Think Piece: Intersectional Resonance and the Multiplicity of Being in a Polarised World

Injairu Kulundu, Rhodes University, South Africa

Introduction

Understandings of collective learning and change agency often conjure up an image of a particular group or community identifying important concerns and finding the momentum to learn together to address them. In reality, gaining consensus around what issues need to be addressed is a complex process in polarised societies. It requires an attentiveness to different standpoints and experiences of the social dynamics at play, and the ways in which ecological, political, socio–economic and psychic experiences manifest themselves within different contexts, generating disparate and connected views on what is missing and what is needed to create a more just society. This paper asks questions about what it means to learn in–between and through complex and interrelated societal dynamics amongst a community of change drivers. By highlighting the individual, communal and collective learning of a diverse group of change drivers in a very polarised South Africa, we can begin to ask questions about the following: 1) how different embodied experiences or 'a multiplicity of being', as referred to in this paper, are essential in the pursuit of a sustainable society; and 2) why we need to learn in ways that can foster a sense of 'intersectional resonance' between and amongst change drivers in a polarised world.

Activate! Bringing together Change Drivers from across the Poles

South Africa is rated as one of the most 'consistently' unequal societies in the world (Bhorat, 2015). To think about what change agency and collective learning means in this context is to appreciate the different 'worlds' that make up South African society. The palpable legacy of four centuries of Dutch, French and British colonialism, as well as apartheid and the pitfalls of the current democratic dispensation, continue to create varied experiences and rallying points around what a just, equal and sustainable future for this land, its inhabitants and all sentient beings needs to look like.

A non-governmental organisation called Activate! Change Drivers is one of the largest youth movements in South Africa. It is a network of young leaders equipped to drive change for the public good across South Africa. The organisation invites a diverse group of young leaders between the ages of 20 and 30 to be a part of the network. The leaders they engage with come from all walks of life: urban and rural contexts, different socio-economic statuses, formal and non-formal educational backgrounds and various identity, gender and sex-based differences. These young leaders truly represent the different poles of South African society. They are invited to be part of the Activate! network on the basis of the work that they already do for the

public good, hence being called change drivers – they are in their own unique ways devoted to creating a positive and progressive future for South Africa. The initiatives that they are involved in range widely across diverse sectors and encompass ingenious informal and formal initiatives at the local and national levels (Why Activate, 2016).

Since its inception in 2012, Activate! has capacitated change drivers around six spheres. Each sphere invites participants to engage with participatory learning materials that help them reflect on the following: 1) their *identity*; 2) clear and powerful *articulation*; 3) insight into the unique *leadership* style each person possesses; 4) thinking tools on how to create *innovative* engagements; 5) critical thinking and astute *social political navigation*; and 6) how to partner with others to *create ripples and waves of change* in society (Why Activate, 2016).

From 2012 to 2015, I worked as a team leader, quality manager and materials developer for Activate! Change Drivers. Because of my proximity to the project, I have an intimate knowledge of the workshop space. I have been privy to the kinds of exchanges that change drivers have had with the project and, most importantly, the fascinating interactions that change drivers have had amongst themselves. Since 2015, I have been interested in how change drivers' perspectives about the world around them are evolving, and how they continue to grapple with issues of social change in their contexts. This interest gave rise to questions about where this network is instinctively leading itself, and, after four years of crafting the curriculum as an organisation, what would happen if we let change drivers define what they themselves feel are the most crucial issues that we need to be paying attention to right now.

As part of a doctorate in education for sustainable development, I set out to connect with 21 change drivers from across the country that have engaged with the Activate! programme over the years. All have undergone the full formal Activate! training and years after this training they continue to instinctively lead themselves towards their visions for the future. My engagements with them were driven by the need to understand where the edge of the work is, and how change drivers can help us regenerate the praxis of liberatory pedagogy in contemporary South Africa. I was particularly interested in how they make sense of their social contexts right now, how their praxis has strategically evolved over time, how they define the 'status quo' and, most importantly, how they subvert or 'transgress' the limits of the status quo in their current work (hooks, 1994). I also wanted to find out what critical thoughts and insights they hold at the edge of their praxis as they continue to work towards the visions of freedom that they hold dear.

