Editorial: SAJHE Heltasa Conference

If walls could speak: Reflections from visiting a South African higher education classroom

H. R. Hay
University of the Free State
South Africa
e-mail: hayd.rd@ufs.ac.za

Abstract
During the last couple of years South African higher education institutions went through major transformation – in particular with regard to enrolling increasingly more non-white students. Not only do the majority of these students come from an educational impoverished background but also from different cultural and language backgrounds. Given the history of South Africa’s higher education system up till now curricula and textbooks and lecturing have been done predominantly by white lecturers, representing western worldviews and ways of understanding and learning. Although a number of policies and initiatives were implemented since 1994 to transform the entire higher education system, undesired differences still exist between the throughput rates of whites and black students.

Given the fact that the majority of lecturing staff in South Africa is still white, I was interested to establish what happens, almost fourteen years after a new government was put in place within classrooms with diverse student population groups. By using three sets of data namely student evaluation, focus group discussions with lecturing staff and classroom observations I explain how a collective consciousness and ethics for learning have been established and has contributed to changes in an institution’s teaching and learning. I argue that the value of this investigation lies within the lessons learned to foster students’ and staff’s academic development and to design curricula that address the particular needs of the changing South African higher education population.

The focus of my article as an editorial to this special edition of the South African Journal for Higher education is relevant to the debate on how learning and teaching should be transformed in order to be responsive and relevant to the diverse South African higher education student population.

INTRODUCTION
We shall only teach better if we learn intelligently from the experience of shortfall; both in our grasp of the knowledge we offer and our knowledge of how to offer it. That is the case for research as the basis for teaching (Lawrence Stenhouse 1983, 193).
Since 1994 various policy initiatives (vide NEPI 1992; NCHE-Report 1996; The Education White Paper 3 of 1997; The Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997; The National Plan on Higher Education 2001) were put on the table to transform the entire South African higher education system – a system dominated by a minority white community of academics that developed and taught curricula. Subsequently marginalised learners were taught within a higher education system similar to that of the western world. Not surprising all policies after 1994 was directed in particular to redress the legacy of apartheid, to open access for marginalised groupings of the population and to ensure greater academic success – not only for students but also for previous marginalised academics.

How good the intentions of all of these policies are, doubt exists whether and how these policies have changed what happens in the classroom as not much more than theoretical and political viewpoints are often exchanged as lip services on what should happen between the four walls of a lecturing venue. How cultures meet, what kind of interactions takes place, how applicable and acceptable the content is for learners, the appropriateness and user-friendliness of study guides, examples for applications of knowledge, culture friendliness of assessment strategies, the way in which questions are asked, etc., are often a secret enterprise between lecturers and students. Thus, whether earlier mentioned policies have enhanced the cultural responsiveness of higher education curriculum (vide the work of Wlodkowski and Ginsberg 1995; Delpit 1996; Gay 2000) is still a bone of contention.

Mindful of the educational anthropologist Erickson’s (1987) research findings that cultural dissonance between teachers and ethnically diverse students contributes to academic failure, often reminds me about the need for in depth research into this area that will hopefully enhance the academic performance and learning experience of all South African students. The realities of a complex and diverse classroom where west and African, the scholastically advantaged and disadvantaged, a number of different cultures and languages interact, often conflicting and deviating political and worldviews congregate, have not yet been researched sufficiently within the new higher education dispensation. Subsequently it is no surprise that white students still outperform black students and that the throughput rates of black students are still alarming high.

Given the legacy of Apartheid, one is aware of the poor schooling backgrounds of the majority of black students and expects to be the case for at least the next decade or two. However, this being the predicament makes one aware of the great responsibility institutions have to invest in appropriate educational development interventions. For too long the academic fraternity has decided in an almost ignorant way what and how should be taught, in most instances from a unilateral perspective. This one sighted view influences not only teaching and learning policies, but also educational development practices as well as views on what constitutes quality in teaching and learning. Unmistakably it also influence the design and content of what and how lecturers assess their teaching practices – thus raising the question that we
may not even assess the right things – neither use the correct way and instruments of doing it.

The above concerns as well as voices for the africanisation of the curriculum and capitalising on the indigenous knowledge also probed me to ask questions on the relevance and worth of student evaluation instruments (usually designed by white academics, borrowing from other countries’ higher education systems). If we are suppose to enhance throughput rates, deliver better graduates to the world of work, eliminate educational backlogs, improve academics’ professional practices and in particular develop a scholarship of teaching, what are the limitations in our current way of thinking and doing?

