

Book Review

Costandius, E & Bitzer, E. (eds). 2015. *Engaging Higher Education Curricula: A Critical Citizenship Perspective*. Stellenbosch: SUN Press.

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Despite transformation initiatives since 1994 in the higher education sector, the area of curriculum has escaped deep critical focus. Initiatives aimed at curriculum development, from regulatory bodies such as the South African Qualifications Authority and the Council on Higher Education, have tended not to hone in on actual interrogation of the curriculum, an area that is long overdue for critique and transformation. Propelled to the centre stage of debate through the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall campaigns, there are flurries of activity at South African universities, focusing on debates on knowledge and what forces - social, political, cultural and economic - have shaped the curriculum. A focus on curricula at universities is noticeably absent, however, in scholarly attention and has perhaps been muddled by the strident focus on determining the minimum level of knowledge, skills and competence of qualifications required for an occupation or job, and their overall contribution to the economy. The authors' of this volume recognise the hierarchical structures of universities and the absence of clear academic leadership structures that can cut through the skeleton of a qualification and examine curriculum. They attribute the myopia in higher education to the following factors, amongst others:

- Narrow focus of alignment of curricula with the world of work;
- Efficiency imperatives within universities;
- Perceptions that curriculum was the sole prerogative of the academic community.

The book pertinently highlights the pressures related to epistemological challenges and the pressing need for engagement on the idea of the African university in the 21st century. Recently, at a UCT lecture, Professor Mahmood Mamdani said: 'If you regard yourselves as prisoners in this ongoing colonising project, then your task has to be one of subverting that process from within, through a series of acts which sift through the historical legacy and the contemporary reality, discarding some parts and adapting others to a new-found purpose - in short, decolonisation'. The value of the book is that it begins this exploration and locates higher education transformation historically with a view to understanding the factors that have shaped our past understandings and approaches to curriculum.

Chapter 2 of this volume focuses on Henry Giroux's work on critical pedagogy which, the authors argue, is relevant to an understanding of citizenship in university curricula. It is argued that 'curricula should therefore be empowering tools that open up new possibilities and insights about how the social world is and should be constructed – which is particularly relevant to the SA higher education context' (p. 29). The text further illustrates

that critical citizenship education has unleashed the potential to inspire reflections on the past and new imaginings of the future informed by social justice imperatives. Using a case study of the inclusion of a Critical Citizenship module in the arts curriculum at Stellenbosch University, the authors argue firstly, that such a module cannot be taught in isolation and must be integrated both within a university and with external stakeholders like communities. Secondly, they argue that the importance of the module flagged the need for safe spaces in the curriculum sans hierarchical conventional relationships between lecturers and students.

However, while it is argued that critical citizenship has the power to enable individual transformation, there is an assumption that those in control of the curriculum can effect change at the depth and level demanded by recent calls for the transformation of university spaces. The danger, however, not fully explored by the authors, is that critical citizenship could take on a kind of instrumentalism that could create other perversities in the higher education system. The case study provides valuable insights as to how this can be avoided through careful distilling of the lessons learned from implementation. Of value is the proffering of further themes for exploration in research and deliberation, even as the project for the transformation of the curriculum continues. Additionally, it would be of benefit to the readers if the book explored the ‘hidden curriculum’ in higher education, which perpetuates social inequalities and injustices in a vicious cycle trapped by university structures, hierarchical relationships and the lack of agency on the part of academic leadership.

The closing chapter by Yusuf Waghid surmises that authors Costandius and Bitzer offer a conceptual model of critical citizenship education and a practical illustration of how it may be implemented. He argues that there is a strong alignment between critical thinking and critical pedagogy which, it is asserted, is central to the call for action in higher education curricula. The text is clear: the assumption of responsibility for the changes to university curricula rests with the academic community, students and external stakeholders to the university environment. It is not a straight line but, rather, a detailed and complex engagement, for which a model could be most useful.

Reviewed by

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Reference

Mamdani, M. 2017. Decolonising the postcolonial university. University lecture, 22 August 2017, University of Cape Town. <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2017-08-24-mamdani-returns> (accessed 1 October 2017).



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