Change Drivers Grappling on the Edge …

I engaged the 21 participants in an art-based multimodal process that invited them to intuitively sense themselves into the evolution of their journey up until now. I use the word 'sense' here purposefully because the intention was to invite a reflection that went beyond rational meaning-making and instead opened the space for them to feel into the 'erotic knowledge' they possess around their journey. Erotic knowledge is an intuitive way of knowing that is formed by the 'erotic – the sensual – those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us' (Lorde, 2007:59). Participants worked intensely to

paint cartographies of their journeys by using symbolic artefacts to represent their evolution over time. Participants also journalled as part of this process and used body images to express what they were currently experiencing and the position that they wanted to be in in the future. After exploring their journeys individually and in groups, each participant offered an in-depth interview that shared what they are currently seeing, sensing, feeling and questioning as they navigate the spaces they are in. Participants also shared their lived experience of what it means to transgress in their work right now.

Below is a brief overview of four of the 21 participants, to demonstrate a small but rich sample of the diverse trajectories followed by contemporary change drivers. In each instance, I summarised and paraphrased some of the critical insights and key questions they offered as part of their reflections. Each participant consented to the way that their viewpoints are presented in these summaries, in some instances adding even more nuance to their perspectives at the time. Participants also gave consent to have their real names used in this paper, an aspect of the methodology that sought to connect these experiences to real people (not anonymous entities devoid of place and identity) who are navigating and responding to the issues of their times.

Kristi

Kristi, a primary school teacher, has spent much time asking herself questions about how to equal the playing field between what basic education looks like in privileged communities and how it manifests in deep rural communities. She has immersed herself in contexts where she has had to teach in these varying extremes and holds a clear picture of how unequal the education system in South Africa is. Whilst she sees her teaching as an important vehicle for her activism, she asks critical questions about the privilege afforded her as a white woman to engage or not engage in the current socio-political struggles of the day. She questions what 'community' means in South Africa. Although she felt a sense of 'community' in the rural Eastern Cape, where she worked for two years, she eventually began to acknowledge that the rural community she had inserted herself into was not her own community, and that she perhaps needed to figure out where her community was so she could drive the change needed there. She has an ongoing internal conversation about where the sites of her activism should be. She constantly interrogates her own privilege and race by asking questions about what her presence as a white woman does in spaces that are predominantly black. She also grapples with how to engage with particularly conservative white middle-class people, who in her opinion can be apathetic in their engagements around the current reality of systemic and institutionalised racism in contemporary South Africa. For her, to transgress means making oneself vulnerable enough to learn from other people's experiences and challenging herself to show up to conversations with an apathetic and somewhat disconnected white community when she can (Kulundu, 2016).

Sanele

Sanele is an African languages scholar and activist. He is interested in interrogating an unspoken conversation about class that he feels was not critically unpacked in the student movements that rocked South African universities in 2015 and 2016. He holds questions about

why predominantly black middle-class women, armed with a highly academic and largely inaccessible language around black radical feminism, have positioned themselves to be the gatekeepers of the movements to decolonise higher education. He is also critical of the ways in which such movements are quick to demonise black men of a particular class as rapists and misogynists as part of their discourse. He is passionate about using language in ways that can open up the conversation around equality and social justice in a way that resonates with and is understandable to the simplest grandmother in any community. He is curious about what it means to mobilise in a way that is in solidarity with the most marginalised people in society and concentrates his learning on what it means to consistently resist oppression in ways that go beyond self-serving fashionable trends. To transgress for him means decentring the locus of meaning-making in popular movements in ways that can adequately engage the common person on the street in their own liberation (Kulundu, 2016).

Motsatsi

Motsatsi is a community warrior in a very rural and marginalised community in Limpopo province. She faces daily risks and threats against herself and her family as she chooses to continue to mobilise for much-needed resources for education and development in her community. She has single-handedly confronted corrupt local government structures in her community by standing as the only independent candidate in recent local elections. She won second place in a very contested election against well-funded political parties. She consistently navigates risk in her community because politically she has many powerful opponents that see her as a threat. Despite this, she feels she has no choice but to demonstrate a different kind of leadership in her community because, after all, the resources that she is struggling for are the exact ones that her young son needs in order to go to school and be a positive part of society. For her, to transgress means being a strong example of what leadership could look like if it was not self-serving. She does this at any cost (Kulundu, 2016).

Judith

Judith, a Congolese foreign national, has lived in South Africa since she was eight. She is passionate about creating inclusive spaces for marginalised voices amongst and beyond the student movements at her university. She is particularly interested in supporting the voices of marginalised women and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual and queer (LGBTIAQ+) community within a largely patriarchal culture of student activism. She consistently works to educate and engage people around what black radical feminism is and why this is an important pillar of the freedom that young people within universities are struggling for right now. Her community of allies ask critical questions about why black women have to repeatedly sacrifice themselves and their needs for social movements that do not acknowledge their struggles as being a worthy part of the ongoing conversations around what oppression looks like in society. She asks questions about why black women should continue to support the dreams of freedom that keep them in the same patriarchal trappings that they still experience now. To transgress for her means moving past a patriarchal imagination of what equality and justice should look like in contemporary Africa (Kulundu, 2016).