Despite the growing interest in enhancing and acknowledging the scholarship of teaching worldwide, the notion and debate of scholarship in teaching and in academic development within the South African context have merely emerged. As elsewhere, the perception still exists that disciplinary research is the central professional endeavour and the focus of academic life. However, when taking above intricacies into consideration, it is clear that a definition for the scholarship of teaching within the South African context should include, amongst others, rigorous research into teaching and learning strategies, as well as the lecturer’s planning, thinking and learning context. Trigwell (2001, 71) confirms this view in defining the scholarship of teaching as the effective application of a combination of scholarly approaches to teaching and teaching plans and strategies that are derived from a student-focused conception of teaching.

**COMPLEXITIES WITHIN THE FOUR WALLS OF A SOUTH AFRICAN LECTURE VENUE**

The predominantly assumptions and values that have characterised South African higher education system are mainly derived from aspects of European culture. Those values persist because those who teach in it and those who benefited from it to get a head shared them. However, higher education is a narrow culture that rewards specific ways of knowing and instinctively discounts other ways of knowing (e.g. nonverbal, empathetic, visual, symbolic or nuanced communication are often not valued). Until now little research has been done to explore what role indigenous knowledge can play to understand and improve student learning, neither which contribution it can make to expand the knowledge bases of current teaching and assessment strategies. Accepted teaching methods are usually those who value the acquisition of content, practice, the exposition and coverage of information, prefer the lecturing method and utilise one set of cultural specific classroom practices. Learning as such is traditionally thus viewed as linear, supported by sequential teaching, departmentalised disciplines, rigid classroom architecture while making use of alternative methods seem awkward, cumbersome and undoable, even inferior. What has thus emerged in the South African higher education system is a lack of
conscious cultural identity among students in higher education, as almost a single common norm is advocated.

**CURRICULUM RELATED ISSUES**

A great matter of concern is still the white dominated method of curriculum design and programme delivery within South Africa. Academics are still predominantly white, teaching from without a white culture, using teaching strategies, textbooks, examples, assessment strategies, e-learning layout and graphics that are more user friendly for white students than for black students who are currently in most instances becoming the majority in classes. Working as an academic developer for 14 years has made me to realise that academics often forget to take important learner variables into consideration, such as demographics, psychological (in particular academic identities) sociological, sociolinguistic expectations and quality of secondary schooling into consideration. In concord with the view expressed by Gravett and Geyser (2004) that we teach the students ‘in front of us’ and not the ‘phantom’ students the plea is certainly for academics to at least acknowledge the discrepancies between students’ preparedness for higher education. This phenomenon is exaggerated by the increasing number of foreign students enrolling at South African universities – the majority of them coming from Botswana, Lesotho and Namibia (Futuse 2004, 7) with 72 per cent of all foreign students coming from the SADC region in 2003 (Kotecha 2004, 11). As the number of African students into South African higher education is increasing, so is the need to review existing curricula and syllabi and to align it with the needs of the African learner. On the other hand, to accommodate traditional learners, a balance need to be ensured between an African and the traditional curricula and syllabi. What seems needed is thus a new teaching paradigm to better understand both curricula and learner as being embedded within a broader dynamic of social context and power relations that determine the context for learning.

What seems emanating is a challenge to follow a more inclusive approach when designing programmes and qualifications. The social context and accompanying power relations are indeed influential in constructing both the environment in which learning should take place as learning and socio-cultural context operate hand in hand. Any curriculum planning process should thus begin with identifying all those elements that shape the learning experience. These elements are suppose to be nested, interdependent, reciprocal in nature, integral to understanding learners’ behavior, and should also inform educational development initiatives and practices (Naidoo and Van Wyk 2003). This way of arguing is also consistent with the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) on bio-ecological systems theories that explain individual behaviour as being embedded within a social context shaped by micro-, meso-, and macrosystem influences. This is equally important when decisions are taken when a curriculum is design, teaching and learning strategies are selected. Figure 1 illustrates the interrelatedness of these factors and influences as depicted by Bronfenbrenner.
Each aspect within above framework comprises certain distinguishing characteristics. For example, the learner component is comprised of a variety of characteristics – cognitive style, learning preferences, cultural and political background including religious beliefs, language proficiency level, prior experience etc. However, the external situational realities, institutional expectations and training challenges are just important determinants as any other. The interrelatedness of this model clearly portrays how complex and intricate the curriculum process is and acknowledge the dialectical relationship between mind and society.

