

Individual Report

Working title: Teaching philosophies, transformation and decolonisation

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Project summary

Through a series of in-depth interviews with lecturers from a cross section of faculties and disciplines at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) this project investigates self-reflexive approaches to teaching and learning as a first step towards addressing areas of change and transformation, i.e. how lecturers think about their own role in relation to the teaching and learning project, their students, and a broader transformation and decolonisation agenda, and how this at once informs their teaching philosophy as well as guides transformation and decolonisation of their own teaching and learning.

Background/rationale

The research is set against the background of renewed and amplified calls for addressing colonialism in higher education in South Africa, calls that are increasingly reverberating throughout the global South as well as the global North. The challenge put to higher education is one of moving beyond the constraints of a higher education system shaped by the legacies as well as continuations and mutations of Colonialism, and later apartheid and its aberrations throughout Southern Africa. Such calls are for scholars to work towards a decolonisation of all practices that underlie the teaching project and epistemological groundings that informs scholarship, this to be applicable to, and relevant for, the context that it serves. And as both a site and agent of transformation, the academy has a crucial role to fulfill to ensure relevance in both teaching and research. With renewed calls for a speedier and deeper transformation and decolonisation of higher education that, as set out in the UJ draft decolonisation charter, “extends to the removal of all barriers to higher education as presently enmeshed in, and expressed through, continuous, and ever mutating, legacies and forms of colonialism” (UJ draft decolonisation charter, January 2017), lecturers will have to take serious their role as change agents within the broader higher education landscape.

The challenges facing higher education are multiple and multifold, and beyond the moral imperatives of transformation and a decolonization of higher education, we need to develop our teaching as well as research in ways that talk less to the normative, idealist and long-term, and instead to the real and experienced, in the present. No matter how well-meaning and thought through, our commitment as lecturers, and the project that we will have to take forward, will have to be one of developing appropriate pedagogy as well as epistemologies that are fit for the purpose and context that they serve, and that importantly, address legacies of colonialism and apartheid and its aberrations. In order to do so, lecturers will have to think through their own role in higher education, this in relation to their teaching and learning, their students, transformation and decolonisation. Such a project might in pedagogical terms best be described as, and aligned to, notions of self-reflexivity. As pedagogy, reflexivity is linked to transformative learning processes and a critical awareness of a person's own assumptions and pre-conceived ideas, as well as those of others (see Mezirow 2000) and, as set out by Schön (1983), reflective practices refer to the process of people considering their life experiences in ways that contribute to a deeper understanding of their own role in shaping practices and the outcomes of the same, as well as an ability to respond and adjust to the social environment around them as part of an on-going process of creating and recreating their identities (see Giddens 1991).

Project description

Recognising the importance of self-reflexivity on behalf of lecturers and the ability to critically reflect on our own teaching and learning as well as our relationship to our students, the development of teaching philosophies has been given increasing weight in later years, and lecturers are required to articulate a teaching philosophy to inform their teaching. Such teaching philosophies or teaching statements are often set out in a teaching portfolio, i.e. a document outlining not only a philosophy to underpin the lecturers' own approach to teaching, but how this relates to and informs the lecturers own teaching practices and activities and importantly how this relates to the students taught and their learning experience. Such documentation is also becoming a requirement for promotions, as is the case at UJ, as well as a vital part of assessing 'good' teaching practices for the purpose of awarding teachers. Having assessed many teaching portfolios I see increasingly how lecturers try to articulate work done on decolonisation, however, more often than not we seem to assess these portfolios more

on the what, i.e. what lecturers are doing, rather than on the why, i.e. why lecturers are concerned with decolonising teaching practices, courses, course curriculums etc. and importantly, little attention seems to be paid to the who, i.e. who we are in relation to our teaching and our students.

Ultimately, the underlining reason for the development of a teaching philosophy is to assist lecturers in thinking through their own teaching and to assist them in their own development, this with the goal to improve teaching and learning in higher education. Given the imperatives in South Africa for transforming and decolonising higher education and the importance given to the development of teaching philosophies in later years, assessing the role that the development of teaching philosophies play in assisting lecturers in thinking through their own role in relation to their teaching, their students and the broader transformation and decolonisation agenda will also contribute to the so far rather limited literature on the articulation of transformation and decolonisation in teaching philosophies and how this can be used as a means and tool for staff development, and thus make a contribution to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL). Such, research, once disseminated, will hopefully also assist lecturers in better understanding the importance of developing a teaching philosophy and how this can assist them in improving their own teaching practices and activities and in the extension contribute to a broader transformation and decolonisation agenda.

