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‘Small’ and ‘grand narratives’ of English teaching and social agency in South Africa post-1994

ABSTRACT:

At Vista in recent times in order to be relevant lecturers in the English Department have had to extend the literature, theory and academic reading and writing repertoire to include new modules, such as ENG5009: Reading and Writing Skills for Business English . Students study the workings of groups in business, how to identify and manage conflict situations, conduct meetings, compose notices, agendas, minutes, reports and presentations and how to manage time and the rules of grammar. In this paper I seek to show that from a postmodernist perspective ENG5009 is to some extent a response to the local context, a Lyotardian ‘small narrative’ (‘petit recit’) in its own right and, simultaneously, traceable to the ‘grand narratives’(‘grands recits’) of English produced and reproduced continuously since its inception as a field of study. Moreover, as a ‘grand narrative’ post-apartheid offspring, ENG5009, the type of English now demanded both locally and globally, will be shown to be complicitous with ‘neo-colonialism’.

Keywords: small and grand narratives, English the subject, English as literacy, social agency

Introduction

From as far back as we can remember as a country of a diverse mix of people we tell ourselves and are told countless stories (interchangeable with the terms narratives, tales, and plots), the most pernicious being those spawned by apartheid politics and since 1994 post-apartheid correctives. Stories help or impede us with the telling, retelling, interpreting and reinterpreting to construct lived experience and ourselves. Built on image and metaphor they aid to sort out puzzles of experience or with logic, analysis and argument help us to make realities of our worlds, construct our identities and make meaning of what we are so busy living through.

To affirm the power and significance of stories Eagleton writes: “We cannot think, act or desire except in narrative” (1981: 72). Added to that McLaren shows that all theories of social reality, that is views of life and “living in particular ways”, spring from “narrative intentionality” (1993: 207). More seriously “authorial voice and legitimating functions” lead to construing narrative as the ‘truth’ that becomes social action for material effect (McLaren, 1993: 206). In this paper narrative refers to official and unofficial discourse (inclusive of a variety of genres through

whatever media) and its actionability, that is language transformed into the practice of social action, as South Africans attempt to become agents of history in the choices they make (if they can), particularly about education for a better life in what is largely a capitalist society.

At this historical juncture the way we come to terms with the narratives, or more specifically the educational vision, mission, philosophy and policies we are subjected to, demands scrutiny to see if we are really putting apartheid behind us. Examining the stories and practices which follow is also important because ‘intentionality’, as couched in arbitrary words, often materialises quite contrary to expectations. Even more crucially the new stories we construct for ourselves may also, when turned into practice, eventuate in what others mean for us to be, not unlike past oppressions. Given the breadth and depth of the apartheid and other baggage that we are burdened with real educational transformation is not that easy to reformulate let alone implement. What makes life even more difficult during the transition period is that we are caught ‘in-between’ stories which make us uncertain and shaky about our bearings. Cast adrift, as it were, it is easy to see why we often find it difficult to make much sense of many post-apartheid experiences. Somehow, like some characters in the widely popular ‘soapies’ who slip confusingly into more than one story at a time, we find ourselves struggling to keep a grip on interacting plots, some resonating with the past, some that we, ourselves, are striving to author since 1994 and some from the ongoing and befuddling global hurlyburly even as they are being composed.

One of the interacting plots is that of English education which in itself comes of stories that have given shape to the content and teaching of the subject. Like ourselves and our stories English, too, is a ceaselessly shifting site of many subjects caught up in the interplay of varied shaping energies. It may be “‘open’, incomplete, always already in process ... as having not one ‘origin’, ‘centre’ or ‘aim’ but potentially many and different”, as Derrida would say; or in a full-blown postmodernist sense it may be said to be everywhere, hybrid, impure and constantly reforming (quoted by Pope, 1998: 21). Yet, the particular English we ‘do’ in the present is significant since it indicates which past we would like to take into the future.

