Re-imagining higher education in South Africa: On critical democratic education

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Abstract
At the 2010 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 30 April to 4 May), the theme of re-imagining public education arose once again with the most compelling presentation from leading scholars in the field concerned with counter-hegemonic politics and democratic change. The session entitled ‘Re-imagining public education: Critical politics and democracy’ reminded me of the important contribution made by South Africans working in higher education in consolidating and enhancing the country’s 16-year old democracy. Their efforts must especially be seen in the light of serious challenges posed by some political groups and their leaders to the democratic agenda of South Africa, which many people have worked very hard to maintain. This essay highlights some of the most salient thoughts that constitute critical and democratic education and what university academics need to focus on to help build our evolving democracy.

II
To begin with, higher education in South Africa has a responsibility to advocate for and cultivate democratic action. If one is sceptical about the role higher education ought to play in South Africa’s 16-year old democracy, then one should be reminded that universities are the places where students’ minds are shaped in preparation for enacting their responsibilities as citizens in a democratic society. If not, then universities might not be producing students with an ethically worthwhile education to serve the interests of the public good. Some significant questions arise: What does a university do that remains disconnected from the real issues of a democratic society? In what way does a university consider education as nothing more than an instrumental process of certifying students without allowing for these students to be oriented democratically to enact change in our society? To my mind such a university produces frivolous knowledge that produces not only ‘technicians of learning’ (Derrida 2004) but also irresponsible students who might not be capable of enacting equity and distributive justice after decades of apartheid. A university that abdicates its responsibility to educate for critical democratic education cannot be a university for the sole reason that it is disconnected from much-needed public...
change. It is for this reason that I want to revisit some of the key positions of counter-hegemonic scholars as enunciated under the theme ‘Re-imagining public education: Critical politics and democracy’.

II

What should higher education in South Africa be concerned with? Firstly, Diana Hess (2010) in her paper ‘Interrogating “student voice” approaches to political education: Do they promote democracy or reify inequality’ cogently reminds us that (higher) education that aims at promoting democracy needs to take seriously the cultivation of ‘deliberatively diverse spaces’. I agree, because it is through deliberation that people engage with the possibility of coming to something new – a matter of connecting with one another, taking risks and simultaneously offering possibilities for a better future. A university that does not teach its students to deliberate undermines the very role of democratic education – that is, such a university fails to enact its responsibility towards nurturing a democratic society. In fact, by not imbuing students with a culture of deliberation it might disconnect people from one another and raise the possibility that the most powerful in society will remain powerful in the sense that they would not be obliged to give an account of what they do. How could they if they are not taught to be engaged in ‘deliberatively diverse spaces’? Another pertinent point raised by Hess (2010) is that public education cannot continue to afford the privileged with more opportunities than the less privileged. If so, public education would invariably reify inequality. Certainly in South Africa, if universities do not create more opportunities for the underprivileged, the existing inequalities bequeathed to us by apartheid would be reified.

Secondly, Julie McLeod and Philip Gartner (2010) in ‘Governing the local: Community, vulnerable youth and democracy’ posit that (higher) education should teach a politics of recognition, that is, it should teach students about their ‘affective citizenship and belonging’ and about their attachments as ‘vulnerable’ persons to the community to which they belong. Certainly in South Africa, university students and educators’ vulnerabilities are being exacerbated by the perpetual institutional hegemonies of exclusion and marginalisation on the basis of race and class and will not do much to enhance students’ feeling of belonging (their citizenship) – a situation which for obvious reasons could be explosive in South Africa considering that many underprivileged students are already becoming more and more disconnected from their society.

Thirdly, Deborah Youdell (2010) in ‘Becoming revolutionary in education? The radical possibilities of a pedagogic politics of becoming’ makes an argument for ‘a politics of becoming for education’. Building on ideas of critical pedagogues such as those of Foucault (for his notion of fearless speech), Butler (for her notion of recognisable politics), Laclau and Mouffe (for their ideas on agnostic pluralism and hegemony), and Deleuze and Guattari (for their views on deterritorialisations and becoming), Youdell (2010) argues for a position whereby educators should
become ‘revolutionary in the present’. According to her, (university) teachers cannot remain a ‘people of line’ but rather need ‘to scatter the assemblages of meanings, representations, practices and subjectivities that render the school (university), the classroom, the teacher . . . so that these are becoming otherwise’ (Youdell 2010). If existing university practices and representations are not going to be ‘scrambled’ (messed up) or ruptured, it is unlikely that students and educators will become otherwise (different). Since the demise of teachers’ training colleges, faculties of education in South Africa (perhaps with the exception of a few) have become the sole providers of teachers. Besides not always having produced sufficiently democratically inclined and critical teachers these faculties have also not produced the scholarly minds to examine democratic discourses. How many of these teachers have actually gone on to further their studies in, for instance, democratic education and actually produced scholarly texts in this regard? How many of our university academics working in education faculties have actually taken on the revolutionary democratic project and produced works that would suggest that they had become otherwise? And here I want to caution faculties of education that they cannot persist with simply overemphasising teaching without also ‘scattering’ these assemblages of often unresearched education. Unless our teacher providers (university educators) themselves unselfishly take up the responsibility to produce work of a counter-hegemonic nature, the possibilities that our public schools would engender democratic change would simply not be realised. In the next section, I refer to the presentation of Michael Apple (2010) in order to offer possibilities as to how a counter-hegemonic higher education can be achieved.

III

Michael Apple (2010) in ‘The tasks of a critical scholar/activist in education’ poignantly reminds us of our responsibility as critical educators in universities. Having been concerned most of his life with ‘understanding and disrupting the Right’, Apple (2010) urges us to ‘keep radical and progressive work alive’. For decades (and perhaps even today) our faculties of education have been consumed with mostly work of an uncounter-hegemonic nature with little if any impact on the democratisation of the public sphere. I cannot imagine a post-apartheid society being harnessed on the basis of work that does not reflect transformative change in our society. Such faculties would not only prove to be counter-productive to the democratic agenda of our country but would also sabotage the progressive demands of democratic education. Moreover, the task of the critical scholar, Apple (2010) argues, is also to use ‘the privilege that one has (as a university educator) to open the doors for those who do not have’. And, this implies that our faculties of education should not only open their doors of learning to those previously denied access to university education, but should also expose the minds of students to a democratic education that can help them to actuate change in their communities. If our higher education sector cannot produce critical democratic minds that can radically and
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progressively ‘give back’ to South African society, then this sector has indeed failed our students and, dare I say, our country. It is with the afore-mentioned context in mind that I invite you to engage deliberatively and radically with the articles in this issue.

REFERENCES


