareness of the constraints of the institution and the discipline. He argued that in the first semester course, *'the students see themselves as detached from the content'* whereas in the second semester course, *'The students tend to relate more to the title and they see themselves in it'*.

It is thus clear that neither course is radically "decolonised", in that both take as a starting point the key disciplinary perspectives and epistemological assumptions of sociology, and both expect students to reproduce these epistemological positions in their written work.

Where they differed was in their focus or lack of focus on local perspectives in so-doing. What effect, if any, did this difference have on extended degree students' experiences of the courses? It is to this that we now turn.

Students' Subjective Experiences of the Courses

When asked to describe the courses, students defined the first semester course as 'very European', (with four students using this exact phrasing); 'theoretical' or 'very theoretical and too deep' or 'theoretically dense'; 'more like history' and 'mostly general'. In contrast, students described the second semester course as 'people-centred – and I have a passion for people'; as a course that 'focused on our realities' and as 'relating theory and practice together' with a 'South African focus'. It is thus clear that the different pedagogical approaches taken in the courses with regard to the necessity for culturally-relevant content was noticed by the students; and that students framed the courses in terms of the discourses of 'Western/European' versus 'African' that were circulating in universities at the time as a result of decolonial protests.

With regard to the first semester course, Phumeza⁷ (a 20 year old student) stated that

I felt that to me it was very European. So it was a bit hard for me to relate to it. Uhm, but it was introductory, so it was a very broad view of sociology as a study. I wouldn't say I really enjoyed it, but I did learn a lot. Just to see things from different perspectives than what I was raised to know.

In other words, to this student, even though the course had a so-called 'European' focus, it still gave access to valuable knowledge, to 'different perspectives than I was raised to know'. On the same module, Khanyisile (a 21 year old student) stated 'I needed to think about it a lot because it was historic. I needed to think about it and apply myself more. Hence I did more reading first semester than in second semester'. Busisiwe (a 20 year old student), disliked the course and when asked why, mentioned that 'It was hard for me to relate because I was out of my comfort zone'. Unathi (a 21 year old student) stated that 'the course was kind of like a history. It was all about the capital, that in order to be normal, you need capital, it was about people that are wealthy, and it was not for me so I didn't like it'. Unathi's sentiments were strong in that she felt that the course did not reflect her own reality. Eight out of ten of the students interviewed found the first semester course to be less enjoyable than the second.

However, the theoretical density of the first semester course was not necessarily experienced as limiting: whilst it may not have been as enjoyable as their second semester course, students still found value in the content. Buhle, a 21 year old student, for instance, commented that,

I keep jumping back to the first one, personally I feel that although the second one is the one I did better in, I could relate to the first one. Look, because it helps more to

⁷ Pseudonyms used throughout

understand people and what you see about the structures that are there. Second semester, was interesting to learn about but it was too engaged with familial inequality, but there was not much more I could do with that info, unless if I was researching it.

Rochelle, a 20 year old, also preferred the first semester course, noting that, *I'm a very objective person, I like being objective. So I enjoyed the content of the first course. I preferred the first semester because it had a much broader application. So I could apply Bourdieu to my Politics course, if I wanted to, because it's my major. So I found it more helpful, I still use those theories even now.*

It can be seen from these student's responses that students' were able to engage with the high theory of the course, even if they did not necessarily find the content immediately relatable to their own lives. Rochelle's comment also points to the value of giving students epistemic access to powerful knowledge, as it is then possible to apply that knowledge across multiple disciplinary contexts.

The second semester course was described differently by students, who drew in their life experiences and spoke with greater passion when explaining the course to interviewers than they did when talking about the first semester course. For example, Wandile, a 21 year old, drew vividly on his own personal experiences in describing the content of the course. He stated that,

I can relate in both courses, but in terms of this second semester course, I related more because we talked about families. It just takes a bit of my experience in terms of family because everything that has been discussed I have seen it happening in my family and other families. We also talked about health community workers, I can say that it has opened my mind in so many ways because in terms of community workers, you know my mom was sick with TB, and as a result me and my brother got TB, and like, I didn't understand why those clinic people would come distribute pills and medication like to make sure that the house is clean, and after I came to UCT, and they were talking about those people (community health care workers), and why they are doing such jobs...and when we did the readings they were so directly related with them.

It was thus possible for this student to intimately link the social theory to his everyday life; as such, theoretically dense readings were more easily understandable. The presence of a contextual curriculum (Ranaweera, 1990) led Wandile to have a much richer experience of the course.