Aims of the narrative review

The stories about education embodying national aspirations need therefore to be urgently probed. To do that the postmodernist perspective of Lyotard, amplified by Wittgenstein and Baudrillard, will assist in cutting through the rhetorical surface to that which is unsaid in apparently democratically inspired plans for a better future in this country. The main interpretive thrust will be Lyotard’s notions of ‘small’ and ‘grand narratives’ through which English and English teaching will be re-considered as they intertwine with the stories that tell us how to live our lives in a country striving to become part of the global mainstream (1986). ‘Grand narratives’ (‘grands recits’) according to Lyotard refer to “all those overarching intellectual schemes which purport to offer a totalising frame in which to understand some aspects of modern life” (Pope, 1998: 129). Whatever may be avowed ‘grand narratives’ eventually work to entrap and constrain. A way out is offered by an alternative politics, ‘small-scale narratives’ (‘petits recits’) emanating from the local and immediate which do not presume to totalise.

This does not always follow though as becomes evident in the South African situation when it is subjected to Wittgenstein and Baudrillard insights. The reason may be that ‘grand’ and ‘small narratives’ are also affected, ‘bracketed’ in the manner of Chinese boxes, by what Wittgenstein refers to as ‘language games’, comprising role-playing, bending and breaking rules and even changing from one game to another (Pope, 1998: 129). Or as Pope continues: Lyotard “is committed to what Wittgenstein calls ‘language games’: people playing their roles with all the

energies and resources at their disposal – even to the point of bending or breaking the rules and insisting that another game be played – but at no time believing that theirs is the only game, or that there is some grander mega-game of which all games are simply part” (1998: 129).

Resonating with further insights, another layer of Chinese boxes as it were, that brings to the surface the far-reaching ramifications of our post-1994 educational stories, is that of Baudrillard and his notions of global communications in postmodern space and time. His ideas are not always easily accessible or, even when they are, readily acceptable. They do, nonetheless, provide a way of enhancing the interpretation of stories encapsulated in our new educational policies. For example, Baudrillard helps us understand why instead of offering stability and direction our reformist plans may disorientate; he also shows what may be happening when the language of stories/policies does not converge with actualities on the ground and suggests reasons for the various kinds of problems experienced as we strive to institute reforms using current communication networks. To sum up: for Baudrillard that which begins as ‘real’, our educational policies for real problems in this case, when mediated by modern communication, media networks and technology become, literally and figuratively, thoroughly cyberised/virtualised as if they have nothing to do with real human problems in real human life but are machine engendered, “composite images of images of images...”, “images without originals”, or as he prefers to term them “simulacra” (Pope, 1998: 129). To illustrate, the most gruesome wars in foreign countries, or in remote localities in one’s own country for that matter, broadcast as television images and sound-bites, despite the real destruction and gore on the ground, are seamlessly mixed up in the heads of television viewers with the daily inputs of movies, and thus distanced from real life. What started off as real war and real suffering becomes in the process unreal simulations barely affecting the human beings benumbed by continuously watching such televised images or ‘simulacra’. Or to put it more directly, educational policies, often borrowed from abroad after their ‘sell-by dates’ and thrust in a deluge of words upon us, an already hard done – by South African populace, are experienced as if they are meant more for an alien community on another planet than for us.

The postmodern is not always this dark, this enslaving and limiting; it can also be emancipating and extending. For the purposes of this paper, however, as outlined the postmodern is another term for what could be Eagleton’s and Harvey’s “late Capitalism” intersecting with the connections made by Said and Spivak with the concept/s of ‘neo-colonialism/coca-colaisation’ (Pope, 1998: 130). Against this intermeshing framework, with the main interpretive focus on Lyotard resonating with insights suggested by Wittgenstein and Baudrillard, the point of the review of English teaching is to tease out characterising features and indicate the network of patterns discernible in ‘small’ and ‘grand narratives’ of English to gauge the extent to which we, in this country, ‘author’ ourselves and our lives or are ‘authored’ by others. To that end at this time when English is undergoing a legitimation crisis as a field of study ‘small scale narratives’ will be traced to their intensities and energies and, not quite in the way of Lyotard’s theory, as they fit into ‘grand narratives’ of overarching intellectual schemes or frames which repress or regress to suggest ultimately laissez-faire complicity with ‘neo-colonialism’; it is also a return, so it often seems, to unreconstructed stereotypes that take us back both to apartheid and capitalist grand plans.