Vygotsky (1978), founding theorist on socio-cultural learning issues, informs us that all distinctively human or higher mental functions are altered social relationships which emerge and are shaped in the course of collaborative activities and interactions with others. The crux of the matter is that what people come to know, that is, how they learn to learn, to think and to act in particular contexts are constituted in a relation between their existing cognitive schemes, knowledge, skills and dispositions, the functional demands of the activities they participate in, and the forms of mediation they are afforded in such activities (Bradbury 1993). The implication is that, regardless of how much potential students have, if they do not have opportunities to participate in activities that develop specialised forms of knowledge and functioning and/or are not afforded sufficient opportunities of mediation by experienced others in those activities, they are unlikely to develop such forms of functioning. Consequently, the notion of mediated learning experiences and how they should be brought into
the classroom is becoming increasingly important to transform the typical South African higher education classroom. This should be viewed against the fact that the differences in many of our students’ educational background needs to be addressed by helping students along their way, between what is known and what is to be known. Vygotsky’s notion of the zone of proximal development and its elaboration by other scholars (Hedegaard 1990; Tharp and Gallimore 1991; Wertsch 1985; Wertsch and Hickmann 1987) although not part of our discussion here, explains possible mechanisms involved in traversing this gap.

THE ROLE OF STUDENT EVALUATIONS IN TRANSFORMING THE CURRICULUM

In taking above observations to mind it is imperative to reflect briefly on some national developments aimed at the identified challenges in teaching and learning. In South Africa it is a core function of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) to address the highly uneven capacities of the South African higher education system. This Committee has also identified teaching and learning as the focus of institutional audits at least for a number of years to come. In gathering evidence to evaluate teaching and learning student evaluations could play an important role and also indicate how responsive an institution is to the teaching and learning needs of students. However, student evaluations as such is not a panacea for what is going wrong in the classroom as teaching is known to be a sufficiently complex human endeavour which effectiveness cannot be account for in solely behaviour terms. Knowledge about what constitutes teaching effectiveness has therefore not had much influence on teaching practice in South African higher education until recently.

Yet student evaluations should not be viewed as something new as Centra (1993) mentions that students’ evaluations of their lecturers began as far back as at the universities of medieval Europe whilst Arreola (2000) informs us about seventy years of research on this topic. Recognition is given that student evaluation is implemented for different purposes such as quality enhancement or for performance appraisal, permanent tenure, promotion, compiling of a teaching portfolio or for reflective practice’s purpose. The research findings of Greenwald (1997) over a 25-year period stemming from 1971–1995 also showed support for student evaluation. Still another stream of thought contests whether student evaluation do improve teaching as a result of student feedback. A common complaint of the evaluation of teaching is those in favour of student evaluation who maintain that it is a subjective judgment and that objectivity is almost impossible. As an educational and staff developer and also in trying to assist students to be academically successful it is of great interest to me to explore if and how lecturers, based on student feedback, adjust their practices to deal with the changing South African student profile and whether they acknowledge the diverse backgrounds and needs of their students. Subsequently I engaged in a research project to determine what is happening in the lecture venues of the institution I was then responsible for the enhancement of teaching and learning.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was predominantly qualitative in nature from within an interpretivist framework. When studying learner behaviour in a diverse learning environment one realises the multiple realities. Therefore I embarked on using a variety of sources and analysis methods in order to make a reliable deduction. In order to construct knowledge on my research problem I furthermore made use of unstructured observations in classes, open ended questionnaires (to capture students’ perspectives) and a focus group discussion with the lecturers involved – this in order to obtain insider knowledge on my identified unit of analysis.

For my qualitative inquiry I used purposeful sampling by collecting an academic programme in which the success rates of the undergraduate students were the lowest in the institution. One hundred and eighty students and 6 lecturers participated in the study. From the lecturers I wanted to establish whether and how they deal not only with a diverse student group but in particular with a group of students coming from a disadvantaged educational background. I used the feedback from the students to verify what the lecturers said and vice versa whilst the classroom observations would triangulate my findings.

For the focus group discussion I had with the lecturers I formulated a number of possible open ended questions that could provide direction to our discussion. I first of all asked them to respond on a statement I made, namely that it is extremely challenging to teach within a new higher education landscape giving the increasing diverse student population. Secondly I wanted them to reflect on what they know about student learning and their students’ learning preferences and how it impacts on their teaching planning and learning facilitation. Thirdly I wanted them to discuss the value of using a variety of teaching and assessment strategies in attempting to address the diverse educational needs and preferences of their students.

APPRECIATION FOR STUDENT DIVERSITY AND CULTURAL AWARENESS

From our discussion it was clear that the lecturers were not fully aware of what the specific differences are between the various cultures represented by their students. They are aware that differences do exist, but could not specify what they are and neither what these differences imply for their teaching practices. One lecturer frankly said: ‘I have never thought about it and I am teaching as I use to do for at least the last five years’. The group was aware of language differences and that for example the Xhosa culture is stricter in adhering to their traditions than the SeSotho culture and that these two different groups will from time to time, specifically on political matters differ openly, but they doubt whether differences will influence classroom behaviour.

