On the possibility of an African university: Towards a scholarship of criticism, deliberation and responsibility

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Abstract

For those making an argument in defence of an African university, the question about the need to justify the notion of such a university seems absurd. In this essay I argue that the idea of an African university cannot be separated from the notion of what scholarship entails. My contention is that scholarship is inextricably connected to what it means to be critical, deliberative and responsible. And, unless an African university lends itself to being critical, deliberative and responsible constitutive features of scholarship it cannot be justified as a university.

Introduction

Most of the papers presented at the ‘African University in the 21st Century Conference’ in Durban from 27–29 June 2005 seemed to make a prudent case for the idea of an African university. Some of the arguments in defence of an African university seem to be rooted in the idea that Africa and its higher education institutions ought to become more autonomous, critical and democratised (Olukoshi 2005). Adebayo Olukoshi, for example, makes a plea for African universities to become paragons of ‘excellence’, equity, development, knowledge production, institutional governance, criticism and social justice (Olukoshi 2005). While I share his noble intentions and enlightened perspectives on what the modern African university should be, he does not go far in defending his arguments. For instance, he seems to be silent on what makes African scholarship different from any other form of scholarship. This is a crucial issue, since what it means to be a scholar or intellectual lies at the heart of what constitutes a university. Hence, I shall explore why criticism, deliberation and responsibility ought to be the constitutive elements in the idea of an African university – failing to address this important issue of what it means to be an African university becomes dubious.

Criticism and Scholarship

When is a person critical? Scholarship does not in the first place simply mean that a person passively receives pre-digested information without actively engaging with such information. Someone can receive information, but fail to engage...
actively with it – or, as Greene puts it, to reach out for meanings (1995, 57). In
such a case, a person cannot be said to be critical, because criticism requires of a
person to construct meanings, to reach beyond where she is or to transcend the
given (1995, 111). And, when a person has gone beyond the given, constructed
meanings and found her own voice, she has demonstrated a faculty for criticism –
she has acted in a scholarly way. In other words, following Greene (1995, 34),
people are critical when they do not just regard themselves as passive receivers of
information, but rather when they demonstrate a willingness ‘to tell their stories, to
pose their own questions, to be present – from their own perspectives – to the
common world’. When a person becomes concerned to go beyond the given, she
invariably wants to respond to other and different challenges which she might
encounter. For example, a person who learns about the suffering of others not only
imagines what others experience, but also how she might find ways to address the
vulnerabilities of others – to alleviate others’ suffering. In this way, demonstrating
a sense of scholarship involves wanting to look beyond the given and to search for
meanings which would be responsive to the vulnerable experiences of others. Here
I specifically think of many South African university students who claim to be
critical, yet do not even begin to wonder how their education could respond to – or
as Greene says, instil in them a ‘wide-awakeness’ to – what must be done for those
who remain tragically in need, who suffer deprivations such as family
deterioration, neighbourhood decline, joblessness, illnesses such as HIV/AIDS
and addictions (1995, 35). Hence, these students have not learned to be critical –
that is, to act in a scholarly way and to respond to some of the conditions of those
who might be vulnerable.

University teachers are critical when they can take the initiative. Taking the
initiative happens when teachers explore possibilities whereby they can connect
with students – that is, opening students’ worlds to critical judgements (Greene
1995, 56). And, when teachers connect with students, they set out to provoke
students to break through the limits of what is taken for granted, a process Greene
refers to as arousing students to ‘break loose’ and ‘to couch some of their stories’
(1995, 110–115). If this happens, criticism on the part of teachers is already in the
making, for opening students’ worlds to critical judgements is already some way of
responding to what our South African higher education system so desperately
seeks to achieve – university teachers who can take the initiative and who have the
ability to carve a space for others whereby they can undertake responsible tasks,
protest injustices and overcome dependencies (Greene 1995, 5). For instance,
many South African university teachers seem uncritically to teach themes related
to globalisation, standards, assessment, outcomes and achievement, but they
seldom provoke students to challenge or undermine these concepts. As far as
learning ‘outcomes’ are concerned, I often hear pre-service teachers at my own
institution perpetuate what guarantees ‘outcomes’ can secure, but their teachers
seldom provoke them to look at ‘outcomes’ as if they could be anything other than
encouraging critical thinking and active learning. Some university teachers seem to
ignore the possibility that prescribed ‘outcomes’ can undermine inventiveness, imagination and surprise; furthermore, for many university teachers the idea that teaching ‘outcomes’ lends itself to pedagogical trickery seems to be an unholy notion which very few want to interrogate. These university teachers (and there are many) are not critical, since their teaching does not engender a kind of disruptiveness whereby students could perceive things as they could be otherwise. Therefore these teachers act passively, that is, not in a scholarly way. Their teaching does not show any promise of being responsive – how could it, if they fail to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished? Of course, my potential critic might legitimately claim that my use of criticism seems to be biased towards Greene’s notion of imagination which in some ways involves saying that things are not right as they are. However, my use of criticism seem to be more connected to what Foucault (1998, 154) refers to as that discourse which involves pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, uncontested modes of thought the practices that we accept rest.

