

Special Issue

Teaching and Learning in Uncertain Times. Papers from the HECU9 Conference

In this special issue of *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning*, we publish five papers from the Higher Education Close-Up 9 conference, held in Cape Town in November 2018. The conference drew educators from different higher education contexts and institutions across the global North and South, to critically consider issues facing higher education in increasingly uncertain contemporary times. The future is perhaps less certain now than it may ever have been in modern human memory. Climate change and environment degradation are threatening our ability to continue to live in harmony with our physical environments; this is connected up with social and economic struggles, including gender-based violence, slowed economic growth and rising un(der)-employment, increased migration linked to civil and economic conflict and fears, and so on.

Our current students need to enter this uncertain future, and quite likely work to solve or address problems we may not even know we have yet. Rapid technological advancement, alongside economic, social and cultural change and upheaval, means that we can no longer rely only on teaching students to know what we already know, or even focus on currently valued sets of defined knowledge and skills. More valuable perhaps, to paraphrase educational sociologist Basil Bernstein, would be to use our time with students to prepare them for an unknown future, where they will need to create and find new knowledge, new skills, and also new ways of being in the world. Thus, higher education needs to begin to make significant shifts now to remain relevant, and embedded, in the societies it is part of.

Broadly speaking, the papers that were presented at the HECU9 conference focused on these questions and issues from a range of sub-fields in Higher Education Studies. The five papers collected for this special issue focus specifically on teaching and learning praxis, and are drawn from traditional universities, as well as universities of technology, and include authors working in the global North and South. Through collecting these papers together here, this issue makes a modest but valuable contribution to ongoing debates about how we re-imagine higher education to look forward to this challenging future into which our students - and we - are moving. Coming from different angles and fields at the question of how to make higher education relevant, critical, socially just and adaptable to change, the authors in this issue make important arguments that we hope will further these much-needed conversations in your own contexts.

In the opening paper, Christine Winberg and Manyane Makua tackle the issue of ontological access within the broader field of technical and vocational education. Drawing from research that evidences ongoing inequality of success in higher education, with working class, black students especially continuing to battle different forms of injustice and inequity in universities, these authors argue that a key condition for widening success is ontological access. This means, in essence, access not just to the knowledge in the disciplines, but deeper access to the less visible ways of doing and being that mark one as a successful knower. These authors worked with students and staff involved in peer education - also referred to as tutoring in various contexts - to understand better the role that peer educators, closer often in age and experience to undergraduate students, can play in widening or deepening ontological access. Their findings show that peer educators play a vital role in creating supportive, varied environments for students to develop both their epistemic and ontological ways of knowing, doing and being in a university environment. However, the study raises questions about how universities in South Africa might explore ways of teaching and learning that are socially and epistemically just, given that many students - especially black students - have raised important concerns about silences around indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing and being. Ultimately, the authors conclude that greater funding and recognition needs to be offered to the valuable work of peer educators, who are the new generation of academics, as they are well positioned to create the kind of university that could sustain a multiplicity of ontologies.

In their paper, 'Seizing opportunities: MOOC takers making time for change', Andrew Deacon, Sukaina Walji, Jeff Jawitz, Janet Small and Tasneem Jaffer grapple with the inherent tensions of managing time and space involved in studying online. Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) takers are volunteer learners drawn to the flexibility offered by online learning. However, realising time for study remains a major challenge. The authors move beyond a deficit take on students as lacking in life circumstances or an ability to manage time, and explore the lived experiences of 58 successful African MOOC takers of courses offered by the University of Cape Town. Using Ballard and Seibold's (2004) notions of 'enactments' and 'construals' of time, the authors designed a study to tap into the spatio-temporal relationalities that shape inequality in higher education studies. The semi-structured interviews uncover barriers faced by students finding themselves 'on the margins' of professional recognition, living in remote locations and facing the structural challenges of access to and cost of network connectivity. The study reports on enactments (actual practices and strategies employed to find time in between daily responsibilities) and construals (how students think and talk about time). It gives insight into what students value about MOOCs, and how course and platform design could support the 'timescapes' experienced by MOOC takers.

Universities of Technology in South Africa lack the clear vocational workplace-oriented identity and close relationship with industry of the original technikons from which they emerged in the mid-2000s. James Garraway and Christine Winberg's 'Reimagining futures of universities of technology' reports on a study using an organisational change framework drawn from Activity Theory to engage with ideas and narratives about what universities of technologies might become. The researchers explored participatory identity formation in their interviews of academic staff members of the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee and the Senate Research Committee at a university of technology. Fundamental contradictions were found between the current hierarchical and inflexible university system striving to improve ranking via increased publication counts and responding to the 4th industrial revolution on the one hand and staff's future vision of collaborative transdisciplinary research responsive to complex societal needs on the other. Activity Theory, with its dialectical ontology, provided a useful lens to uncover the contradictions in the competing visions of a future identity that become creative spaces for development of flexible institutional teaching, learning and research responsive to intransigent societal problems.

In the penultimate paper: 'How do students' beliefs about mathematical ability change in their first year at university?', Anita Campbell critically explores the usefulness of Carol Dweck's 'mindset' framework for understanding students' experiences and academic progress in first year mathematics. Here, the development of a growth mindset (a view that academic ability is not innate but can be cultivated) is examined in relation to the mindset beliefs of two representative first year mathematics students. Students were interviewed and completed a survey of their mindset beliefs, which gauged aspects of their mathematics learning, including their beliefs about ability, their focus on performance or mastery goals, their degree of persistence when challenged, and their propensity for risk-taking. This study, while acknowledging the wider socio-cultural aspects that influence student learning, suggests that pedagogical approaches that explicitly develop growth mindsets could be a fruitful form of affective support for students, especially for those who were high achievers at school but who struggle with the transition to first year university studies.

In the context of recent debates locally and globally on the decolonisation of higher education, the final paper paper by Sue Timmis, Emmanuel Mgwashu, Kibbie Naidoo, Patricia Muhuro, Sheila Trahar, Lisa Lucas, Gina Wisker and Thea de Wet, 'Encounters with coloniality: students' experiences of transitions from rural contexts into higher education in South Africa', offers an important contribution. This paper's focus on rural students in particular is significant since these students tend to be especially disadvantaged by the historical effects of coloniality and the ongoing legacy of apartheid. Significant, too, in this study is the adoption of a participatory methodology which involved students as co-researchers in the production of knowledge. This 'decolonising' mode of methodology allowed students to investigate

their personal histories and practices, and the different knowledges that they bring to the higher education context. Drawing on the concepts of decoloniality and cognitive justice, the study highlights the ways in which South African universities fail to recognize the experiences, practices and local knowledge that students bring from rural contexts. The authors argue that incorporating these broader experiences and knowledges has the potential to reshape higher education through transforming curricula and pedagogies. The affective dimension of learning is often neglected in studies of student learning in higher education, and the final two papers especially offer productive avenues for reflecting on how we bring the affective into higher education more visibly going forward.

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