Noma, a 21 year old, expressed similar thoughts when she stated that *'the course content was great, I loved it. I could relate to some of the things, you know'*. She went on to say that *'I would not relate to the course as much if I did not come from that background, if I didn't come from a background where I have seen people die of AIDS because they can't access medication, no health facilities, so yeah'*. The second semester course was powerful for this cohort of students in that it drew on students' experiences. Unathi stated that *'I was*

relating to the second semester one, like it shows how people are living....living in shacks, and I also live in shacks so I understood because I knew the environment. Plus it was very South African, you know’.

Out of the ten students that were interviewed, eight felt that they related better to the second semester course. The course seemed to take account of their contexts and they were mostly able to align their own personal or lived experiences with the content of the course. The TA also recognised this and stated that *‘The difference may be that the students tend to relate more to the second semester and they see themselves. I think in first semester they see themselves detached from the content’*. Luckett (2016) argues that the mobilisation of student agency and identity is an integral part of the learning process. The students who were interviewed mainly came from disadvantaged backgrounds and *‘did not leave their culture (backgrounds) at the door when they entered the academic institution’* (Morreira, 2017: 12). This made it possible for them to relate better to the second semester course. In interviews, the students were asked if they thought it was important to relate to a course. All of them agreed. Most of them maintained that this was important as it helped them better comprehend and take ownership of the content.

For similar reasons, the second semester course was perceived as being ‘easier’ than the first semester one, despite it having as stringent assignments and examinations as the first. For example, Ayesha, a 20 year old, maintained that *‘the second semester was easier. The other one was too complicated and I wasn’t interested. Maybe if I had a different mindset...’*, while Busisiwe stated that *‘It was just easier to understand the second semester module than the first semester one’*. Nine out of ten students interviewed found the first semester harder than the second; as seen in the above quote this was most commonly attributed to students’ being able to maintain interest in the course content and, through this, to access the theoretical foundations of the course. This may result in an ‘easier’ academic experience in that students perceive the course as less threatening or difficult. The TA stated that this was also evident in the marks of extended degree students, commenting that, over the several years in which he has taught on the courses, *‘generally, the marks for second semester were often higher than for the first’*. From the perspective of the university, ‘easier’, of course, does not make a course ‘better’, particularly if it means that students are only accessing unspecialised knowledge. However, as was mentioned in the description of the course content above, both courses did give students access to vertical discourse/dense theoretical content. Students in the second semester course, however, found that dense theory easier to access as the examples they were given were relatable. They thus experienced a course that was also theoretically challenging as ‘easier’. The tables below illustrate the course marks received by the 2014 cohort.

Differences in students’ results across the courses

The data below shows the overall marks for all extended degree students upon completion of the two courses in 2014.

Table 1: Overall Marks for Both Course (All Extended Degree Students in 2014)

Semester Course	Year	Number of students	Average Course Work Mark (%)	Average Exam Mark (%)	Combined Overall Mark (%)
First semester	2014	117	58.1	49.5	52.7
Second semester	2014	72	57.3	54.8	55.6

The table above provides the outcomes in the form of results/grades of the two courses. As the table indicates, 117 extended degree students took the first semester course for the year 2014, while the second semester course had 72 students enrolled for the course in the same year. The coursework average was 58.1% and 57.3% for first and second semester respectively. There was thus only a slight difference between the two courses (of less than 1%) in terms of coursework marks. However, the examination marks saw a difference of 7% between the courses, with the students’ doing worse on the first semester, more theory-heavy, course. The combined overall marks of coursework assessment thus averaged 52% and 55% for first and second semester, respectively. Extended degree students did slightly better in the second semester module than the first. This is in keeping with the TA’s assessment of the courses, and with the student’s own experiences. It is interesting to note, however, that most of this difference came from the examination mark, despite the exam format being similar across the two courses, with both requiring students to write short essays.

Table 2: Marks for Both Courses (Research Participants Only)

Student	Coursework Mark 1 st Semester (%)	Coursework Mark 2 nd Semester (%)	Exam Mark 1 st semester (%)	Exam mark 2 nd semester (%)
Student A	62	61	43	49
Student B	52	53	48	62
Student C	57	61	54	60
Student D	42	43	58	63
Student E	49	51	51	57
Student F	60	58	63	62
Student G	60	63	49	54
Student H	58	61	43	65
Student I	58	56	50	50
Student J	57	57	51	50
Average	56	57	51	57

Table 2 shows the first and second semester marks for coursework and exams obtained by the students who participated in this research. The mean of the coursework marks obtained by the 10 student participants in their first semester was 56%, whilst the mean for

their second semester was 57%. For exams, the mean was 51% for first semester and 57% for the second semester. Most students did as well or slightly better in the second semester, with only student B and J performing slightly better in the first semester course. This reiterates the trend seen in Table 1. Whilst these differences in academic performance could be due to a number of factors, this study investigated the student perspective: as such, our focus was on the students' explanations for the differences. It is to this that we now turn.