SEEKING DELIBERATION THROUGH SCHOLARSHIP

Scholarship in the Aristotelian sense is a form of doing action – action aimed at achieving some worthwhile end. So, scholarship involves activities which connect with and open up students’ worlds whereby they find their voices or construct their own meanings. Likewise, scholarship creates possibilities for learners to bring into question existing understandings and to produce meanings perhaps not thought of before. In these ways scholarship can be said to be forms of doing action with potentially worthwhile ends in mind. But scholarship is not only performing morally worthwhile actions, but also actions which rely on the relationships between people – activities which depend on people coming together ‘in speech and action’ (Arendt 1998). They act through dialogical relations. When university professors teach, they communicate meanings to students; but at the same time students are expected to make sense of such meanings. As aptly noted by MacIntyre (1999, 102), people are dependent rational animals who act in relation to one another – they share ‘sets of social relationships’.

How do these dialogical relations come into being? In the first place, teachers and learners talk to one another or at least have an opportunity to do so. In this sense, the premium in cultivating dialogue is put on deliberation. Deliberation can take several forms. First, people can have a discussion whereby they exchange ideas or views without challenging one another; second, deliberation can take the form of debate, whereby one person attempts to produce a better argument; third, deliberation can take the form of questioning such as when people raise issues and expect others to respond to their questions. All these modes of ‘deliberation’ can at different times be associated with dialogue, because people have to be co-participants when they engage in such an action – they are active participants who reason together (MacIntyre 1999, 105). Put differently, one gives to others an
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intelligible account of one’s reasoning, and shows ‘the ability and the willingness to evaluate the reasons for action advanced to one by others, so that one makes oneself accountable for one’s endorsements of the practical conclusions of others as well as for one’s own conclusions’. Thus, when teachers offer an intelligent account of their reasons, they teach; when learners demonstrate the capacity to evaluate the reasons advanced by teachers – perhaps finding the reasons convincing, or incorporating the reasons into systematic controversy, or attempting to modify and adjust the reasons – they learn. Consequently, teaching and learning only take place through dialogical action. Moreover, in dialogical relations teachers and learners not only disclose their inner voices through deliberation, but also drive themselves towards listening and responding to others without being inhibited in doing so. They recognise that their audience has a right to be heard and listened to. According to Fay (1996, 237), dialogical action refers ‘both to the capacity to elicit another’s regard in you and your capacity to become invested in the lives of others . . . . (It is) an enhanced ability to listen and respond to others; a deepened appreciation of the ways others contribute to our own self-knowledge; and an enlargement of our moral imaginations’. Enhancing our ability to ‘listen and respond to others’ implies that teachers and students have to be willing to hear and be open to accept what others have to say. They have to interact with others who are different, and they should mutually explore and share with others alternatives as a way to develop their own and others’ understanding. In short they act in a scholarly way.

But when teachers and learners engage dialogically, all have the same chances to initiate arguments, to question, to interrogate and to open debate; all have the right to question the assigned topics of conversation; and all have the right to initiate reflexive arguments about the very rules of the discourse procedure and the way in which they are applied or carried out (Benhabib 1996, 70). Such dialogical action, which involves interrelated actions such as debate, questioning, discussion and argumentation, constitutes deliberation. Now in many South African university classrooms learners do not always have the same chances as teachers do to initiate arguments, since teachers mostly conduct their teaching by telling learners what they need to know. Likewise, many learners do not see it as their right to question what they are being taught, since often university teachers treat academic texts as encyclopaedic and canonical material which cannot be questioned. In the main encyclopaedic inquiry constitutes three interrelated functions, firstly, inquiry is fragmented into a series of independent, specialised and professional activities (unrelated to a whole), whereby facts have been ‘collected’ and pragmatically ordered for convenience of reference; secondly, inquiry advances a determinate account of how a list of ‘Great Books’ is to be read, interpreted and elucidated; and thirdly, inquiry conclusively leads to agreement, whether constrained (enforced) or unconstrained (MacIntyre 1990, 216). If I relate such an account of encyclopaedic inquiry to the academic discipline of philosophy of education (with which I happen to work), then it follows, firstly, that philosophy
of education comprises a body of knowledge (definitions, descriptions and explanations), which has been somewhat neutrally (objectively) ‘collected’ and which can be used as the point of reference to give an account of meaning. For instance, for encyclopaedists there would not be a problem in defining philosophy of education as a collection of rationally justifiable facts about events in the world. But such a definition of philosophy of education as a collection of neutral facts would itself be at odds with other competing and rival assessments, for example, that philosophy of education represents ‘shared (intersubjective) standards of rational argumentation’ or ‘transcultural modes of critical engagement’ or ‘incommensurable paradigms’ of/about events in the world’. The point I am making is that an encyclopaedic account of philosophy of education would be blind to conflicting, incommensurable and contending viewpoints on the subject. Of course, I am by no means suggesting that ‘Great Books’ are not worth talking about, but rather that spaces ought to be created for learners to interrogate – as opposed to only assimilate – the content of these texts. Failing to do so would undermine the rights of learners to offer (counter-)arguments. Hence, as a consequence of a lack of deliberation in some (or perhaps most) university classrooms, teaching and learning seem not to be scholarly activities, because scholarship is intrinsically connected to dialogical action.

