TEACHING ADVANCEMENT AT UNIVERSITY 2018-2019 ROGRAMME:

INDIVIDUAL PROJECT REPORT

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Title: **Readings in epistemological access and epistemicide**

TAU Enquiry: Group Four – Decolonisation
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ABSTRACT

Epistemological access to the 'conceptual pile' of disciplines by demographically representative cohorts who have diverse cultural capital is a well-established discourse in the scholarship of teaching and learning in South African universities (Muller 2014). In questioning whose knowledge in whose interests epistemological access validates, this review examines education studies literature on epistemological access in relation to decolonial studies literature on epistemicide (Nyamnjoh 2012). How do these literatures relate, or not? Where do the embedded critiques miss each other? What can be drawn from such a comparative analysis in terms of successful access to high level disciplinary knowledge which is both epistemological and ontological? This review starts by comparing recent scholarship from my own institution, attempting to locate this local work in global trajectories of scholarship, beginning to find connections in the literature through voice and agency.

INTRODUCTION TO THE INDIVIDUAL PROJECT

The project sits within a TAU portfolio comprising teamwork in a thematically constructed enquiry group, institutionally based change agency to promote scholarship of teaching and learning, and the individual research project – tasks which developed in dynamic relation to each other over the eighteen-month TAU-2 cycle from January 2018 to July 2019.

The enquiry group explored different scales of decolonisation – literature both philosophically and disciplinarily, contexts both institutionally and in the classroom, and roles of students and teachers both individually and collaboratively. My change agency effort examined inclusivity and curriculum change at departmental level – the site of disciplines.

The individual project started with the *objective* of understanding knowledge and pedagogy in my discipline of professional knowledge of architecture, in terms of *two issues:*

- Firstly, *epistemological access*: the 'knowledge argument' of bringing powerful knowledge back (which implies moving everyday experience out) (Young 2008), in a sequential curriculum build-up which is legible to an increasing diversity of entrants who may not have the presumed cultural capital to recognise what counts for knowledge in the tacit domain of the traditional design studio (so problematising the learner);

- Secondly, *decolonisation*: the 'social justice argument' of challenging whose knowledge in whose interests access is being given, in a course which, in my department, while having many progressive aspects still has knowledge curriculum and pedagogy which is Eurocentric - carrying with it student alienation (problematising the knowledge).

As a sixty-year-old white person, I entered this project space with caution in making claims about knowledge and black identity (though, perhaps, not about whiteness).

My *question* in this reading project is simply: how these two agendas relate (or how not) - success in epistemological access to the high-level professional knowledge (rather than to the experience of everyday practice), and decolonisation of both that knowledge and the institutional culture within which it is learnt.

The *context* for asking this question is the departmental level of a historically white university, in which I am complicit, where my sense of what is going on is that as knowledge is decolonising (taking a progressive turn) pedagogy seems to be re-colonising (taking a conservative turn). In the disciplinary context of the project-based design studio pedagogy seems to be reverting to the French Beaux-Arts tradition of the 'atelier privé', to a class of masters and novitiates in which regulative discourse strengthens (with more demand on expected behaviour in the performance of design, and of the affinity necessary to establish rapport with the 'master' who validates design performance). What then happens to epistemological access?

So, this would probably a Bernsteinian *analysis*.[1]

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[1] Bernstein's pedagogic device sets out the structure of social relationships which cohere in any curriculum (Bernstein, 2000, 25-39). Here Bernstein argues that instructional discourse, 'which creates specialised skills and their relationship to each other', is always embedded in a dominant 'regulative discourse', 'the moral discourse which creates order, relations and identity' (in the case of this reading project, the formation of the professional identity of architects) (op.cit., 32).

STAGE ONE

In the 18-month TAU timeframe I have tried to get into the first stage of this project – reviewing literature on epistemology and decoloniality (at a macro level, philosophically beyond the discipline before exploring the micro level of how those discourses are in play in the disciplinary literature on knowledge and pedagogy).

I thought that I could review these literatures side by side in time sequence, looking for any linkages and differences between them, and any clues on regulative and instructional discourse within them which might reveal how these two narratives relate (cognisant of the risk of presupposing a binary in this parallel reading project).