A Multiplicity of Being and the Sum of Its Parts

Each participant described above offers a picture of a person who is awake to the complex questions at the edge of their praxis. These multiple perspectives also paint a picture of a fragmented society with different frontiers for active citizenry. Through their actions, each participant actively chooses to transgress their ideas of what the status quo looks like, and whilst this sense of navigation is not by any means complete, it does represent an emerging culture of activism and social justice in contemporary South Africa.

But what do these different perspectives offer when we think about collective learning and change agency? The different points of view demonstrate a multiplicity of being, as well as the varying trajectories around what change agency and collective learning mean for different people in their respective communities. A careful look at the critical insights shared by each of the four change drivers highlights interesting contradictions between the different worlds they occupy, providing a space to conceptualise what collective learning and change agency could mean in the different situations in which they find themselves.

Whilst Kristi tries to navigate her site of activism and sense of community with other white citizens, Motsatsi is so embedded in the struggles in her community that she has no choice but to show up every day at great risk and mobilise for justice. Motsatsi does not have the immobilising sense of choice around where to intervene. The issues that threaten her child's development propel her to act in her community every day. Whilst Judith creates much-needed spaces for black women and LGBTIAQ+ members of her university community, Motsatsi, a black woman from a rural community, holds none of the language and discourse around radical black feminism as she mobilises for social justice in her community. For her the struggle is one of social justice, it could also be said that she wilfully transgresses the norms of what is expected of her as a woman in her community by challenging established and predominantly male-led political parties in her community. Sanele is sceptical about the lack of class consciousness in student movements and how black men of a particular class orientation can be demonised within certain articulations of black radical feminism. Sanele also instinctively wants to reach out to and create a more grounded and relevant language for liberation within marginalised spaces, much like the rural world where Motsatsi lives and struggles for justice.

A question emerging from these criss-crossing experiences is: *How can we make more use of these overlapping and seemingly contradictory concerns?* An intersectional perspective on change agency compels us to look deeper into the different fronts from which struggles for social change are waged, and to see these fronts as symbolic of the way that the systems that underpin inequality function. Crenshaw and Spade comment on the importance of observing identity-based struggles as symptomatic of broader structural and political dynamics: '[…] identity categories or group descriptors are not just "there": They are constructs with political, social and experiential histories of lived impact and socio-political enforcement. They are also highly regulated and managed by the state […]' (in May, 2007:149).

What we see presented in the change drivers' different narratives is the way in which 'social location impacts one's experience of the social world, shapes what is known and

understood about inequality' (May, 2015:149). Each of the different perspectives represents varying indices from which inequality functions. For example, grappling for resources within a burdened social structure in Motsatsi's community is juxtaposed to the apathy, isolation and perhaps assumed wealth that Kristi experiences in white suburban contexts. These two realities are different sides of the same coin of structural injustice in South Africa. The experience of lack on the one end can be argued to be reinforced by the sense of affluence and disconnection on the other. Additionally, a hierarchical understanding of what should count more, gender or class, in Sanele's and Judith's experiences obscures the way in which these fronts are interrelated – that there is a hierarchy at play that can privilege the reality of a black middle-class man above that of his female counterpart. Conversely, a black middle-class females' understanding of oppression can paradoxically impose her preferred trajectories for freedom on the situation without adequately accounting for or being sensitive to other forms of structural class oppression that she might not acutely experience. Here the black working-class man or woman might be left out of her meaning-making and be partially or fully excluded within the terms of freedom that are articulated there. Contending concerns of this nature run the risk of eclipsing each other's experiences in order to advance their own. What further interests me about the contradictions between Sanele's and Judith's experiences is that they are contradictions that exhibit themselves *within* a young black demographic. These experiences highlight the presence of contesting struggles within the same demographic groups as well as those across demographic groups.

Whilst celebrating these change drivers' sense of agency, urgency and collective learning in their respective contexts, one wonders about their potential to piece the puzzle together and sense the larger context at play within their articulated struggles. It is probable that each change driver is aware of the different experiences that other change drivers hold, but all are in a situation where they are driven to act upon what makes the most sense in their own context. I wonder what it would be like if each change driver were challenged to regenerate their praxis in ways that acknowledge the contradictions in the collective perspectives that they hold. From a pedagogical point of view, how could this be inspired and what impact, if any, would it have on the way they define and act on the pertinent issues they face in their contexts? These questions are explored next, highlighting the pedagogical implications of an intersectional way of working.