And, when one considers that deliberative action is a necessary condition for a democracy to flourish, it seems unlikely that South Africa’s higher education policy frameworks would easily achieve their intended ‘outcomes’. It is for this reason that I agree with Walzer (1983, 304), who makes the point that democracy puts a premium on deliberation – offering persuasive arguments and listening to arguments. Scholarship which does not develop through dialogue with others would truncate our democracy, which should always be in the making.

**RESPONSIBILITY THROUGH SCHOLARSHIP**

Undoubtedly, the higher education policy frameworks also aim to produce students who, in the words of Foucault (1988, 152), ‘are grown up enough to make up their own minds’ – to be responsible citizens. Such citizens are not just obedient to the state, but also people who work with government, that is, they do not simply subject themselves to government or totally accept what government has to offer – but are resistant (Foucault 1988, 154). And, when citizens act restively, the potential exists for them to exercise their critical judgements responsibly. Even at my own institution I hear and observe how colleagues are bracing themselves to ‘have everything ready’ for the Higher Education Quality Committee Audit (HEQC) this year without seriously engaging with some of the potential implications such an audit can have for our institutional autonomy. Similarly, other colleagues remain forever hypercritical about the state’s transformative agendas, because they cannot look beyond the entrenched privileges bequeathed them by a racist, apartheid education. In a Foucauldian sense, these groups of
academics are not critical at all – they do not act in a scholarly way. Critique does not merely involve saying that things are not right as they are. As alluded to earlier, ‘it is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, uncontested modes of thought the practices that we accept rest’ (Foucault 1988, 154). In essence, these people are not responsible – they do not act in a scholarly way.

This apparent lack of scholarship on the part of some university staff and their students (particularly in and through their teaching and learning) would make it extremely difficult to achieve the desired goals of transformation (as is evident at my own institution), because the exercise of scholarship is indispensable for any transformation (Foucault 1988, 155). Bourdieu (1992, 40) makes the point that higher education discourse seems to be dominated by ‘ready-made thoughts’, which do not sit well with any sort of critical intervention – many universities seem to be guilty of such injustices, which further deepen the crisis of a lack of transformation. As Foucault (1988, 155) aptly puts it, ‘the work of deep transformation can only be carried out in a free atmosphere, one constantly agitated by a permanent criticism (I would say, scholarship)’.

In summary, I have shown that if a university does not create spaces for criticism, deliberation and responsibility, it is very unlikely that scholarship would be cultivated and the idea of a university be fostered.

**TOWARDS CULTIVATING AN AFRICAN UNIVERSITY**

This brings me to a discussion of some of the implications of criticism, deliberation and responsibility for cultivating a university of ‘excellence’. Most of the universities in South Africa often rely on ‘performative’ statistics to illustrate their levels of ‘excellence’ achieved. For instance, the quantity of research outputs and postgraduate student throughput (especially at masters and doctoral levels) are often used to ‘measure’ universities’ ‘excellence’, which in turn also determines the funding from the state. Also, intra-institutionally we are told that one department is more cost effective and thus excellent than another on the grounds of a superior research output and funding allocation. Seldom is an institution/department/faculty recognised for being academically more rigorous than another despite an inferior research output and student throughput. I am not making an argument against the quantity of research output and student throughput, but rather indicating that very little is made of where outputs appear or the level of educatedness that a postgraduate student has acquired – her level of rational autonomy or that which can only be achieved by means of a movement that goes beyond the present and the particular towards the general and the enduring (Biesta 2003, 71). For example, one might find that research outputs of a department are all reflected in local journals, whereas another department can have fewer outputs but they appear in internationally renowned scholarly journals. In this instance, and there are many cases at my own institution, the superior research outputs (in terms
of quantity) cannot be deemed more ‘excellent’ than those which have been subjected to more rigorous and critical processes of peer review – that which reflects the use of rational autonomy. Also, one might find students having achieved ‘good’ grades in their final examinations. However, this does not mean that such students have necessarily achieved high levels of self-determination, autonomy, rationality and independence. In other words, examinations seem to be dominated by subject matter prescribed by university academics and students are often ‘seized’ by or led by it – ideas seem not to be of their own making. Hence, such students have not acquired rational autonomy, that is, they have not made use of their own understandings to look through things and not as they appear at face value. Apple (1993, 44) refers to such rational autonomy as that which ‘enables the growth of genuine understanding and control of all spheres of social life in which we participate’.

