SHORT COMMUNICATION

Teaching philosophy and the making of an intellectual: A personal reflection

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Academic institutions are regarded as centres of intellectual moulding. At the centre are students who through consultations or class attendance interact with lecturers or professors in intellectual exchanges. In the same vein, lecturers and professors are viewed as custodians of the intellect, to whom students must pay obeisance and glean on the crumbs that fall off their lofty intellectual tables. Perhaps, these are the images that aspiring students have when they apply for spaces in academic institutions. Notwithstanding such a glorious picture, academic institutions are workplaces where fellow colleagues meet in corridors for the exchange of either hastily or meticulously composed emails; attend departmental or institutional meetings; support and or degrade others; like and dislike certain activities, etc.

One of the core businesses of academic institutions is teaching and learning, where students must be placed at the centre as beneficiaries, and lecturers and professors are benefactors. Naturally, it is envisaged that the focus must be on students, but reality sometimes points in the opposite direction. That is, instead of placing students as chief players, they are reduced to being beggars who must survive at the mercy of lecturers and professors. Unfortunately, such a state affects indiscriminately those whose concerns lean on the side of students. Such lineages are explainable in pedagogic and paradigmatic orientations. I therefore take a subjective perspective and expose my personal lineages that explain why I carry myself in front of my students the way I do.

I am an English language specialist. I have worked in various departments of English in the Middle-East and South Africa. It is a truism that English came to South Africa (and many other former colonies) not on a liberating mission, but that of perpetuating the imperialistic colonisation agenda. To be a specialist in a colonial language is, therefore, understandably easy to associate with collusion in the oppression of the colonised. With these realities, I am inclined not to take a defensive stance on English, but to interrogate the tenets of the education carried by and through the English language. My approach to teaching is, therefore, influenced largely by critical pedagogy (Canagarajah 1999; Phillipson 2009).

Critical pedagogy seeks to bring the student to the centre by, *inter alia,* exposing the hidden curriculum that, in many instances, undermines the oppressive reality of students as a people and their contexts as historically situated. I, therefore, see my role as that of emancipating students from the educational indoctrination that seeks to keep or mould them into certain beings that serve the ends of the elite. Students must therefore remain critical of the whole educational system, i.e. the content and the administration, for these tend to have a disjuncture with their natural societal norms. This is even more crucial in Africa, where there is an increasing need to Africanise knowledge and education (Botha 2010). This is where the critical teacher and lecturer come in.

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Adopting a critical approach in teaching has made me see nuances in the education system and in my own teaching. For instance, following Scrivener's (2005) axiom that teaching does not equal learning, I continuously remain critical of my own teaching; not unduly blaming students when success seems to evade them. Also, whilst I realise the need for my students to be proficient in the target language, I do not do so simply to propagate mimicry (Ashcroft *et al*. 2004) and the adoption of Anglo-Saxon patterns of thought (Salomone 2015). My students must be taught to be critical of the target language, especially in its historicity as a colonial language. This will ensure that they are emancipated from the clutches of colonial and neo-colonial bondage.

Placing students at the centre also means that the teacher or lecturer must relegate some of his/her traditional power and share it with students. For instance, many of my students have challenged me both inside and outside of class about addressing them in their mother tongue. That act of challenging me seems to reflect an application of what we learn in class when studying the novel *Coconut* (Matlwa 2007), which, among other themes, interrogates the negative perceptions associated with African languages. Some have even dubbed me 'coconut' because of my exclusive use of English when teaching or addressing them in and outside of class. I have often explained to myself that my deliberate use of English in these circumstances is meant to arm my students with the same tools of speaking back to the 'empire'. I also emphasise that you cannot remain critical of a system if you do not know its entire operation – their proficiency in English, therefore, should not just serve as an elitist tag, but should, most importantly, allow them to unmask the cultural imperatives of English that seek to obliterate the local ones. But I must at the same time admit that their criticism is not without substance or intelligence. They seem to be demonstrating a critical awareness of a disjuncture between what I say and what I do. They rightly observe that whilst I seem to favour the promotion of African languages as viable intellectual tools comparable to dominant colonial languages, I fall short of demonstrating that utility, which to them should amount to hypocrisy. This excites me because I can see the making of intellectuals out of my students' engagement with the content of learning and the realities surrounding that learning.

