

Book Review

Bezerra, J., Paterson, C. & Paphitis, S. (eds.) 2021. *Challenging the Apartheids of Knowledge in Higher Education through Social Innovation*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media.

ISBN 9781991201058

Drawing from a rich range of university/community partnership projects, readers are immersed in the complexities of higher education in the South African socio-economic, historical, and cultural context. The fourteen chapters consider multiple ways in which higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa have been working to address historic and systemic issues emerging from the upheavals of the near and distant past. Each chapter details research geared towards exploring and establishing innovative ways of addressing deeply embedded social inequalities. The book is largely aimed at an academic audience, although some write about community groups and organizations, who are engaged with via a wide range of disciplines and geographical contexts.

The book contributes to the growing number of texts critiquing the purpose and position of universities as reproducing dominant western epistemologies, mostly informed by decolonial scholars such as those who want to de-link from existing ways of knowing (Mignolo, 2010) and/or to erase the abyssal lines (de Sousa Santos, 2018) that divide human beings. It is suggested that successive crises in HE – of funding, of student recruitment, of global pandemic – have further entrenched divides that strengthen global hierarchies of inequalities established during the colonial period. The book explores how in the unsettled context of South African Higher Education (HE), scholars are turning to communities beyond academia to engage with research that might generate greater equalities. However, academics and universities risk unsettling their position as valued knowers (Masaka, 2019). From a broad array of disciplinary perspectives, the collection engages with issues these shifts make apparent.

Questions about the nature and location of valued knowledge established in the introduction run throughout the book. The 1997 White Paper is identified as notable catalyst in South Africa HEIs. It set a programme for the transformation of higher education and the hope expressed in the White Paper was that HEIs would play a key role in developing future citizens to participate actively in a democratic society. Civic responsibility and community service were to become embedded in teaching. Research was to focus on developing solutions to the enduring post-apartheid struggles faced by South Africa since 1994. However, the editors consider the policy to have largely failed in practice. This is partly due to the dogmatic adherence to university practices and the particular kinds of knowledge created by them. They say that universities in South Africa, and globally, emerged from a positivist paradigm that underpins and maintains epistemic communities through credentialed discourses of expertise. This construct is further



entrenched through divides between academic and managerial knowledge, theory, and practice, public and private, individual, and social. These conditions, and the institutional and societal structures which re/produce knowledge in this way, separate university knowledge from other knowledges. Additionally, limited resources, required for expansion of HEIs' work in the ways set out in the White Paper, result in the creation of what the editors call knowledge apartheid.

Some consequences of knowledge apartheid are articulated through the theory of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), principally, the devaluing of some knowledges and sustaining prejudice against some knowers. This notion is directly applied in universities to research in 'the community' – a phrase generally used in this book to refer to everything outside academia. Aware that Fricker's work has been applied to issues about inclusivity and equality – of race, gender, class – in universities, the editors argue that epistemic practices with respect to research undertaken with communities is rarely, if ever, considered. The book seeks to problematize the silos created by knowledge apartheid by showcasing a range of projects between HEI academics and community groups that actively engage with identifying and seeking to overcome the divide. Importantly, when HEIs' role in alleviating the demographic inequalities of South African citizens has been so limited, this book asks how and in what ways social innovation and community engagement can offer more hopeful alternatives that chip away at the apartheid of knowledge.

The book is arranged in four parts. The first includes examples of social innovation, bringing to the fore the problems and potential of partnerships between HEIs and community groups. The second part develops consideration of how such partnerships can be sites for trying to address the problems by doing things differently. The third part focuses on innovative methods of working together and the fourth on the role collaboration plays in identifying and overcoming social challenges.

The first four chapters are important in establishing some of the key concerns that are developed in the book. They demonstrate ways social innovation through community engagement is being carried out in the Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown) education area of Eastern Cape Province. This section covers a variety of projects and perspectives whose aims are closely connected to the aspirations of social transformation through education set out in the 1997 White Paper. Authors discuss project implementation, in theory and practice, and engage with issues arising from the intersection of power and knowledges, the role of education, educators and students, and the potential and limitations of such projects in overcoming societal inequalities. They range from detailing engagement programmes, through systemic analyses, to identifying (un)expected power relations between schools and other groups. For example, in Chapter One, Bobo describes an approach to community engagement through a volunteering programme at Rhodes University and offers a wedding ring model for guiding students' relationships with the groups they volunteer. However, with focus on students' learning, the issue arises of how to avoid exploiting community groups for the benefit of those in already relatively privileged positions within HEIs. This introduces another key theme: the need for researchers to be aware of inherent hierarchies that may re/create barriers to change. One clear example, that resonates with other chapters, is the way lack, want or need positions some people as deficient