Students' explanations of their performance on the two courses

As noted above, students maintained that the second semester course, with its focus on locally resonant materials, was 'easier' than the first semester one, despite it having similar demands in terms of reading requirements, essay writing, assignments and examinations. When asked why the second semester was easier, and why students felt they did slightly better in the second semester, student responses focused on the material in the two courses, and its relationship to the 'background' or social capital that the students' entered the two courses with. Boitumelo, for example, stated that

background does play a role in learning but I think it's about intimidation. Some students can be really intimidating you know because of their background. Yes you are on the same level.... But others are from Saint whatever, Michael's whatever, and wena otswa ko skolong sa ko loktion⁸ ...It's intimidating you know...So it does affect your learning, I mean I failed a few courses because of that.

Boitumelo's's utterances about 'intimidation' relate to Convener B's statement that the lack of a particular social and cultural capital results in the '*the absence of a nurtured confidence*' in students. Similarly, Wandile maintained that background does matter, and whether one can bring one's background into the classroom situation affects how well you do on the course, saying that '*there's this module that I am doing now, and I feel like I can't say anything. We are talking about privileges, so in a tutorial, you are asked what privileges do you think you have? And I ask myself, privileges in terms of what?*' In such an instance, it can be hard for a student to engage with the material, where a tutorial task is clearly designed with a privileged learner in mind: for those who are not privileged, the pedagogy does not work.

Students also highlighted that the content of the curriculum affects their enjoyment and engagement with the course, and this in turn can affect grades. One student argued that,

There is nothing African about the first module. If they talk about Africa, they only talk about South Africa, at least if they could talk about the theories in a more African context, maybe we can learn about so many things, say for example, Zimbabwe, Malawi. If it could be more Afrocentric. Even essays that challenge us to think about how Africa is participating in this modern world, in terms of those Marx Weber theories, I think that will be catchier because I believe in that sense we will have more African authors writing from their perspective. Sociology is a discipline that brings

⁸ Trans. from Tswana "When you come from a township school"

about solutions, so if we can use those in analysing these African problems, that would be much better.

This student found it harder to write essays for the course because she was not able, or not allowed by the terms of the essay question, to link those theories to a relevant context. As such, they were not as easy to write about or the concepts were not as easily operationalised as was the case for assignments in the second semester.

Almost all students cited the practical and experiential nature of the second semester course as influential in their learning, while the first semester course was perceived as posing difficulty because of its Euro-American theoretical basis, even where it attempted to give examples to contextualise the theory. As one student commented, *'the first semester gave us European examples, but our [African] history can also give many examples, instead of Americans and European'*. When a course is contextually and culturally relevant to the students, and students are able to relate to it better, they are able to draw on their own experiences while learning the content of the course. This was interpreted by students as a factor in their doing better in one course than another.

Conclusion: Towards a Culturally Responsive Curriculum?

Students' interactions with course materials are complex. This study found that the content of a course (whether Euro-American focused or Africa-relevant) played a role in South African students' academic experiences. Most students were attracted by the contextual and practical nature of the second semester, while they were dissuaded by the theoretical and dense nature of the first semester. For these students, there was a richer and more fulfilling academic experience when knowledge was first contextualised within the African context, and thereafter transcended the boundaries of local context to speak to broader theory. The space of higher education is a complicated one in that learners enter the institutional environment from a wide array of backgrounds; it is thus difficult to design materials that will resonate with all students. However, recent calls for transformation within South African universities have argued that academics are responsible for ensuring that universities in South Africa respond to African problems and draw on African theorists in their curricula.

This is not to say that courses should be Afrocentric to the exclusion of the rest of the world, but rather that we need a better acknowledgment of the Eurocentric nature of the canon, and an awareness that the global South produces theory as well as producing data (Connell, 2008). Teaching students about sociological concepts is always going to involve theoretically dense material, particularly if the aim is to give students access to powerful knowledge in sociology. This study has shown that rather than focus too heavily on the removal of 'Euro-American' or 'Western' perspectives from the curriculum, there is great value in finding spaces in the curriculum where we can contextualise such theory, and spaces where we can think reflexively about where such theory originated. Furthermore, as the Convener of the theory-dense course noted, moves are being made in sociology towards the creation of new African-centred theory that is by its very nature more contextualised to African experiences. In other words, should this trend continue, in future it will be possible to have theoretical courses that are not as far removed from students' experiences as are

theoretical courses at present. As noted by Convener A, however, we are near the beginning of what will be a ‘long process’ of new theorisation.

This study shows that in the present moment, reflexivity and contextualised teaching can assist students in working through the canon as it exists at present, and thus in giving students access to powerful knowledge.

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