The discussion will focus on ways of saying and seeing the world that are assumed and asserted, the power relations in play, alternatives that are being marginalised or ignored and what can be said, seen and done differently. To do that in the complex English teaching situation in South Africa the following aspects will be covered:

- an overview of the subject English, the shift from teaching English literature to English

communication, students' learning problems, the teaching of English language skills for the advancement of capitalism, connections/disconnections in the teaching of English language skills with past practices, English language skill teaching and its relation to class, what employers want of employees, outcomes-based education, and finally what post-1994 stories/policies tell us about ourselves and archetypes and the conclusions that can be drawn from the study of English teaching from the postmodernist perspective.

Potted pen version of 'small' and grand narratives' of English

For most of its history English as literacy or literature has become as a result of the interplay of 'small' and 'grand' narratives capacious, fundamentally plural, interdisciplinary and a constantly changing series of subjects. With its substrata of Anglo-Saxon, Latin and French it is a compound and hybrid with ever-changing contrasts, tensions, centres and margins. The subject has been an arena for battles and in itself shows the results of battles lost and won. Strongly influenced by the church and its ramifying influences as English teaching it wove itself into the 'grand narrative' of the colonialism of 'cannons and flags'. As University English at University College, London in 1828 it became part of the 'grand narrative' of English Language and Literature or simply English Literature that has since variously contracted or expanded. The subject which owes its existence and expansiveness or diminution to the potency or otherwise of 'small' or 'grand narratives' is further double-edged, rendered more ambiguous and elusive by being potentially emancipating or constricting, more often than not concurrently.

The battle-scarred image of English, the developing subject, can be tracked back to when it first competed with and then succeeded the Greek and Roman Classics, Rhetoric and Theology at the centre of the liberal arts curriculum. The tensions and contrasts of the subject continued as it carried into the present its legacy of special kinds of literary appreciation and criticism together with shifts from national ways to more local and global conceptions. As a dynamic shifting entity and inter-discipline it is bound up among other areas of knowledge with History, Politics, Economics, Sociology, Anthropology and Psychology even as it is being infiltrated by narratives seeking to challenge or transform it into subjects such as Literary, Cultural, Communication and Media Studies. Ambiguous and elusive it is subject to processes of compounding, displacement and transformation that since its beginnings are fundamental to the constitution of the subject.

Because English is still relatively young much of its history is still evident in some form or other in the contemporary organisation and practice of the discipline. For instance, the influences of Greece and Rome can be discerned in the concepts of art, comedy, tragedy, genre, metre and classic; theology still holds sway in the notion of the canon; rhetoric, the art of persuasive and effective public-speaking, is present in composition and discourse analysis.

Narratives of English literacy modules

As student numbers for straight English literature are declining the demand for modern versions of rhetoric and composition, like ENG5009, keep lecturers at work in Vista University. The module "Reading and Writing Skills for Business English" focuses on studying the workings of groups in business, how to identify and manage conflict situations, conduct meetings, compose notices, agendas, minutes, reports, presentations and manage the rules of grammar and time. It is the consequence and product of many transformative processes both local and global. One of eight modules covering English communication and Business English it was devised in response to several interweaving academic concerns. Overall the eight modules are meant to help alleviate the

difficulties experienced by students who were unable to cope with the reading and writing assignments set in the English literature course and other subjects taught. The experience is not unique to Vista as Samuel found at the University of Durban-Westville in 1995 and Prinsloo in 1998 at the University of Natal (PMB).

Students' apartheid legacy and English difficulties (and other intermittently recognised learning problems)

Prinsloo, for example, found in her research that the academic problems of her students could be traced back to systemic practices of the apartheid narrative. The students, as a result, relied on her "to supply them with meanings of basic words and concepts that they could have investigated" (1998: 142). But that dependence was overlaid by the more recent identifiable effects of what can be termed 'intellectual-consumerism', an offshoot of the consumerism of 'world mass culture', which proves to be so amenable to global dispersals and localised reconfigurations.

Unlike the early form of global culture, transmitted through the nation-state and dominated by British imperialism, the new global mass culture [of television, electronic communication and the visual image] is driven by America [I]t remains centred on the West and while 'waiting to absorb and recognize [local] differences' it 'wishes to do so within the larger overarching framework of what is essentially an American conception of the world' (Marks, 2000: 231).