Working from the inside (local institutional culture) to the outside (the continent and globally) I started the literature review by reading authors from my institution – the social anthropologist Francis Nyamnjoh's work on colonial education in Africa (2012, 2004, and with Jua 2002) and the sociologist of education Joe Muller's work on knowledge and pedagogy in South Africa (2014, 2009).

I then read some informants of that work – Mbembe (1997) and Mamdani (1993) in the case of Nyamnjoh, Young (2008) and Morrow (2009, 2007) in the case of Muller. Underneath this literature, and going back in time, is a development of theories of decoloniality and epistemology, where I am turning to Mignola (2011, 2009) and Bernstein (2000), which I am still busy with.

I've not yet been able to pull a regulative / instructional discourse analysis out of this literature because I've realised, what should have been obvious, that one needs to get to the level of the classroom to do that.

DISCUSSION

The interesting argument that keeps coming up in this literature is the tension between *voice* and *knowledge.*

Muller and Young (1999) take issue with *'voice discourse'* as an educational position recurring since the 1970s which privileges experience over knowledge to the disadvantage of marginalised groups seeking to voice identity institutionally – supressing epistemological access.

On the other hand, the '*epistemic violence*' of this argument is the suppression in western systems of knowledge of voiced identity, of culture, of indigenous knowledge systems – epistemicide, alongside genocide (Nyamnjoh 2012).

So, for Mignolo, it is not about universal components of knowledge to be learnt (as a 'zero-point' detached from 'the geo-political configuration of the world') but is about the who – the knowing subject is within the known, with 'epistemic rights' which have been 'racially devalued' in the 'epistemic silences of western epistemology (Mignolo 2009, 162).

This tension is evident in the 'Mamdani affair' at the University of Cape Town in 1998 where the black scholar's first year humanities course 'Introduction to Africa', based on critical thinking grounded in primary sources of the longstanding debates of the equatorial African academy, was rejected in favour of the white scholars' course in academic literacy skills derived from secondary sources of the US academy (Mamdani 1998).

These parallel tracks of northern knowledge and southern voice, in contestation, keep running for decades going backwards from these sources, and forwards e.g.:

- Young (2016) reprises the knowledge argument (that knowledge is different to experience) 'demonstrated by the failed attempts of successive generations of progressive and radical educators to collapse the categories and construct an experience-based curriculum' and, while conceding that 'the powerful will always try to define what counts as knowledge', emphatically states that 'experience is a powerful force but (is) inadequate as an epistemological principle and no basis for reliable knowledge or the curriculum' (46, 48);

- Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017) restates the counter claim of the authenticity of endogenous knowledge systems which link culture and place, materiality and spirituality, and which have deep intellectual traditions across arts and sciences, orality and textuality – requiring 'epistemic disobedience' to Eurocentric thinking.

Where these two arguments seem to miss each other is in different understandings of voice:

- for Young and Muller (and Morrow, Bernstein) voice reflects individualised experience, as everyday 'segmental' knowledge which cannot be hierarchically structured;

- for Ndlovu-Gatsheni (and Nyamjoh, Mamdani, Mignolo) voice reflects collectivised experience of 'embodied' knowledge which has been epistemically silenced.

I.e. both sets of literature deal with 'powerful knowledge': 'voice' in decolonial turn is not just about individual everyday experience (so there is a risk of conflating critique of outcomes-based education with critique of challenges to the institutional hegemony of Eurocentric knowledge and curriculum).

Perhaps Clegg (2011) does suggest where these two arguments might link – through *agency* emerging from community and familial capital with the recognition of voice in curriculum, acknowledging both the context dependence and context independence of knowledge (an asset rather than deficit model of learning).

This is the next literature to explore, what is being written between the parallel tracks of epistemological access and epistemicide, to understand successful access to the high-level professional knowledge which is both epistemological and ontological.

So, the reading project will need to continue by exploring the linkages of voice and agency in between the arguments for epistemological access and epistemic disobedience, speculating on approaches which could be taken forward in the context of contestations over institutional culture and curriculum change frameworks at universities here.

The analysis is still emergent, perhaps an appropriate condition in TAU Enquiry Group Four's collaborative framing of decoloniality as multiple, incomplete, disruptive and emergent.

(1,365 words)

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