The point I am making is, firstly, that ‘excellence’ cannot be measured only in terms of quantity of research outputs and student throughputs. To my mind, ‘excellence’ ought to be associated with a ‘permanent criticism’ (Foucault 1988), that is, any university should be preoccupied with a culture of disturbance where ideas are contested, troubled, modified and even abandoned. Often, particularly where I work, university practices are dominated by what it means to be tolerant of the other. I tolerate someone because I want to avoid conflict and disturbance of the status quo. But such tolerance teeters on the edge of the superficial, because to tolerate someone does not imply that that person has the right to say anything she wants to say without being undermined or challenged. This would be tantamount to a form of pseudo-tolerance, which works against the kinds of rupture, ambiguities, anomalies and contestations which ought to underscore university practices – that is, scholarly activities. (South) Africa is a dynamic and volatile society where many uncertainties and unexpected possibilities seem to surface in universities, and failing to harness a sense of criticism which can deal with what is other and different would undermine the critical spirit necessary to deal with surprise and disruption. Such a denial of criticism would make the realisation of an African university highly unlikely.

Secondly, with the new neo-liberal market economy influencing universities – in particular coercing universities to offer inter- and transdisciplinary programmes – many departments and academics are beginning to work together under the guise of deliberative engagement. However, such working together is mostly geared towards designing and developing programmes which have a market orientation whereby graduates stand a better chance of being taken up in the competitive job market. What invariably happens is that students become more and more self-centred and narcissistic about their own individual futures and prospects at the expense of national interests without deliberating what their collective contributions can be in shaping the future of their country. Most of the students which I have encountered doing a Post-graduate Certificate in Education reason as follows: ‘I want to be a teacher so that I can secure a job’. Very little is said about how
prospective teachers ought to deliberate about improving schooling in order to produce better citizens, or what ought to be done about making schools more conducive to learning and teaching. On the one hand, it seems as if university teachers produce materials mostly aimed at equipping students with universal skills which match with requirements of the world of work and not what it means to be educated in a transformative society. On the other hand, some students narcissistically acquire formal qualifications which seemingly prepare them for the labour market, but do not instil in them qualities which can help build a better country – one free from social oppression (drug and alcohol abuse, gangsterism, and human rights abuses), economic marginalisation (unemployment is rife among the majority of the previously disadvantaged) and subtle forms of racist exclusion (the most lucrative jobs are still occupied by those who were privileged in the past). The point is that unless universities become havens of deliberative discourse aimed at producing a better future for all South Africans, we would not have seriously engaged with challenges of the unexpected – that is to say, our deliberative efforts have not been responsible enough. In fact, they have been biased towards perpetuating injustices. Therefore, we have acted irresponsibly. In this regard Arcilla (2003, 149) makes the point that educators and learners need to take more responsibility for the social context of their education.

This brings me to my concluding comment on how we can act more responsibly. In the first instance, education is a human or social science, which is to say that the theories which characterise it cannot be disconnected from the culture within which they are produced. In other words, education cannot be understood in isolation from processes of immense cultural (regional, historical and temporal) change. Therefore it is not possible to establish a theory of education that is culturally transcendent, because it involves a number of practices between which there are parallels but which do not themselves share unifying characteristics (Uljens 2003, 43). So, simply to assume that one has to accept a universal understanding of education exclusively along the lines of Enlightenment thought is to be insensitive to alternative views, in this instance, views from African traditions. Yet, my argument is that being culturally sensitive to African traditional thoughts and practices does not mean that one has to abandon a universally enlightened idea of, say, democratic dialogue. It is here where I would argue for efforts to communicate between rival and perhaps competing traditions – a matter of acting responsibly, since we would be nurturing an idea of education with which genuine African universities should become involved with.

In essence, we cannot begin to talk about an African university in the making if such institutions are not committed to advancing criticism, deliberation and responsibility. A university which fails to cultivate these virtues of scholarship does not deserve its status as an institution that advocates intellectualism at the highest level, as intellectualism cannot be separated from criticism, deliberation and responsibility.
REFERENCES