This conception which also comprises the vital, creative, even wise and humane comes across more often than not as a success and achievement marketing device for the vapid and infantile. Just as powerful is the notion of the university as the servant of society, business and industry, a derivation from the late 19th century American college which became firmly fixed after the Second World War and is now undergoing revival.

Prinsloo's students' learning problems, consequently, extend beyond the apartheid back-wash for when they "found a reading difficult it was simply rejected" (1998: 142). The accumulative interplay of local and 'world mass' effects is enacted again when, as Prinsloo reports, "frequently, the intended focus of a session would be abandoned because the majority of the learners lacked basic understanding of the content and prior concepts upon which further conceptual development depended" (1998: 142).

The apartheid transmission mode of teaching was in direct contrast to the liberal approach of cultural heritage and personal growth models of textual practice that coincided with differentiated apartheid education. With the ever-increasing effects of intellectual-consumerism and other as yet unnamed possibilities added to the far-reaching practices of the past, academic problems swell to enormous proportions. Officially and institutionally there is no concerted effort of truly getting to grips with and distinguishing between fundamental complications and their convolutions let alone any recognition of their burgeoning breadth and depth. Learning and teaching problems are instead lumped together as apartheid engendered and/or language related difficulties which, to an extent, are undeniable. But the result, inevitably, is that students who require an English language qualification for their own and other course or programme needs flock, dragging in their wake the Prinsloo learning and teaching baggage, to ENG5009 or similar modules.

The English of capital

The module of nine credits covered in six weeks teaching focuses on surface and narrow, not higher level intellectual skills. The module adds to its subscribability by exposing students directly to the domain of work by the experience of work as such within their studies. As a curriculum response it allows those involved in its practice a measure of learning and teaching but, at the same time, encourages both the masking and reinforcing of deep-seated academic learning and attitudinal problems that require much more time, effort and resources (mental, material and human) than can presently be provided. The identifiable apartheid hangover and other as yet barely grasped and explored effects could have ominous consequences for our nascent democracy. Edward Said points this out in a plea he made in 2001 for the independent, enquiring, critical reader. Given political arrangements and the consequences they have had so far in the fate of our continent he warns us to watch out for “the lazy rhetoric, automatic language and distorted ideological discourses that have so often covered up abuses of power” (2001: 8).

Said’s advice is clearly of no account in the partial version of English that is currently in vogue; it is the kind favoured by capitalism and, as a result of marketing and future job prospects, by students. This should not be surprising given what students bring to higher education from the school system in the first place and the demands made for economic reformulations of English language skills. At the same time because of the unresolved learning backlog it makes some sense to return to basic school literacy which has been the chief occupation of the subject for most of its history. Grammar, spelling and punctuation which were mainly taught in the composition of business letters are now refurbished with other products and processes in the ENG5009 package, for instance. The module is in accord with outcomes-based education which was specially imported, warts and all, as the answer to all our socio-economic problems and to undo the damage of systematic differentiated education. In keeping with the educational philosophy the module is divided into discrete performance chunks sequenced in lock-step fashion. Geared at the instrumental level learning becomes exact procedures, practices and lists of operating principles which returns in a way to Prinsloo’s transmission mode of easily attainable objectives and right answers for narrow bits of words. The module looks well-focussed and career-oriented, managerially for the most part that is, with its content appropriately apportioned into predictable, standardized segments.

The variety is English for second (or third) language users, who have very specific views of the nature of the subject to fulfill their particular needs (see Sarinjeive, 1999). The transformation of University English which takes us back, incidentally, to the medieval university as a functional, vocational school, is jointly shaped both by those perceptions and needs and the changes taking place in the production and application of academic knowledge. The major shift overall is to the performative in association with ‘efficiency’, ‘outputs’ and ‘use-value’. The performative

implies doing, rather than knowing, and performance, rather than understanding. In the performative society, there is a mistrust of all things that cannot easily be quantified and measured. Those knowledge fields that were once intrinsically valued for their own sake must now demonstrate their relevance to the wider world (Barnett, Parry & Coate, 2001: 436–7).