Being critical also entails realising the realities that militate against the very project of emancipation. Frère (1970) realised the oppression that the education system can perpetrate when approached from the angle of reproduction, and thus proposed that learners should be critical about such oppression. Notwithstanding that, it should be noted that higher education, in particular, remains largely elitist in its assumption of developing skills on individuals. Individualism remains predominantly the Western cultural milieu, which is usually at odds with the communal intellectual ethos that characterises the East and Africa (Meyer 2014). This means that the establishment of higher education is underpinned on the notion of exclusivity. Realising the limitations of such an approach, contemporary educational thinkers argue for inclusive education that would cater for masses that have been left in the lurch. The result is the massification of education (White Paper for Post School Education and Training 2013). Though massification has noble objectives, it only expands the intake of students without addressing the intellectual culture of higher education, which is individualism (Gombrich 2000). For instance, many professional bodies, *inter alia*, consider student–lecturer ratios when determining the quality and effectiveness of a programme which, if not balanced, leads to de-accreditation. It also means that the massive class forces the lecturer to resort to teacher-centred approaches which obviously do not take into account different learning styles. Unfortunately, many students fall through the cracks and drop out. It still remains the teacher's or lecturer's responsibility to expose these contradictions to students. In English Language Teaching (ELT), there is an assumed class size (say maximum twenty five) in the teaching methodologies that are considered effective. For instance, the emphasis is on active learning where students learn the language by using it – meaning a typical lesson should create opportunities where students would use the language either with the teacher, with each other in pairs, or in small groups – with

the teacher monitoring and giving feedback (Scrivener 2005; Harmer 2006). Such opportunities collapse in a big class, say of more than a hundred – the teacher finds himself/herself lecturing. In fact, lecturing is the traditional university mode of teaching based on the regard for the lecturer as an expert from whom students must glean knowledge. The probability of students not benefiting from such an approach is dismissed on the same notion that those who made it to the university must, by their exclusive privilege, cope with the university culture of knowledge dissemination, production and reproduction. Those who require a different style are simply regarded as incapable and should not have been admitted to university. This is the critical perspective I consider to be my mission in passing to students.

That said, I should also admit that my stance could be easily misinterpreted as being methodologically naïve. My adoption of the critical perspective is that I have my students' interests at heart which, in many cases, require that I become eclectic in my choice of methodologies. In other words, I remain sensitive to the context of operation which say, when it calls for a teacher-centred approach due to un-viability of a learner-centred one, in my case caused by extremely large classes, I am ready to give my best shot. I am also equally ready to employ the most effective approach in a given context. In fact, the very choice of what methodology to employ in a given context is what constitutes criticality.

Being critical, therefore, is not meant to massage my own intellectual slant, but is largely projected towards the betterment of my students. This means employing both traditional and contemporary methodologies without succumbing to the common mistake of throwing the baby out with the bathwater (Wight 2006).

What then does it mean to mould a student into an intellectual being? There are probably as many answers as there are many sub-questions linked to this one. In the context of a university, it is an intellectual that begets intellectuals. By an intellectual here I will borrow from Seepe (2019) who argues that it should be someone who is able to think critically, self-reflect critically, and be able to critically discuss and challenge ideologies and practices. Admittedly, universities are not automatically made of intellectuals although they should be centres of intellectual production. Similarly, adopting a critical approach to knowledge engagement is not an easy choice to make or an easy route to take. The challenge it entails is that one must be prepared to shed some of the disciplinary foundations and positional privileges in order to remain at the cutting edge of criticality. But the absence of such a choice means that the status quo, which often works against the intellectual development of students in the context of a university, remains intact. In other words, my refusal to be challenged by my students on my practices despite my self-justifications, or the rejection of the labels they give me based on their reading of the content and its application to the immediate environment and context would simply mean that I am undermining their intellectual abilities, or, at worst, I am stifling their intellectual growth. Modiri (2016) is on point in asserting that "[s]omething must be seriously wrong with one's psychological and intellectual comportment when university professors go to embarrassing lengths to prove that they are smarter than 20-year-old students". However, when I acknowledge that there is accuracy and legitimacy in how they read the world, thereby allowing them to speak critically to the practices they see in me, I am allowing them to develop a critical engagement with issues they constantly face in society. This is crucial because such critical engagement precedes change that must ultimately happen.

The ultimate goal, therefore, of my choice of critical pedagogy as a means of developing intellectuals out of my students is solely based on the need for change. Ideological change which is ultimately reflected in how societies and entities operate is very evasive. Institutions of higher learning arguably remain trapped in ideologies and practices of yore simply because there is not enough intellectual development, if there is any at all. Students that are produced do not appear to have the intellectual tools needed to respond to the intellectual ills that plague our societies and communities. They unfortunately reflect the pot from which they have come. Adopting critical

pedagogy for me therefore is one way of responding to the changes we must see in our societies, communities and universities.

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