From Collective Contradictions to Intersectional Resonance and Action?

An intersectional approach to social justice is often shallowly misrepresented through descriptions that overemphasise its desire for a diverse, pluriversal and coalitional outlook on change agency. What is often missed is the depth through which intersectionality seeks to challenge hierarchical power structures through coalitional mobilisations. May (2015) shares a detailed description of this methodological imperative:

Intersectionality is a justice-oriented approach to be taken up for social analysis and critique, for political strategising and organising, for generating new ideas, and for

excavating suppressed ones, all with an eye toward disrupting dominance and challenging systematic inequality. This entails actively finding ways to perceive/interpret/act against the pull of established, single-axis imaginaries and to engage in an ongoing effort to realise meaningful, collective justice via epistemic, ontological, economic, and structure change. (May, 2015:228)

Here the tendency to define social issues based on one perspective of what injustice means is challenged. Instead of single-axis-oriented responses, intersectionality advocates for a matrix-based response to the social justice issues of our times. This is done with the thorough understanding that,

> When single-axis models are relied on, the experiences and knowledge of some are often (falsely) universalized as if they could adequately represent the experiences, needs, and claims of all group members: this obscures within-group differences, the relationality of power, and interactions among and permeability between categories. Likewise, single-axis forms of redress adhere to, rather than challenge, the conceptual 'building blocks' of domination – they leave the foundations of inequality intact and also reinforce them. (May, 2015:82)

The above extract deftly critiques the results of some manifestations of change agency and collective leadership, which can be celebrated for their efforts in responding to issues of inequality and injustice but ironically leave the foundation of inequality intact. It challenges us to consider the ways in which some interventions omit an analysis of the compounded ways that `others' might experience marginalisation and inequality that might be different but integrally bound to the dynamics experienced by us. This critical issue brings to mind Audre Lorde's (2007:140) shrewd reproach of single- axis social movements when she asked the question: `Can anyone still afford to believe that the pursuit of liberation can be the sole and particular province of any one particular race, or sex, or age, or religion, or sexuality, or class?' It is clear from this question she seeks to entice social activists from all walks of life to consider what they need to do together as opposed to the critical experiences that they have apart from each other. In line with this thinking, an intersectional approach to collective learning and change agency insists that we keep on:

> orientating ourselves, and expressly developing interpretive inclinations, modes of being, and political commitments in ways that disrupt, trouble, and fundamentally depart from mainstream logics, ontological habits, and perceptual practices. Intersectionality's both/and orientation [as opposed to an either/or orientation] encourages developing and honing the capacity to exercise ruptures with hegemony and to embark on (coalitional) journeys toward each other's worlds/selves/histories/meanings/imaginaries. At the same time, we must attend to significant structural disparities within and between groups and consider the impact (and import) of our different positionings in multiple and relational systems of power. (May, 2015:227)

Intersectionality thus portrays itself as the possibility of fostering a form of emancipatory resonance between and within different socio-economic, cultural and psychic demographics. Intersectional resonance as space for pedagogic inquiry could mean learning to connect the dots along the harsh lines of a polarised society and to perhaps gain a picture of the whole system at play through the experience of individual struggles. It could be a space to purposefully surface and engage the contradictions and synergies that sit between and within different experiences with an emancipatory outcome in mind. Most importantly, intersectional resonance as a space for pedagogic inquiry could be a place where such contradictions and synergies can be used as a catalyst in renewing our subjectivities in ways that affirm the collective struggles that we individually experience as well as those that others face.

Braidotti takes this thinking even further by asserting the need to not only create new forms of subjectivity but, more crucially, to 'create collective experiments that can actualise these new subjectivities' (2011:6). This is an invitation to be generative and innovative at the edge of our deepest questions and should ideally endeavour to push past all orthodox boundaries embedded in the heart of the status quo as she understands it:

> One must indeed start from somewhere specific: a grounded and accountable location and the process of becoming is a time bomb placed at the very heart of the social and symbolic system that has welded together being, subjectivity, masculinity, compulsory heterosexuality, and (western) ethnocentrism. The different becomings are lines cutting open this space and demanding from us constant remapping: it is a question, every time, of finding new coordinates. (2011:31)

This is a question of willfully relinquishing some of the trappings of single-axis mobilisation towards the formation and articulation of new struggles that 'move the centre' away from hierarchical and normative understandings of who we should be (Thiongo, 1993). It is a question of locating ourselves from a place that does not concede so easily to the power that is afforded to us by virtue of our race, class, gender or any other defining privilege that separates us from others. Instead, we need to intentionally seek out each other's battles and find the language to speak and act in ways that can address multiple and interrelated forms of oppression.