They acknowledge that they have to be more responsive to the diverse group of students but do not really know where to start. Four of the six, whom were ‘white’
lecturers, were rather overwhelmed by the complexity of the diverse group. They have not considered implementing themes on cross-cultural understanding into the curriculum or to create opportunities for such training. Amongst the lecturers themselves a sense of being uncomfortable to talk about cultural differences emanated. On asking lecturers whether they have ever visited the townships where their students come from, the answer was no. In responding on what they do to develop an understanding of their students’ lives and whether that could assist them to increase the relevance of their lectures and to make examples more meaningful they affirmed that they do not know enough to do so but willing to be informed and trained to do so.

**AWARENESS OF STUDENTS’ DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES AND PREFERENCES**

The majority of the lecturers came from industry and almost only one of them holds a professional teaching qualification. In asking them whether they are aware that different students uses different learning styles and have different learning preferences, they could not mention any specifics on the different kind of learning styles students have, for example theoretical learners who prefer reading or listening, pragmatic learners who prefer to see the practical application of theory and prefer to have only one solution to a problem. All of them indicated that in planning lecturers, they do not take students’ possible different learning preferences into account.

**USING DIVERSE TEACHING STRATEGIES**

In eliciting whether the group capitalises on more than one teaching/instruction strategy, thinking in advance about how best students’ cognitive, emotional and social skills could be developed, it was clear that not much thinking goes into planning issues. Neither was it found that lecturers consider students’ cultures and language skills when developing learning objectives and instructional activities. Although lecturers are aware of different student characteristics such as race, sex, disability, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, or ability, they are unsure how to deal with it in class. Lecturers did mention that they try to boost students’ self-esteem and try to motivate them as far as possible but would like to know what else they can do to improve their students’ motivation and academic identity. They furthermore realise the importance of linking students’ prior knowledge and experiences with new knowledge but do not have the required register of information to do so.

**ASSESSMENT**

Lecturers admitted that they do no experiment with a variety of assessment strategies but usually do what is convenient for them. Subsequently the written kind of assessment is the most popular with hardly ever thought given to role-play, artefacts, verbal, or
If walls could speak: Reflections from visiting a South African higher education classroom

Graphical methods of assessment. This clearly indicated that assessment to a great extent favours one particular cultural group. They do not deliberately think about learners’ preferences or cultural background when they compile tests, assignments or examination papers. Given the workload of academics they indicated that they could use assessment results much better as a way of shaping students’ knowledge and understanding. In asking what their philosophical viewpoint is on assessment they used words such as summative and continuous, irrespective the institutional policy which puts a strong case for a developmental approach to assessment.

Unstructured Classroom Observations: A Snapshot

Although not much have been written about the learning behaviour patterns of the new South African learner I have made certain observations in visiting classroom when I was assessing lecturers for promotion purpose. Skills such as self-directedness, assertiveness and problem-solving, for example, are developed as part of one’s learning in western education institutions. Given the education histories of these students, the majority of them lack these skills. In their culture their own ideas and opinions are often viewed as violating the concepts of maintaining harmony - making them subsequently more oriented toward affiliation than separation. I have noticed that they prefer sharing of ideas rather than debating them and that they would rather seek rapport with lecturers than to be challenged by them. These students often feel overwhelmed and silenced by a discourse style that is not comfortable for them. When they are uncertain about something, they would rather use personal judgment than logic and research to resolve it.

One would often found that if a lecturer asks students whether they understand a particular lesson they would nod their heads and ask no questions to do so. In exploring the reasons I found that nodding means I am attending to you, not that I am understanding or agreeing. Some other observations I have made are that black students in particular will often hesitate before answering, provide indirect, ambiguous responses, are rather shy to ask for clarification, seem to be highly dependent upon the lecturer, lack autonomy in learning, have difficulty in answering open-ended questions and to participate in loosely structured activities. I have observed long periods of silence in some classes. My preliminary findings of how students perceive the outcomes-based education approach that has been implemented in all levels of education in South Africa show that black students are at least initially, not much in favour of it as the expectations of an outcomes-based education curriculum is contra their culture and that they still prefer a teacher-centered classroom in which little communicative interaction take pace. Another interesting observation I have made was that many lecturers will ask a question, but before any student could raise their hands, will answer it themselves.

