CriSTaL
CRITICAL STUDIES IN TEACHING & LEARNING

2022, Volume 10, Issue 1
DOI: 10.14426/cristal.v10i1.565

Book Review

Boughey, C. & McKenna, S. 2021. *Book title: Understanding higher education: Alternative perspectives*. Cape Town: African Minds.

ISBN 9781928502210

Even for scholars of higher education, let alone all those who participate in it and care about it, teaching and learning are frequently viewed as somewhat common-sense considerations: School pupils work hard to be those who are selected to go to university, and once there they need to work even harder. If individual students are failing, they find support for the skills they are lacking, such as time management or writing. This perspective is not necessarily a bad one for an individual student to hold, but it is not adequate to the quite different task of reforming university education to facilitate the success of students from a diverse range of educational and social backgrounds, as was the major challenge faced by South African higher education at the end of apartheid. In this rich case study, drawing on multiple sources of data across the range of public and private higher education institutions, Boughey and McKenna demonstrate in a most accessible manner why *alternative*, less common-sense, perspectives on teaching and learning are needed for university leaders, educators, academic developers, and scholars of higher education.

Chrissie Boughey and Sioux McKenna hold unique vantage points on South African higher education, informed by an African and international backdrop. While based at Rhodes University, unlike most academics at a research-intensive university, over decades they built an intimate knowledge of the full range of institutions in the country, through invited and contracted academic development projects involving workshops, talks and reviews, culminating in their being commissioned to do a meta-analysis of the data that had been generated on teaching and learning through the first cycle of institutional audits led by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in 2005. But they also designed and implemented the first large scale PhD programme in Higher Education Studies in the country commencing around the same period and have jointly supervised literally dozens of PhD studies by students who are typically lecturers or academic developers at a wide range of South African and African universities. Both have written up parts of these findings over the years in various journal articles, but it is timely to see their important insights pulled together in this engaging monograph.

There are two key ideas that each of these authors have led on that obtain a fresh prominence in this book, recruited now to service a larger argument. Both authors started work in writing support interventions during the apartheid period. Already in the early 2000s, Boughey (2002) had put

forward a strident critique of much of this work, which was typically focused on addressing 'language problems' through attention to technical writing skills. Boughey's critique was noticed by an international community also moving away from these simplistic approaches and developing more nuanced thinking on academic literacies grounded in the disciplines, informed especially by the work of Brian Street. In this book you feel both of their frustration that, nearly two decades on, many South African universities are still offering generic academic literacies courses focusing now especially on plagiarism, seen again in a rather technical sense.

The second key idea that gets a new level of elaboration in this book is their identification of the discourse of the 'Decontextualised Learner' (Boughey & McKenna, 2017), which emerged from their analysis of the CHE audit data mentioned above. In analyzing how universities were documenting their approaches to teaching and learning, Boughey and McKenna were struck by the prevalence of common-sense thinking, with statements such as 'students appear to lack motivation to study, having registered on the basis of having been awarded a bursary or merit scholarship' (p. 54). As noted earlier, while it might indeed be helpful for individual students to be focused on their own efforts, for those designing curricula, causal explanations for student failure that are fully located in characteristics of the individual student are insufficient to the task. Education is a mass phenomenon and cannot be conceptualized only as the accretion of individual effort. The central challenge for contemporary massified higher education in countries like South Africa is to be able to meet the needs of a broader student population than they were set up to cater for. Boughey and McKenna also note misappropriation of theories of teaching and learning, where, for example, 'student-centredness' comes to mean focusing on what is wrong with students.

Bringing together these key ideas into a wider argument in this book, Boughey and McKenna do not flinch in their critique: 'By attributing students' learning difficulties to their status as speakers of English as an additional language, it became possible to avoid engaging with the effects of the apartheid ideology of inferiority' (2021: 61). Their focus is on the growing inequality in society, and higher education's quite limited capacity for shifting the status quo, despite all our best wishes and even public policy, as seen in South Africa's 1997 White Paper which put the transformation of society firmly on the higher education agenda. They write: 'In many respects, this book is an attempt to answer questions about what went wrong in South African higher education' (2021: 9). At the same time, it is worth at least acknowledging that South Africa doubled the number of students in higher education in its first twenty years of democracy (from half a million to a million) and now has 22% of its youth cohort in higher education. Even though pass rates show stark racial differentials (they note that institutions are not always required to track these) there are still significant cohorts of young people whose lives have been changed by higher education and who are changing society through their post-graduation lives (Case, et al., 2018). Change has been slower on the staffing front, with only 27% of the associate professor and professor ranks presently held by black academics (2021: 95, 121).

At this point it is worth considering what interest this book would have for those other than South African readers, and Boughey and McKenna are most attentive to a global audience. As already noted, their work has always been closely engaged with an international scholarly community, but here they locate themselves also more explicitly in the global South and draw readily on evidence from across the African continent to make that claim more than just rhetoric. South Africa is indeed an interesting case study, with its infamous Gini coefficient also reflected in its higher education institutions. Global debates on access and inequality in higher education are magnified through the South African lens. While Boughey and McKenna take a clear stance on the need for differentiated higher education systems, they note the dilemma in that South Africa's differentiated system is tainted by its origins in apartheid institutions, that had different kinds of higher education designated for different race groups, reflecting intended destinations in the racialized labour market. While formerly white, now globally ranked, higher education institutions mostly have racially diverse and mostly middle-class student bodies, the historically black institutions are nearly entirely black working class and under resourced. While Boughey and McKenna are centrally focused on considerations of teaching and learning, they also do offer commentary on whether all public universities in South Africa should be aiming for the same kind of research outputs, as they presently do, given the system of research subsidy. They do not think that getting everyone to write scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) articles is the panacea!

Boughey and McKenna have made some smart choices in the writing of this book, which positions itself well for multiple audiences. A key focus for the book is on how advanced social theory is needed to do the necessary reconceptualizing of higher education. They draw primarily on philosopher Roy Bhaskar's critical realist philosophy and Margaret Archer's social realism to frame their overall case study, while employing Karl Maton's Legitimation Code Theory for a close-up look at curriculum. As experienced PhD supervisors, they are explicitly including PhD students and new researchers in their audience, and their writing works beautifully to clarify complex concepts. For the uninitiated, the Archer terminology of T_1 to T_4 can feel a bit clunky at times, but they do this to remind the reader of the theoretical framing of the whole book. The arguments in the book are supported effectively by pen and ink illustrations throughout. In the chapter on curriculum, they include a section which draws on studies from many of their own PhD students who researched curricula at South African institutions across the spectrum. What could be noted by some readers is that that book is more focused on theory than method, which I find a decent call – there are lots of methods texts out there and indeed their own original journal articles where one can see what sort of data are needed for this kind of research. Similarly for their reporting on the CHE study – the reader might be relieved that this book does not have any tables of institutional statistics and the like! As they note in the conclusion, the book is more a reflection on the research they have conducted, and they have chosen to pick the theory battles which arguably still need fighting.

In conclusion, this book gives an important overall diagnosis of teaching and learning in South African universities at this point in history, which is not unrelated to the situation that many universities in the global South and beyond presently find themselves in. The desire to better meet the needs of a massified student body has led to the creation of many structures in the university to support teaching and learning. Boughey and McKenna point out that cultural change, in Archer's terms referring to the ideas that inform these structures, is still needed, but Archer herself emphasizes the important finding of much sociological research, which is that culture always lags structure. This book gives some important pointers for the necessary directions to build the deep understandings of higher education that are needed in this next period.

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