

## **Book review**

Walker, M. & Wilson-Strydom, M. (eds.) 2017. *Socially just pedagogies, capabilities and quality in higher education: Global perspectives*. London: Palgrave.

ISBN: 978-1-137-55786-5

The collection of studies in the edited volume, *Socially just pedagogies, capabilities and quality in higher education: Global perspectives*, was published at particularly significant time for higher education – both in South Africa and globally. In response to increasing and increasingly diverse student populations, higher education has been dominated by neo-liberal efficiency discourses of student ‘throughputs’ and ‘success’. South African higher education’s attempts at self-transformation have largely been unsuccessful, as recent student activism has shown, and new regimes of funding, managerialism and quality have emerged to steer the high education system towards state-regulated objectives. The chapters in this edited volume uncover some of the complexities and injustices that underpin ‘hard managerialism’ – and instead propose ways in which university teaching, student well-being, and quality might be brought into a different kind of relationship – one that avoids the positioning ‘quality’ and ‘equality’ in opposition. This collective work offers a very different vision of what higher education might become if socially just pedagogies were placed at its centre.

The book makes a strong case for theoretically-informed teaching, with a particular focus on how the values and principles that underpin socially just pedagogies can guide teaching practice in contexts of inequality. The chapters explore what it means, and what it takes, for students to flourish in higher education, and why such well-being is a matter of pedagogic justice. The ten chapters at the core of this collection comprise rich, detailed descriptions and analyses of socially just pedagogies in a range of different disciplines and fields. While much of the book is guided by the editors’ particular interest in Amartya Sen (2009) and Martha Nussbaum’s (2011) capabilities approach, the chapters show that a range of theoretical perspectives can be placed in the service of social justice. The first two chapters, which reclaim Bernstein’s (2002) sociology of knowledge for pedagogic justice, are a case in point. Jenkins et al. draw on Bernstein’s (2000) theorisation of the ‘pedagogic device’ and his model of ‘pedagogic rights’ (enhancement, inclusion, and participation) to conceptualise and enable access to ‘powerful’ sociological knowledge for students in less prestigious universities. Jenkins et al.’s chapter shows that although universities might be implicated in social and educational inequalities at many levels, academics can address the social inequalities of the system (or their own institution) and implement transformative practices. Wilson-Strydom’s chapter on ‘Pedagogic rights for transformative student learning’ explicitly puts Bernstein’s pedagogic theory into conversation with Sen and Nussbaum’s capabilities approach. The focus of the chapter is university teachers’ reflection on their practice. The academics who are the focus of the study come from a wide variety of

Vol.6, No.1 (2018): pp. 81-83

Corresponding author: winbergc@cput.ac.za

doi: 10.14426/cristal.v6i1.143

disciplines, including those in Mathematics and the pure and applied sciences – disciplines often thought to be exempt from a transformative agenda. Wilson-Strydom finds that what unites committed teachers across the disciplinary map is, as one participant puts it, a focus on ‘the potential in each and every student’ as the ‘starting point’ for teaching practice. As a reader particularly interested in the transformative potential of the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines and fields, I would have welcomed more studies of teaching in these disciplines and fields – precisely because they are so resistant to social change.

Educational technology, that most under-theorised field of higher education studies, has, in a way not dissimilar to that of the STEM disciplines, distanced itself from its own pedagogical practice. Yet, ironically, is often presented in policy documents as a panacea for increasing access to higher education in resource-constrained environments. In her chapter on ‘Participatory parity and emerging technologies’, Bozalek tackles some of these dilemmas, drawing on Fraser’s (2009) dimensions of social justice to show how a strongly theorised approach towards the use of educational technologies might bring about new and potentially transformative forms of practice.