In revising the study guides used in the programme I found that although ground-rules for class behaviour are outlined, they are usually not informative and explanatory enough. Aspects such as the length of tasks, how long it will take to learn a new skill
or strategy, and when appropriate, give them information on their ability to master a certain skill or complete a task often lacks. I found insufficient clarification of terminology and that in the majority of study guides the language used is not suitable for learners whose mother tongue is not English.

**LEARNERS’ PERSPECTIVES ON WHAT HAPPENS IN A MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM**

In order to gather the learners’ (N=180) perspectives on what happens in a multicultural classroom, I designed an open ended questionnaire in which I asked students to reflect critically on the following statements:

- In class I feel at home.
- Where I come from and who I am matters to my lecturers.
- My lecturers are aware of the cultural differences between me and my peers.
- My lecturers try to accommodate differences between students coming from different socio-economic, cultural and educational backgrounds into account by providing examples and explanations to which I can relate.
- My lecturers use a variety of teaching methods that is interesting to myself and peers.
- My lecturers use a variety of assessment tasks which makes assessment tasks and feedback provided by them meaningful.

In analysing the students’ feedback I grouped their responses according to trends I picked up. Sixty (33%) students mentioned that their lecturers do not remember their names and if they do pronounce it, it is usually incorrect – even if they provide the lecturer with the correct pronunciation. They view this as lecturers not being interested in who they are and not important enough to make an effort to remember or pronounce their names correctly. Forty five (25%) of the participants indicated that lecturers are not interested to know what happen with them outside the classroom and that if they pass their lecturers on campus they will not greet them and they get the impression that they hardly recognise them. Twenty-five (13%) responses referred to lecturers that would usually not congratulate them with extra curriculum achievements, for example, in sports and cultural events. Twenty (11%) responses draw to the fact that white lecturers interact substantially more with white students, while the same was said of black lecturers who would focus more on black students. It was mentioned that some lecturers will forget the medium of instruction is English and will sometime talk to white students in Afrikaans, forgetting the other cultural groupings in the class.

Students expressed their dissatisfaction with lecturers that assume they have been exposed to the life world of white people. They mentioned that the examples lecturers use to apply or explain a specific concept are not always familiar for them,
While the majority of examples lecturers provide, reflects a white culture. They often feel distanced from academic textbooks as it does not refer to their life worlds, nor reflects the communities they come from. Twenty (11%) responses refer to the pictures used in power point presentations use white figures, video clips, photos, and material of e-learning material are usually representing their lecturers’ cultural.

The lecturing method, supported by group work activities, was found to be the most popular method used by a third of the lecturers. Twenty-seven per cent of the students expressed disapproval of group work as ‘not all group members are taking equal responsibility for tasks’. Forty students (22%) mentioned that they are usually assessed by means of a written test or assignment and to a lesser extent on practical work. Only 12 per cent (24 responses) indicated that they found assessment valuable whilst 45 (25%) responses requested that lecturers will provide them with feedback that will indicate to them what they have done incorrect and how they can improve on it.

**DISCUSSION**

From the feedback received it is clear that in this particular programme an array of intervention is required to sensitise lecturers on a variety of teaching issues that could assist them to enhance the learning experiences in a multi-cultural classroom. Lecturers will have to be taught to view their instructional design from the perspective of the students. This is not only important for inclusion but is a principle of effective learning and striking a balance between the traditional methods of instruction and the research that clearly indicates that different students have different ways of knowing. Attempts should be made to include new knowledge about the role of particular marginalised groups in a specific discipline. Lecturers could for example start to monitor their level of engagement with the various student groups in their classes for inclusion and balance it by keeping track of who do they call on, who do they listen to and who dominates class discussions. Stronger attempts must be made to bridge cultural differences through effective communication, for example by teaching and talking to students about differences between individuals. It will only be possible to talk about instruction that is culturally mediated when it incorporates and integrates diverse ways of knowing, understanding, and representing information. Lecturers should develop a learning environment that is relevant to and reflective of their students’ social, cultural, and linguistic experiences and should act as guides, mediators, consultants, instructors, and advocates for students, helping them to effectively connect their culturally- and community-based knowledge to the classroom learning experiences.

In this special edition of the South African Journal for Higher Education the focus is on exploring new ways of thinking about transforming higher education teaching and learning. This edition will hopefully stimulate critical reflections on finding the best possible way to prepare an effective work force for South Africa.
REFERENCES


NCHE, see National Commission on Higher Education.

NEPI, see National Education Policy Investigation.


RSA, see Republic of South Africa.

RSA DoE, see Republic of South Africa. Department of Education.

RSA MoE, see Republic of South Africa. Ministry of Education.