Overall, in order to deepen the understanding of teaching excellence in local contexts we must develop a better understanding of how lecturers think about their own role in higher education, their relationship to their students, transformation and decolonisation, and the role that the development of a teaching philosophy plays in this regard and whether the process of developing a teaching philosophy contributes positively to lecturers own understanding of their own role, their relationship to their students, the need and practical measures of transformation and decolonisation on multiple levels and in multiple spheres of higher education.

Research aim and research questions

Through engaging colleagues from a cross section of faculties and disciplines at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) around self-reflexive approaches to teaching and learning, this project aims to:

1. Better understand how lecturers think about their own role in relation to their own teaching and learning, students, transformation and decolonisation as expressed through a teaching philosophy.
2. Assess the application and value of developing a teaching philosophy as a tool for better understanding ones own relationship to teaching and learning, the students, transformation and decolonisation.
3. Ascertain whether and how such self-reflexive approaches expressed through a teaching philosophy contribute to improving teaching and learning, a better understanding of the students, ones own relationship to the students, as well as imperatives and strategies for transformation and decolonisation.
4. Contribute to staff development that strengthens the transformative agency of individual lecturers in the interest of transformation and decolonisation of teaching and learning. This while also contributing to the literature and practice around the development of teaching philosophies in the interest of transformation and decolonisation.
5. Make a contribution to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL), with the aim to disseminate the research widely so that it can assist lecturers in better understanding the importance of developing a teaching philosophy to assist in improving their own teaching practices and activities and align these to a broader transformation and decolonisation agenda.

The research questions addressed are the following:

How do lecturers think about their own role in relation to their teaching and learning, students, transformation and decolonisation?

How is this expressed through our teaching philosophies and teaching portfolios?

Does the development of a teaching philosophy aid in this process?

Methodology

I have conducted interviews with lecturers at UJ from a cross section of faculties and disciplines around self-reflexive approaches to the teaching and learning project as a

first step towards addressing areas of change and transformation, i.e. how lecturers think about their own role in relation to the teaching and learning project, their students, and a broader transformation and decolonisation agenda, and how this at once informs their teaching philosophy as well as guides transformation and decolonisation of their own teaching and learning. Interviews have also been conducted with lecturers at UJ that have been awarded teaching awards and/or lecturers who have been commended for articulating transformation and decolonisation through their teaching philosophies.

The interviews have all been semi structured and conducted face to face. Interviews have in most instances been recorded and later transcribed and analysed for common themes as well as individual articulations of how transformation and decolonisation of the teaching and learning project can be strengthened, and the value of the development of a teaching philosophy and application hereof.

The final data findings will, as set out above, be analysed, as well as presented, thematically. To enhance the credibility of the research, the researcher will describe the data analysis processes and procedures, justify why they are applicable within the context of the study, document the process and the development of themes, concepts or theories from the literature and refer to external evidence, including existing qualitative and quantitative studies to corroborate the conclusions.

Interviews have been conducted from April 2018 to present. To date I have conducted 26 in depth, semi structured interviews with lecturers in the faculty of Humanities; Health Sciences; Science; Art, Design and architecture, and Engineering. The research findings will be shared as the project progresses through publications as well as workshops/seminars at UJ.

The research will continue, and I will also conduct interviews with lecturers at UJ who have been involved in assessing teaching portfolios for the purpose of teaching awards as well as promotions. This to query how teaching philosophies as well as reflections of self-reflexivity in relation to transformation and decolonisation are evaluated across faculties.

Findings

I am still busy going through the interview data but so far the data shows a clear focus on what lecturers do, and to a lesser but still substantial extent 'why' they do it. Less clear is the 'why' of particular teaching practices as well as curriculum content. Seldom is the 'I' articulated and it is often less clear how individual lecturers see themselves in relation to their teaching, discipline and students.

While teaching portfolios assessed as well as interviews conducted in early 2018 had a strong focus on decolonisation, the focus have gradually shifted towards a focus and articulation of IR 4 and the future of teaching and learning and higher education with regard to technological and other major paradigmatic shifts.

Recommendations for teaching practices etc.

I hope the research will contribute towards refining criteria in teaching portfolios. This to move away from a primary focus on methods as well as projects, towards criteria that provides for lecturers to clearer articulate the "I", i.e. themselves in relation to their teaching, their students their discipline and a wider stakeholder community. This will also include a stronger focus on research-lead teaching and the lecturers' own role as a change agent in the interest of transformation and decolonisation.

References

Giddens, A. 1991. *The consequences of modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Mezirow, J. 2000. *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Schön, D A. 1983. *The reflective practitioner: how professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.