The individual experiences of change drivers show us the hard-won spaces that they have carved out through their inquiries. This is an essential and potent place to start with. However, there is also a need for intersectional resonance between their worlds – a space that can perhaps acknowledge the binaries or either/or biases that may be operating as part of their thinking. There is a need for participants to see each other in five-dimensional ways across the frontiers of their individualised struggles and meaning-making. This could be an experiment around how their praxis could further evolve if it were to find situated ways to acknowledge and respond to the contradictions and synergies that they collectively grapple with.

In addition to these deliberations, it must be said, however, that this sense of seeing across the divide need not result in forms of action that are steadfastly synchronised in their local

objectives. There ought to be the space for one to tune into intersectional resonance and think carefully about how to apply this pluriversal thinking to one's local context. The local forms of mobilisation would need to be careful that they do not in turn perpetuate hierarchical constructions that favour mobilising on a single-axis but can rather find the language and praxis to weave together seemingly contending aims. Thus, the impasse between Judith's and Sanele's disparate experiences would require a more nuanced affirmation of how injustice plays itself out across gender, sex and class so as to affirm the humanity of all those that are presently bent into painful shapes by the status quo. It would require a way of realising that 'when we are busy arguing about the questions that appear within a certain frame the frame itself becomes invisible; we become enframed within it (in May, 2015:236). Issues of gender, sex and class play themselves out, simultaneously impacting those that fit into the various categories, in different and very real ways. Ironically, it is often those who are challenged with the least power – in this case the black, rural and unemployed woman – who acutely understand the everyday burden that these nexus points generate.

By virtue of their continued devotion to social change, I believe that these change drivers are exceptionally well equipped to face one another and grapple at the edges of their meaning-making. They are their own best teachers, carefully crafted by the contradictions embedded in a fragmented society. I am curious about what it could mean to create a space where change drivers themselves can challenge one another to experiment with the idea of deep intersectional resonance in a polarised society. In what ways could they challenge one another to keep the broader frames of oppression in mind as they work towards social change? What creative coalitions, if any, for the public good could they experiment with in their thinking and praxis? What necessary individual, identity-driven or contextual work would need to be preserved as a part of this, and why? And how would the languaging and actions behind this contextual work benefit from an intersectional reading of the dynamics at play? This could be a space where we could shift one another through the depth of our frustrations with how things are, through our scepticism around how to address this, and the added insight gained from our unresolved questions. It could be a place that challenges us to go beyond the certainties of what we already think we know, into a realm of organisation that could also appreciate our interconnectedness and our uniqueness as the basis of our collaboration.

We do not have a shortage of brilliant young people doing work that they feel is important to change the world. What we have is an inadequate language and praxis around the complexity of working in intersectionally resonant ways. We lack an adequate language and praxis around how to strategically forge and dissipate our emancipatory impulses. The suggestions in this paper seek to challenge our idea of collectivity from the definition of a group of people from the same setting that mobilise themselves around a particular issue to one that highlights a vital knowledge exchange between diverse peoples from the same context who hold and contest very different perspectives around what justice, equity and sustainable development mean. This perspective on collective learning and change agency hopes to challenge us all to evolve our praxis in ways that inspire us to courageously take a step up from the divisions that run rampant in polarised societies and to find innovative ways of making our distinct and collective voices count. As a last thought, I offer the words of bell hooks, sharing in her own way what I believe

to be the work of nurturing intersectional resonance whilst honouring a multiplicity of being in polarised societies:

> Only by coming to terms with my own past, […] and seeing that in the context of the world at large, have I begun to find my true voice […] that no pre-cut niche exists for it; that part of the work to be done is making a place, with others, where my and our voices, can stand clear of the background noise and voice our concerns as part of a larger song. (hooks, 1994:185)

References

Bhorat, H. (2015, 30 September). FactCheck: Is South Africa the most unequal society in the world? *The Conversation*. http://theconversation.com/factcheck-is-south-africa-the-most-unequal-society-in-the-world-48334, visited 28 April 2018.

Braidotti, R. (2011). *Nomadic theory: The portable Rosi Braidotti*. New York: Columbia University Press.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.

Kulundu, I. (2016). Unpublished PhD fieldwork. Stanford valley, Western Cape.

Lorde, A. (2007). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. New York: Crossing Press.

May, V.M. (2015). *Pursuing intersectionality, unsettling dominant imaginaries*. New York: Routledge.

Thiongo, N. (1993). *Moving the centre, the struggle for cultural freedoms*. London: James.

Why Activate. (2016). Information pamphlet. Cape Town: Activate Change Drivers.