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CRITICAL STUDIES IN TEACHING & LEARNING

Book review

Cross, M. and Ndofirepi, A. (Eds.). 2017. *Knowledge and change in African universities* Volume 1 – *Current Debates*, and *Re–imagining the terrain* Volume 2. Rotterdam: Sense.

Some years ago, I was involved in a project with three universities in sub-Saharan Africa and subsequently, with another one in Cameroon. Since 2015, I have been engaged in research projects in South Africa and have been reading voraciously to further understand the complexities of higher education in the South African context, as well as the other sub-Saharan countries with whom I previously worked. Latterly, I have been striving to engage with African philosophies and epistemologies to explore ways in which curricula can be decolonised and to consider the continuing challenges of access and retention. I was excited, therefore, at being invited to review *Knowledge and change in African universities*. The title suggested that this work, gathered in two volumes, could provide everything that I wanted to know about South African higher education and higher education in other African countries. The two volumes have, to some extent, fleshed out my developing understanding, raised further important questions, and challenged me to reflect more critically on my own perspectives on certain issues.

Volume One consists of twelve chapters and Volume Two of ten, in addition to a final chapter which synthesises the main themes of both volumes. The first chapter of Volume One introduces both volumes, although this is not articulated nor are all the chapters mentioned. Therefore, if one reads only Volume Two, it is not introduced as a companion to Volume One. In their final chapter of Volume Two, Cross and Ndofirepi (2017: 189) refer to the 'conversations in all the chapters.' In my speculations about how this book came about I imagined many fascinating conversations, some of which I would have liked to have seen reflected in the book. Their inclusion might have gone some way to reducing the amount of repetition in several chapters which I found somewhat frustrating. For example, there are repeated definitions of the role and purpose of a university and where and how universities originated in that, in Africa, they are all products of and continue to be mediated by coloniality. In addition, and not surprisingly, there are definitions of globalisation, neoliberalism, Africanisation, and decolonisation throughout the book. It is not that these issues are unimportant, quite the opposite; however, to encounter similar definitions in chapter after chapter can feel a little monotonous and may reduce their impact on the reader.

In chapter 11 of Volume Two the editors write: 'it would be impossible to scan through all the issues flagged in the various chapters' (Cross & Ndofirepi, 2017: 189) As a reviewer charged with considering twenty-three chapters, I feel that I am faced with a similar impossible task. Extrapolating only a few chapters for comment is not to dismiss others, but I have singled out for discussion those that challenged my thinking and gave me fresh insights.

Having been involved as a methodological consultant to a large research project that focused on *Ubuntu,* it is not surprising that the two chapters that centred on this – '*Ubuntu*: African philosophy of education and pedagogical encounters' by Yusef Waghid (chapter 3 of Volume One) and 'Managerialism as anti-social: Some implications of *Ubuntu* for knowledge production' by Thaddeus Metz (chapter 8 of Volume Two), captured my attention. The ability to think critically continues to be endemic in higher education, yet it is rarely critiqued for its underlying philosophies nor questioned as an academic practice. Elements of Waghid's chapter that I found especially valuable were those that draw attention to how critical thinking can be conceptualised in an African philosophy of education in ways that are respectful of others, in particular elders, and how such a philosophy is denied by 'ignoring the artefacts, images, symbols and practices that constitute some of the reasoned justifications for people's ways of being' (Waghid, 2017: 37). Metz's chapter offers a recognisable critique of managerialism in higher education but extends this to offer encouraging and practical suggestions on how to draw on 'Afro-communitarian values of identity and solidarity' (Metz, 2017: 149) in particular with regard to research and promotion in universities. Julia Suarez-Krabbe's chapter, 'The conditions that make a difference: decolonial historical realism and the decolonisation of knowledge and education' (chapter 5 of Volume One), extends the decolonisation debate beyond Africa to Latin America and Europe which, for me, is crucial. I relished Suarez-Krabbe's (2017: 61) assertion that 'Europe also needs to be understood as a continent deeply shaped by colonialism – both the colonialism carried to the outside world, as well as within the continent'. She proposes that we Europeans need to be engaging with decoloniality in our universities. Such a proposition lends important weight and credence to, for example, the movements within the UK that are agitating for decolonisation of curricula such as those expounded by the Rhodes Must Fall Movement at the University of Oxford in *Rhodes must fall: The struggle to decolonise the heart of empire* (2018) and 'Why is my curriculum white?' (El Magd, 2016).

I found two of the most thought-provoking chapters to be chapters 7 and 8 of Volume One, the positioning of which seemed intriguing. Kai Horsthemke's chapter, 'Africanisation and diverse epistemologies in higher education discourses: Limitations and possibilities' (chapter 7 of Volume One), challenges the concepts of Africanisation and decolonised curricula that are, inevitably, prevalent throughout both volumes. His central argument - that 'an African essence' and 'African ways of knowing' do not constitute 'an appropriate theoretical framework for conceptualising change in higher educational thought and practice in South Africa' (Horsthemke, 2017: 102) - is critiqued by Maringe (chapter 1 of Volume Two) as symptomatic of 'white doubters' (Maringe, 2017: 15). Nonetheless, this chapter is

an important – if left field – contribution to the book. The questions raised by Horsthemke caused me to reflect more deeply – and critically - on why I believe decolonisation of the curriculum to be so important. The chapter precedes a provocative and hard-hitting one by Sipho Seepe, 'Higher education transformation in South Africa' (chapter 8 of Volume One), which foregrounds how white privilege continues to be perpetuated in South African higher education, underpinned by two brief case studies of the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN) and the University of Cape Town (UCT). A single chapter written as a dialogue between these two authors would have provided a lively and confrontational contribution and stimulated further conversations.

In reviewing any book, it is inevitable that the reviewer poses several questions. In reviewing this one, the main questions for me were: How did the book come about? Who are its intended audiences? Academics and policy makers in Africa, South Africa, or those of us in other parts of the world? What determined the decision for it to be two volumes?

Such questions arise from the repetition mentioned earlier and from a heavy emphasis on 'knowledge and change' in South Africa – there is hardly any attention paid to North Africa or to many other sub-Saharan countries. If the book is directed at readers outside of Africa, especially South Africa, who have little insight and engagement with the context, then the volumes are comprehensive and informative. As a non-African, I cannot comment on the extent to which they will enrich the knowledge and insight of African readers.

Both volumes have several language and grammatical errors. Some chapters would have benefited from a clearer structure and, in one chapter, there were unfinished sentences. I agree with Seepe's (2017: 137) comment that 'editorial policies and discursive practices also serve as gatekeeping mechanisms' but the book would have benefited from some tougher editing. As an editor, I know how difficult and complex that role can be but one also needs to consider one's readers, as well as one's writers. A more thorough proofreading would, I am sure, have picked up the myriad errors.

Finally, I am aware of the sensitivities that can arise when, as a European, I observe and comment on the complexities of higher education in non-European contexts. I am reading this book with European eyes located within a European context - with all that implies - and I am aware that a reviewer from within Africa may well foreground different issues. I agree with Brock-Utne (2017: 178) (chapter 10 of Volume One) that '[t]here is so much the Western world can learn from Africa'; however, articulating specifically what the 'Western world' can learn from Africa might have added to the originality of these two volumes. As it is, there is potential for 'the Western world' to learn much about higher education in parts of Africa, in particular South Africa, from reading this book and hopefully be provoked and stimulated to reflect on crucial issues that otherwise they may not consider.

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