

The UKZN Griot Of Teaching and Research

When I was at school we were called “pupils”, but more often just “school children”. Now these youngsters are called “learners”.

WORDS: KEYAN TOMASELLI

This semantic engineering does not of course conceal the fact that only quarter or so of any undergraduate class actually learns anything substantive, or learning how to learn in the process. The majority simply learn how to write exams and how to manoeuvre through their degree without learning very much at all.

A Swedish lecturer who addressed our students last year about “the experience economy” linked this concept to what he called “learned helplessness”. Those who have learned to be helpless are all around us. Schools, universities, and educational institutions of all kinds seem to teach this passive, dependent and debilitating condition. Entertaining the masses is now the job of lecturers where students enrolled at taxpayer expense think that *they* are clients paying for a product. This instrumentalist attitude is the kiss of death as far as critical thinking is concerned.

Last year SUBtext published an article by Gail Robinson entitled, *Academics: Researchers or Teachers?* She was debating an article published in *UKZN-TOUCH* where terms like “up-skill” and “teachers bridging gaps” were invoked. This language sits uneasily with the research discourse that emanates

from other sectors of the University. In between are found artists and performers who claim to be doing both teaching and research. It’s not clear what they are doing though the NRF rating committee on the Performing and Visual Arts seems to think it knows what its constituency is doing. But that’s another argument that goes to definitions of research and how it is reported, in print, clay, song or dance.

The polarisation of the argument between ‘teaching’ on the one hand and ‘research’ on the other often forgets that the best researchers are also often the best teachers. This is because researchers are located at their respective disciplinary coalfaces: they educate from practices in the field, from direct experience, from the empirical and theoretical fronts, so to speak. They are not relying on a textbook that someone else wrote, based in a different context, far removed from the daily experience of UKZN students. Researchers/educators critique the textbooks – a positively unsettling experience for students. Theory and method come alive in the actual practice of the discipline – made possible by research-led education.

Researchers (and indeed activists, anyone who is socially involved), engage students *via* methods designed to break dependency, replace passivity and

promote agency. Regrettably, the word ‘teaching’, suggests that it is the lecturer who does the work while students respond like ‘clients’ – waiting for the ‘service’.

Students learn best when they are educating themselves. The ‘teacher’ is basically the facilitator/educator. The educator should be asking questions, not delivering answers, uploading notes and power points on Moodle, creating a day-care environment. In the US I learned the Socratic method: ask questions in class and encourage students to debate answers that they themselves offer. This method can be a really daunting experience for the best of educators. Trying to elicit productive debate from often sullen and under-prepared students (even from the minority who actually come to class) takes a lawyer-like doggedness.

Teachers may need to be trained and held accountable to regulating bodies, but educators and researchers take responsibility for their own practices. Regulation encourages instrumentalisation where students imagine that ‘doing time’ is the equivalent of learning. Learning is a dynamic negotiation in the thick of things. Evaluation delivers numbers for the auditors, while education facilitates learning for the students. This is known as critical pedagogy a la Paulo Freire.

Just when one thought that instrumentalist rationality had reached its zenith, then I opened an email and read about the way that Texas A&M University is attempting to calculate a profit-and-loss statement for each Faculty member, weighing annual salary against numbers of students taught, tuition generated, and research grants obtained. The 265 page document includes balance sheets of which lecturers earned profits for the institution and those who are operating in the red.

This kind of productivity spreadsheet imposes a symbolic violence that reduces everything to that which can be measurable, instead of measuring that which is symbolically valuable. (I do agree however that staff who are under-performing do need to be made accountable.) Not everything can be measured, and neither should it. How would one measure immeasurable individual and institutional contributions to the NRF, CSIR, Academy of Science, National Heritage Council, etc.?

Algebra, after all, is about relationships, propositions and possibilities. Knowledge, especially indigenous knowledges, exist in the collective rather than the individual mind, they resist the tour-niquet of monetarisation. DNA sequencing may never have been discovered had its inventors been



told to earn their keep through the spreadsheet economy. Brutal instrumentalisation heralds the death for humankind. As Lenin once observed, the capitalist will happily sell the rope to his executioner. Similarly, the educational bureaucrat now auditing the US tertiary sector via profit and loss statements will claim fiscal accountability at the very moment that there is nothing left to be accounted for.

Forget climate change, productivity audits of the kind envisaged by Texas A&M will reduce the academy to a state of entropy already assumed by students – nothing more than a service (even as we head towards extinction of the species).

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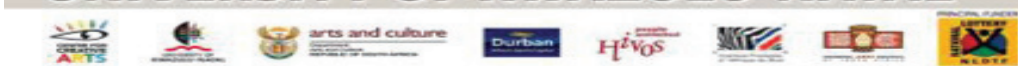
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