

The UKZN Griot

Of Marks and Socialism



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A FEW years ago on a field trip students recurrently used the word "random" to refer to anything that grabbed their attention, something that was novel, an odd event that required some kind of colloquial signifier. "Random" was soon evacuated of any meaning – like a well known expletive – and simply became a marker that marked some empty exclamatory rhetoric. Being seen to be using cellphones here, there and everywhere, irrespective of content, meaning or relevance, is the gesticular equivalent of nothingness taking on signficatory value. "We're connected – seems to be the message to onlookers". But even the concept of "zero" has meaning – even if it signifies emptiness.

Another student foible is the question: "Is it compulsory"? This might be called the First Law of Student Procrastination. Realising that evasion is not an option, the Caveat becomes: "Is it for Marks?" It is at this point that the Corollary of the First Law kicks in, especially when lecturers try to respond intelligently and patiently to the First Law and its Caveat parroted at them by students.

The Corollary states that "Students Asking these kinds of

Questions Indicate that all they have Learned is How to Write Exams". This brings us to the 2nd Law of Procrastination, that students who only know how to write exams have yet to learn how to learn. Also, they don't know that they don't know – they are running on empty/zero. The lecturer's stock response to these kinds of questions is found in the Law of Irritated Reaction: "A Register Will be Taken!" This Law suggests that students attend a class to sign a register rather than to learn or participate.

So, what's the point of this exercise in Academology?

Learning is a collective socialization process. Participation helps to get a foot in the door – i.e. employment. As Jonathan Jansen keeps telling unemployed graduates in *The Times*, volunteer, do, get experience, take up unpaid internships to fill in your CV. Waiting for top-paying management posts only works for the small class of self-righteous politically connected. The rest have to work for their living. This is known as the Law of Mundane Existence. Most of us have to know how to slog where the elite just have to cash their paychecks.

All this reminds me of a graduate class we taught in the early 1990s. Many of the MA

students, the first batch co-terminous with the first election, refused to read, work or participate. They were simply doing 'time'. No need, they assured their increasingly exasperated lecturers, "Soon, the ANC will be in government and socialism will provide". This conclusion was offered after the lecturers had locked the seminar room door. The class would be allowed to leave only after they explained their otherwise inexplicable refusal to learn. Thirty minutes of excruciating silence loosened their lips. "OK, I responded", now we have a starting point. My colleague, Eric Louw, I said would examine this proposition. He had, after all, just finished a PhD on Marxism, in the aftermath of the Soviet meltdown.

Louw's response was that a contributing factor to the failure of communism was the myth that 'socialism would provide'. Who will pay the taxes, I asked, for this to occur? The students were horrified to learn that as part of the employed middle classes that their own salaries would contribute to the tax base. Were they prepared for the 45 percent marginal tax that we were paying? Even as they lived middle class lifestyles they had foolishly assumed that they were revolutionaries who would be exempt. Indeed, a new staffer had

complained bitterly that her first pay slip reflected a tax deduction. What was I going to do about it, she demanded.

The class became visibly animated and distressed on learning that they were tax fodder. Why not re-distribute Anglo-American's profits one asked. A study just reported revealed that if each individual was to get an equal share, the income per head in 1994 would be just R17. The question was posed by a student who is now a head honcho in the advertising industry. And so it went, until enlightenment dawned. Socialism is flawed because people venerating passivity want to benefit but not contribute, participate and learn. Resources are finite in this system and marks mean nothing when learning and problem-solving is not occurring. The Soviet Union was running on empty/zero in more ways than one. Successful socialism is not just a matter of signing the register, being seen to be doing 'time' or paying fees to get a certificate. Wealth creation is needed no matter the type of economy. Then, it's a question of redistribution, and the rich are required to support the poor, though in many societies, like ours, it is the poor who support the rich. The question is how and under what conditions can redistribution

occur? We had a great seminar and this class came to the academic party big-time as a result of this conversation.

Suffice it to say that the mechanism of redistribution cannot be "random". To get back to education. A variation of Terman's Law (Stanford University), would state that "There is no direct relationship between the quality of an educational program and its cost (or the 'time' spent doing nothing/something in the classroom)". Time is like using cell phones, if it's question of being 'seen' to be 'doing' even if nothing is being done, then we are running on empty. Active participation in a collective learning environment is the key.

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



Ms Janet Van Eeden, a judge at the Assegai Awards Student Film Awards, hands Ms Lona Mkhize her Best Script Award.



Seen at the 16th edition of Poetry Africa: UKZN's Vice Chancellor Professor Malegapuru Makgoba; CCA Director Mr Peter Rorvik and one of the performing poets Ms Werewere Liking of the Ivory Coast.