Connections/disconnections with the past

In a way ENG5009 typifies change from traditional to emerging curricula and, at the same time, seems to revert to the transmission mode of education. It also apparently derives from and yet is a

far cry from the ancient Rhetoric training of politicians, statesmen and senior administrators who had to be prepared to deal with their own illiterate people. Rhetoric comprised invention (identifying relevant materials and topics), disposition (effective overall organisation of argument), style (word choices and combinations), the art of memory (for storage and recall) and delivery (for persuasive handling of tone, manner and gesture), all of which conform to contemporary research and writing as well as cognitive public performance and diplomatic training (Pope, 1998: 29–30).

The downgrading and delimiting of the expansive discipline to the service industry are also not something completely new but smacks somewhat of the late 19th century when writing and speaking were separated from the study of the specialised subject matter of English. Like many universities abroad Vista versions of Rhetoric and Composition draw large numbers of students and support the teaching of literature courses, now down to twenty percent of the total English Department enrolment. The skills from the disciplines of the past are reconfigured in different proportions for different occasions and functions. In this sense like so many other aspects from the past in English it is then “displacement and replacement not utter destruction and disappearance” (Pope, 1998: 41).

Differentiation and divisiveness reproduced

In contrast to Vista’s English Department, however, UCT, Rhodes and the University of Pretoria have, I recently learnt from colleagues, healthy enrolments for traditional literature courses which, presumably, remain by and large training for the teaching of literature. Literature teaching as always concentrates on the inner structure and disciplinary knowledge-base of the subject rather than its direct and explicitly formulated use-value to society across all socio-economic classes. To put it another way, reading, appreciating and critiquing a selection of works from different literary genres in the form of discussions and essays usually associated with middle-class values and comfortable pensioned job niches are still viable in the higher-fee, admission controlled institutions such as the three universities named above. Students at these universities are for the most part taught lists of selected texts (either traditional or non-traditional canons or mixtures of both) that comprise specific bodies of knowledge with identifiable boundaries, conceptual frames and tests of truth. However, the present reading lists in the Vista literature modules that have been Africanised have the opposite effect as has been mentioned already. With the decline in popularity of teaching as a future career option Vista students coming from the poorer socio-economic strata and inadequate schooling turn, unhesitatingly, to the more explicitly enskilling language modules, such as ENG5009, for badly needed English language, reading and speaking skills. Whether the module (which is meant to be taken with other modules) aimed at brushing up and not teaching-from-scratch primary and secondary school English language skills, serves to fill the learning gaps remains open to question.

What employers want

Moreover, when it is no longer possible to foretell the changes in industry, occupational structure or content of work even in the short term further implications are pointed out by Barnett, Parry and Coate who found that, at one level, “the skills most valued by employers are not higher level skills, but are generic ‘multi-skills’, which are more integrated and simplified by new technologies” (2001: 442). And Ainley adds that ‘flexibility’ has become increasingly valued (1998). At another level, Rylance and Simons found in their research in 2001 that aptitudes and attitudes were more important to employers than particular knowledge which in standard practice is picked up on the

job (2001: 74). They elaborate that for employers “aptitudes of mind, skills in communication and analysis, the ability to learn and adapt speedily, the staying power, confidence and commitment to see things through are highly valued” (Rylance & Simons, 2001: 74). Marginson includes “confidence, the capacity to be pro-active in new and familiar situations, learning how to learn, flexibility, adaptability, responsiveness, sensitivity, openness and dispassionate thought” (1994: 250).

At the Barnett, Parry and Coate extreme it is one set of desirable traits that employers require much like the goals of OBE ENG5009 in the South African job and skill depressed market; at the Rylance, Simons and Marginson extreme it is another, more the conventional university ‘graduateness’, character, that from the point of view of entry into employment, life-time earnings and prospects, job satisfaction, overall quality of life or career mobility still heightens the value of traditional higher education (and institutions such as UCT, Rhodes and the University of Pretoria in comparison to Vista over and above whatever students study). On the one hand both sets of traits, given enskilling and education backlogs particularly of the South African majority, are called for during the interregnum. But the traits desired are also to be seen in relation, as it is beginning to become gradually apparent, with differentiated market values in the national and, for that matter, the international employment pool.

