



The UKZN Griot. Of Passing and Failing

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'Pass one, pass all' was an opportunistic catchphrase of the 1990s, uttered by militant students who claimed that administrative justice was thus best served. The ranking of class essays from good to bad was considered undemocratic and demands were made for marks to be homogenised across the whole class. Some would even threaten lecturers – 'We know where you live' – while the less democratically inclined would try to negotiate higher marks on the basis of racial congruity with their lecturers – 'Let's make a deal, black-on-Black'. Then, there were those weak students who 'knew' that they deserved an 'A' and tried to negotiate an upgrade by camping in departments for days on end trying to exhaust the patience and sanity of their tutors.

No-one thought that they should fail for any reason at all. One MA student told me that the text that he had plagiarised from the web, which he had laboriously copied in long hand, in fact was plagiarised by the web author from his own hand written essay. Our hard-working international African students and lecturers looked on with a combination of horror, bemusement and disbelief. I know of PhD theses that were nothing more than atrocious technical reports being passed by their host institutions. Where I would write 15 pages of closely argued critique, other examiners would just tick the boxes, lodge their claims and move onto the next one. This conveyor belt that relied on pass one pass all was a national industry.

My response to 'Pass one, pass all' was 'Fail one, fail all'. That put paid to the nonsense. I would then ask whether the student who had failed would fly with a pilot with a condoned pass. Up until recently this was a hypothetical question. Indeed, a recent graphic reminder of what happens when we pass students who should fail occurred in Taiwan when a Chinese pilot, who had failed his simulator test, crashed his plane, killing everyone on board. One of the engines had cut out and instead of switching it on again he stupidly turned off the engine that was running and which might have righted the plane.

Then there are those pilots who have failed their psychology assessments who have recently committed suicide by plane and who deliberately kill hundreds of innocent passengers. On top of these failed pilots are their failed managers like at Malaysia

Airlines who once kept their planes flying over war zones – with predictable results. The managers who fail to manage their pilots' planes routes can and do kill because they don't anticipate likely consequences of flying through war zones.

Hence, my pro-active philosophy that 'Fail one, fail all' will save thousands of lives, whereas 'Pass one, pass all' will kill thousands. Just think of all those mini bus drivers with condoned licences who kill their passengers by the dozen because they think that physical laws and the rules don't apply to them. They think that they can pass one pass all, usually on the wrong side of the road, in the emergency lanes or over pedestrians or by other means. Since just about everyone has contempt for the rules of the road, Arrive Alive should just close shop and leave it to motorists to 'kill one, kill all'.

If one extrapolates further, the now EFFing Malema ingratiated himself while protecting his own life by claiming that he would 'kill for Zuma', not that he would die for him, the more charitable offer. So, all those graduates with condoned passes, take a leaf out of Bungling (Buffalo) Bill's book, who will you kill today?

'Shun mediocrity' was the catchphrase of the July 2015 Africa Universities Summit held at the University of Johannesburg. Our own VC, Professor Albert van Jaarsveld, got massive coverage in the ensuing reports, about the need for cosmopolitanism, local career pathing and the global circulation of academics. Let's hope none of them have to catch the local mini bus taxis or planes piloted by failed pilots, lest they circulate in the local and global cemeteries also. Then, of course visiting academics have to be trained and psyched up to deal with toyi-toying students who chase other students and lecturers out of classrooms, libraries and other study spaces. The 'cool toys' (from the North) that Dr van Jaarsveld wants to get to ensure that top academics remain in South Africa are sometimes trashed in the process.

Toy-one, toyi-all, I say. Let's have fun with the toys. But that means that we should be trained to use them, not to smash them. The problem with the strategy of making the country ungovernable of the late 1980s, with its associated discourse of 'freedom now education later', is that the education bit got lost in translation. Education became associated with chaos, and mediocrity was certified as democratic. Where Jeremy Bentham proposed: 'The greatest good for the greatest number', in South Africa, the practice rewards mediocrity for the few, which protects the incompetent at the expense of the majority.

No-one knows who is flying the plane anymore.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.