The next two chapters re-think ‘internationalisation’ in higher education – generally considered a desirable and important measure of quality. Suransky, drawing on Mouffe’s (2013) ‘agonistic politics’, shows how international collaboration can be exploitative, but also where possibilities might exist for an ‘active seeking of understanding across lines of difference’. Against ‘internationalisation’ as a quality measure in higher education, Crosbie proposes a version of Appiah’s (2006) ‘cosmopolitanism’ in her proposal towards ‘cosmopolitan praxis’. Crosbie’s model emerges from the work of teaching first year undergraduate English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and a final-year undergraduate cultural studies elective. These prove to be rich sites – against the ‘othering’ implicit in the ESOL acronym – for the emergence of transformative cosmopolitan identities. Teaching English language and assumptions around the role of English in higher education raises many questions about socially just practices in higher education, particularly in contexts where English is a borrowed or imposed language, and where traditional ESOL pedagogies have been the cause of exclusion and alienation.

Undergraduate research has appeared in recent literature, in a fairly unproblematic way, as a ‘high impact’ student experience. In her study, Calitz shows what undergraduate research might look like from the perspective of a capabilities-informed pedagogy. In particular, Calitz shows how undemocratic practices in an unequal higher education system can reproduce inequalities, while a pedagogy informed by ‘deliberative participation, agency, dialogue, democratic practice and voice’ has the potential to create more socially just spaces for the emergence of ethical behaviours. Much has been written about ‘graduate attributes’ in the higher education literature, often represented as de-contextualised ‘wish lists’ that are unlikely to be implemented or attained. Calitz’s study shows that if we want to nurture ethical graduates who can become ethical citizens, then it matters how we teach them. Calitz points out that for students whose positions in the institution are ‘precarious’, socially just pedagogies are more able to expand students’ ‘real opportunities to gain entry to the knowledge, literacies and affiliation required for the cultivation of ethically minded and reasoning citizens’. Pym’s chapter raises similar issues about the possibilities of socially just

pedagogies from the perspective of an educational development unit in a Commerce Faculty. Pym argues that it is only in a safe and caring space that students from diverse backgrounds are able to collectively ‘configure new identities’ that enable them to both participate in the ‘goods’ offered by the discipline, and become ‘agents of change’ within the disciplinary community. In the chapter entitled ‘Transforming the system from within’, Boni et al. turn their attention to postgraduate research, in particular, an exploration of Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a socially just pedagogy that has the potential to forge links between ‘local and global issues (not only on a theoretical but also on a practical level)’. Like many who chose to work within a critical paradigm, Boni and colleagues have to confront issues of institutional marginalisation in the context of ‘hard’ quality regimes that do not, for example, value PAR. Boni et al.’s chapter highlights the frustration of working in a space where transformation is possible, but the institutional impetus is towards reproduction. What is remarkable about all the core chapters is that they offer both strongly theorised positions, but also provide richly detailed examples of enacting theory in the practice of teaching. These central chapters argue that socially-just teaching matters if we want to build socially just societies.

In the final chapter, Walker and Wilson-Strydom draw together the concerns and findings of the preceding ten chapters to propose ways of how we might teach, and think about teaching, in ways that advance social justice. Theoretical consistency within an ethical framework is required to address higher education transformation consciously and critically if we are to envision more caring futures in which all might flourish. The book’s strong theoretical framing of pedagogic justice and pedagogic rights, its insistence on the return to practice, and its careful scholarship, make the book an important addition to the literature on critical pedagogies in higher education.

*Reviewed by*

Chris Winberg, Cape Peninsula University of Technology

## **References**

- Appiah, K.A. 2006. *Cosmopolitanism: ethics in a world of strangers*. London: Allen Lane.
- Bernstein, B. 2000. *Pedagogy, symbolic control, and identity: theory, research, critique*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Fraser, N. 2009. *Scales of justice: Re-imagining political space in a globalizing world*. New York: Columbia U.P.
- Mouffe, C. 2013. *Agonistics: thinking the world politically*. London: Verso.
- Nussbaum, M. 2011. *Creating capabilities: the human development approach*. Cambridge MA.: Harvard U.P.
- Sen, A. 2009. *The idea of justice*. Cambridge MA.: Harvard U.P.



This publication is covered by a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license. For further information please see: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.