Widening the definition of performativity

In the new form of differentiation that is fast creeping in traditional and emerging curricula are becoming not mutually exclusive but mutually shaping entities. As such a wider and more explicitly articulated definition of performativity from the conventional ENG5009 and OBE sense is required. As Barnett, Parry and Coate indicate there are various forms of performativity:

- the epistemological (the way in which scientific fields become more practical), pedagogical (which is less an engagement with knowledge than understanding leading to performance), educational (the tacit skills internal to the discipline re-defined in terms of their value to the world of work) and self-monitoring (that is being more self-reflective) (2001: 446).

The modes of performativities in curricula are unequally understood and targetted, if at all, at present. Some forms, as is evident in ENG5009, are emphasised and more exclusively in some universities than others as references to UCT, Rhodes and the University of Pretoria are meant to convey. The various aspects of performativity described above by Barnett, Parry and Coate need to become more clearly defined and differentiated action plans. The more we learn to demand the demonstration of the various forms of performativity before students graduate the greater will be their impact and effectiveness in the new and uncertain economic climate.

Common or garden ‘intelligence’

The changes taking place in education and the way we work force us to examine traditional and emerging curricula. And since perfect fits between education and training and the world of work are problematic at the best of times because of numerous interacting factors, the aim should be to keep all facets of the human mind at peak performance level. In Jacques Barzun’s view whatever market capital turns out to be it all comes down to what he calls the chief and only outcome “intelligence” which he finds “today, everywhere, ... flagrantly lacking” (1994: 75). He continues: “Wherever we look, we find people in charge who are baffled, incompetent, often stupidly dishonest, and who, after manifest failure, are replaced by their own kind, all this despite the fact that by current standards all are ‘highly qualified’” (Barzun, 1994: 75).

Those who raise Barzun's ire were trained to focus seriously and perform particular actions laid out in some trendy textbook in conventional educational settings. The best work hard to score high and become "expert routineers", loyal and ever-ready to spout hollow management 'concepts' like 'strategic thinking' (Barzun, 1994: 75).

Instead of that type of education Barzun advocates a truly liberal education that needs to be created for the endlessly varied use of intelligence. Prinsloo's students, for example, would do well to note that the mental muscles need extended bouts of flexing with many varied particulars so "that the fatal habit of using formulas for all occasions is ruled out" (Barzun, 1994: 76).

Outcomes-based intelligence for a 'Stepford' universe

The way Barzun conceives of intelligence as the primary goal of education does not always come through as clearly in OBE documentation which in broad brush strokes focuses on general practical demonstrations and measuring of mental skills that fundamentally lend themselves to such treatments. To give examples, in the name of transformation OBE aims to develop "a thinking, problem solving citizen who will be empowered to participate in the development of the country in an active and productive way" (Van der Horst & McDonald, 1997: 6). And according to Spady, one of the foremost proponents of the philosophy and from whom we borrow heavily, OBE ensures "the knowledge competence, and orientation [that is the affective and attitudinal dimensions of learning] that you deem critical for assuming success" (as quoted by Brandt, 1993: 69). The recipient of OBE is ultimately expected to function successfully as a consumer, a producer, a citizen, a family member, an intimate friend and lifelong learner (Spady, 1994: 18–22). How these roles and functions are to be achieved is left very much to educators who, resorting to their own devices and poorly trained in the new order let alone any order for that matter, focus on variegated interpretations of demonstrable, measureable training – hardly the intelligence that Barzun has in mind.

The generalised definition of an ideal citizen probably cannot be helped given where we have come from. But a closer look at the OBE goal makes it look more and more like the product of unclear, incomplete and one-sided thinking; in practice education is contracted to emphasise the docile, easily managed consumer-producer as outcomes are broken down into bite-size pieces for the sake of efficiency and accountability. The rest of the emancipatory goal which needs to expand to take in the more finer-tuned Barnett, Parry and Coate definition of performativity and Barzun's deep sense of intelligence is in this way subverted as is English with its literary focus (although it, too, is problematic given Foucauldian revelations about knowledge and knowledge production and our underprepared, multicultural students) by the likes of ENG5009. OBE, the frame of the new story chosen for us by democratically elected political agencies to direct our transformed lives, harks back in this sense to coercive educational practices, such as the behavioural psychology of B F Skinner, the master learning of Benjamin Bloom, the curriculum objectives of Ralph Tyler and the competency education models connected with vocational education in the United Kingdom (see Jansen, 1997).