in some ways while HEIs – and the credentialed knowledge in them – are framed as providers of help. The example, from Hayes' Chapter Three, is the account of the Head of a school which needed renovation. She found that help given without consultation, based on donors' assumptions, was not always useful, and at times resulted in greater cost to the school. This benefactor/beneficiary relationship stems from the hermeneutic injustice (Fricker, 2007) of a system that creates the conditions for some to make assumptions about other groups and for these assumptions to be largely uncontested. This view is contested throughout the book as a problematic that supports unequal hierarchies. Contributors' honesty brings to the surface quite profound shifts in their view of others as valued knowers, prompted through their encounters with community groups, as in the students recruited as water testers (Chapter Four, by Nqowana et al.), and the fundamental role of trust and relationships in unsettling sedimented ways of interacting. In Chapter Two, Westaway analyses how changes introduced in South African politics to address the failings of the education system for most of the population, actually established mechanisms that exacerbated inequality and preserved power with that fraction of the population in possession of the economic and financial capital. This forthright acknowledgement made early on frames the extent of social injustice, raised in later chapters, and the sizeable task of addressing it.

Part Two chapters show how social innovation can be difficult to initiate when persistent views about knowledge and power are embedded in the wider community. Students and parents were hesitant to try a bespoke, translanguaging mathematics online programme because of their belief that English is more valuable (Chapter Five, by Lourenco), resonating with Wa Thiong'o's (1992) argument about the cognitive and cultural devaluation of local knowledges as a result of colonization. Additionally, university students don't equate learning about themselves and the world in a service-learning programme, with valuable (academic) knowledge (Chapter Six, by Bezerra and Paphitis). Bringing knowledges together in ways that do not replicate epistemic inequalities requires de-linking from existing practices, such as including consideration of the benefits to all involved parties (Chapter Seven, by Ackhurst). This latter point matters because it breaks from the uni-directional benefits of traditional HEI/community projects.

The methodological implications of breaking from practices that support knowledge inequalities are gathered in Part Three. They draw from projects in different disciplines: sport, literacy promotion, and digital story telling but each present alternatives for community engagement. A model aimed at developing elite sportsmen was adapted to build capacity in the local sports system, resulting in a shift towards commitment to community involvement by an academic to build understanding of community issues (Chapter Eight, by Ryan and Todd). An academic who had limited success in engaging with people during her doctoral study found that linking with a community scheme that empowered people to supplement their food in ways that food boxed failed to, more deeply understood the pressing concerns of vulnerable families, and therefore was better able to support the literacy of their children (Chapter Nine, by Haese, et al.). The tensions between closer connections with participants, with the lives of people that traditional methods keep at a distance, are considered from the point of view of the institutional ethical

processes that research is required to pass through (Chapter Ten, by Gachago, et al.). Part Three surfaces important tensions that researchers need to consider. Can academics sustain the community involvement and relationships that the book argues is necessary to support social change? What happens to CE if the departure from traditional methods has implications for these academics' progression or tenure? What happens when the abyssal lines that sustain inequality are transgressed by individual actors but not their institutions?

Some of those questions are further elaborated in the final part of the book where the focus on collaboration brings together some of the key themes. For instance, coming to know others through relationships. Some moments stand out. Firstly, researchers realizing the low uptake of conservation volunteers when people's priorities are food and employment (Chapter Eleven, by Shabalala and Bezerra). Secondly, valuing knowers outside academia and, rather than research addressing gaps in other research, researchers responding to requests from community groups, such as those from the non-profit organization designing solutions for informal workers (Chapter Twelve, by Davy, et al.). Additionally, thinking about collectives, rather than individuals, to find sustainable ways of addressing long-lasting problems (as in the counselling service programme described in Chapter Thirteen by Nel and Govender); focusing on positives rather than negatives to imagine better futures (through Affirmative Inquiry, used in both Chapter Thirteen by Nel and Govender and Chapter Fourteen by Van Rooyen and Venter); and shifting the dominance of researchers-as-knowers to find more horizontal ways of engaging with knowledges emerging in social groups and disrupt narratives of deficit and disempowerment.

Amongst some of the most important questions raised in the book are why community engagement remains underfunded despite it being a key part of HEI policy since 1997, and how the (currently) disruptive position that practices for social justice occupy can become accepted means of knowledge production? Davy, et al. in Chapter Twelve suggest that researchers committed to this work need to be involved in 'shifting the perspectives' of important decision-makers in municipalities and government policy makers. Perhaps this is asking too much of academics already engaged in immersive and demanding counter-hegemonic knowledge work. Committed individuals can only take this work so far. Without funding, HE will keep talking to itself and continue to reproduce apartheid of knowledge.

Ultimately, the book argues that academic knowledge that does not connect to wider society, will limit the contribution of HEIs to social innovation. Given that, it is a pity that the book didn't include more examples that made room for other knowledges. Poorly reproduced figures and infographics restricted much of the evidence presented this way and the disciplinary range required chapters to have specific introductions that somewhat detracted attention from the central issues. Nevertheless, this book demonstrates that collaborative partnership can work towards a just society through social innovations that establish trusting relationships, contest epistemic inequalities, and humbly appreciate the unifying potential of valuing multiple knowledges.

Reviewed by

Dr. Shona McIntosh, Department of Education, University of Bath

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