The 'small' narrative of South African education transformation inspired by stories from elsewhere is being moulded, at one and the same time, into a local response for our immediate context and its history and, during the last few years, to meet the challenge of market forces and globalisation. OBE in the process turns from the promise of liberalization to the practical and operational that on a more equal opportunity plane resonates ominously with apartheid-type skills such as 'drawers of water' and 'hewers of wood' and pre-1994 participation in international business conglomerates, before the onset of sanctions, that is. Instrumental rationality, technicist

mechanisation and control are reinforced by direction setting critical cross-field outcomes – South African Qualifications Authority 0204/96 in which the human subject is re-conceived “as an instrument to be shaped and moulded into the ‘proper scheme of things’” (Dobson, Dobson and Koeting, 1987: 6).

In spite of the mantra-like humanistic strains of the OBE goal and official rhetoric Vista which, like most particularly historically black universities, relies on a subsidy from the government, is forced in an effort like ENG5009 to conform and homogenise. Because of the emphasis on the consumer-producer OBE takes us back to middle-class values (more specifically as Said, Spivak and Marks alert us the American coca-cola culture) in a materially rewarding, high stakes environment. The stress on the consumer-producer (a creature yet to materialise) also succeeds in transmuting the emancipatory aspects of OBE into the pseudo-liberal that “merely covers up who controls constructing outcomes and [does] not really [deal] with social inequality” and reform (Capper & Jamison, 1993). Moreover, “the issue of democracy is lost within a sea of objectives, behaviouristically defined, sequentially substantiated and with little room [or time] to explore alternative meanings” (Kanpol, 1995: 363).

What we may be experiencing as OBE may be the trickle-down effect of ‘grand’ overseas narratives but in South Africa, particularly at this time, it becomes a whirlpool to sweep us back post-1994 into the global mainstream and not necessarily as a significant world player. Added to which almost as if in a casual back-swipe nascent attempts to establish, if not reclaim, a unique identity and address other social justice and equity concerns are thrust aside. ‘Small’ local narratives of diversity and redress which replaced the ‘grand narratives’ of the canon in English are similarly displaced as literature and the skills of reading, analysing and academic writing are discarded. The ‘grand narrative’ of the 21st century Coca-cola Age of Markets with the inadequately-informed (wilfully and rigidly to an extent, if Prinsloo’s students are considered), seductively procured consent of the recently and universally enfranchised in South Africa is characterised by the utilitarian, purpose-focussed and vocational of instant gratification.

‘Pawns’ or ‘stool pigeons’ in a tale told by others

The critical tracking from the past to the present and the present to the past is an attempt to bring into view some uncomfortable insights particularly in the midst of reform processes. One particular shadow brought to light is that for the most part we have become characters in a meta-tale told by others in the dominant narrative of change, globalisation and what Gee and Lankshear term ‘fast capitalism’ (1995). In comparison to cruder, overt impositions of yore, however, new forms of domination are eagerly sought by our representatives if not ourselves and inserted (subtly or otherwise) into collapsing traditional hierarchies, for example, and the transformation of workers into associates and partners who have to take responsibility for and manage their own careers.

The caring, democratic liberal tale widely broadcast is substantially invested with the argument of vocationalism and the language of skills to make politicians, its main spokespersons, look tough, practical and as if they are doing their jobs. However, at its core the tale is used to isolate workers from the poor economic climate and place the responsibility for employment squarely on their shoulders. While it is true that new types of skills are required for a changing economy and education backlogs need serious attention, the lack of employment is also caused by the crisis of the political economy of capitalism intimately entangled, as Apple avers, with the structural problems of poverty, of the de-skilling and elimination of jobs, of capital flight, of systematic racism and sexism, problems “naturally generated out of our current economic and political

arrangements” (1987: viii). Aronowitz and Giroux add that the image of the deficit worker “is produced by the constitution of the job market, by social and economic inequality and political powerlessness” (1985: 102).

The power of the tale and the deep-seated archetype

To that needs to be added the power of the tale and the teller of the tale. Most beliefs come from discourse which has ideological and political implications; in time beliefs become naturalised common sense understandings and accepted as apolitical truths. The more dominant and popular the beliefs the more natural and commonsensical they appear, a phenomenon referred to by McLaren above (1993: 206).

What adds to the validity and reliability of beliefs is that they connect with what is deeply-seated within us. For example, to explain the current context Neville suggests a link with the discourse of archetypal psychology to show how the old informs the new and how we are subjected to and subject ourselves to recyclings of the past appropriately dressed up for the occasion (1995). He suggests that what we are being called upon to experience may be viewed as representations of archetypal human behaviour patterns such as that conveyed in the Hermes archetype whose name is given to the current context. Hermes is recognisable from ancient times as best loved, friendliest, slippery, deceiving, seductive and non-heroic:

the god of travellers... the god of merchants and markets, the god of persuasiveness, the trickster, the god of lies and deceit, the god of gamblers, the god of thieves, the god of illusions, ... the god of crossroads and boundaries, the god of connections, of quicksilver, of fast footwork and smoothtalking. He is the divine entrepreneur, a con man without ethics and without malice. He has no values of his own, no concern for substance. He enjoys doing deals, being clever, playing the game. He is the herald of the gods, the connector, the carrier of information, the god of secret knowledge (and insider trading) ... He loves paradox and process, trickery and risk. He is ambiguous and many faced. He is everybody's mate (Neville, 1995: 51).

The current context perceived through the Lyotard-Wittgenstein-Baudrillard frame is characterised as Hermes-inflated by Neville, with learning being turned into a commodity, education institutions becoming providers, learners becoming customers or raw material to be processed and products becoming ‘learner enhancement’ (1992: 1994). In keeping with Hermes’ persuasiveness and pervasiveness prosperity is now logically and inevitably bound up with competition.

For Saul the apparent power of such storylines is because decision-making is in the grip of corporatist, neo-conservative ideologies (1977). We are all, according to Saul, “in the thrall of the new all-powerful clockmaker god – the marketplace – and his archangel, technology. Trade is the marketplace’s cure for all that ails us. And globalisation is the eden or paradise into which the just shall be welcomed on Judgement Day” (1997: 19–20).

Neville further adds that the promoters of the market and technology “do not take kindly to being told they are simple-mindedThey see themselves as revolutionaries, heroically defying the conservative forces.....” (1992: 236–240). He continues: “The myth tells us explicitly that Prometheus [whom they worship] takes from them their ability to foresee the future. Infatuation with technology leaves no room for doubts about where technology might lead” (Neville, 1992: 236–252). The narrow focus upon acquiring discrete and measureable skills and humans being imaged as machines is consistent with the myth of Prometheus. And in the Hermes-inflated context the individual is the ‘economic subject’ and literacy is determined by prevailing socio-economic shifts and changing expectations mainly to serve the interests of the workplace.

Conclusion

Berry writes: "It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story" (cited in Suzuki, 1997). It is also difficult to find and use a voice when social and political considerations are drowned out by the stereophonically enhanced economic and technological, and when personal, working and political relationships are turned into economic constructions. Alternative stories are crucial at a time when it looks as if the economic driving forces are no longer governments as such, as much as they think they are, but corporations who have responsibilities to shareholders, directors or accountants if the Enron and Worldcom examples are anything to go by and in spite of being exposed.

Since many professional educators have of late been silenced or co-opted by the political, economic and technological 'small-scale narratives' as envisaged by Lyotard need to be told by alternative players to voice the unspoken and the inadequacies of purely economic conceptions of 'demand'. Further, to push 'capability' beyond orthodox and reductionist views of competence the best of the past, other myths and other gods need to be drawn upon whilst still recognising and responding to the need for change and development. Coping or 'copping-out' should be replaced by informed, active, critical and creative engagement – playing in and through language and other games to fracture, disperse and reform current 'small' and 'grand narratives' and redirect political agendas. The stories we finally make and tell will say much about how we conceive of ourselves, our lives and our effectiveness as a new democracy.

End-note

- i. *The Stepford Wives*, a film (1975) based on the Ira Levin novel (1972) with the same name of Barbie-doll-like obedient robot-wives.

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