# Cultivating criticality in a neoliberal system: a case study of an English literature curriculum at a mega distance university

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## Abstract

Neoliberal practices such as managerialism and academic casualisation impact higher education systems globally. While these practices can constrain any curriculum aimed at enabling transformative learning, this paper shows that they place particular limitations on arts and humanities curricula intent on cultivating criticality and a sense of social responsibility. I draw on data from an English literature curriculum study at a mega distance education institution in South Africa and use Legitimation Code Theory to take a close-up look at how two neoliberal practices: managerialism and academic casualisation cause misalignments between the underpinning values of the curriculum and the kinds of pedagogic and formative assessment practices that are employed. I conclude that decisions regarding administration, enrolments and staffing based on neoliberal values can frustrate students' epistemological and ontological access to humanities disciplines and limit the potential of humanities curricula to offer a higher education in service of the social good.

**Keywords** Critical literacies · Socially transformative education · Managerialism · Academic casualisation · Legitimation Code Theory · Curriculum alignment

## Introduction

As neoliberal values continue to encroach on higher education systems globally, curricula aimed at cultivating criticality and a sense of social responsibility are increasingly under threat. Neoliberalism is both a set of economic policies by which business practices are spread throughout the public sector and an ideology that reduces our conception of human interactions to economic relations (Leathwood & Read, 2022; McKenna, 2022; Monbiot, 2016). The debilitating effects of neoliberalism on the academy have been the focus of much scholarship (see, for example, Ashwin, 2020; Brown, 2016; Giroux & Giroux, 2004).

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Such research shows that commercial values, such as competition, monetisation and metrification, have taken hold and are antithetical to a belief in higher education as a social or public good. Understanding higher education as a public good means that it is viewed as something that should benefit society as a whole, not just the individuals that attend and work in universities (McKenna, 2022). If universities are to function as a social good, they must be vigilant against reinforcing social divides, nurturing greed and encouraging the plundering of the planet (McKenna, 2022). However, in a neoliberal system, the emphasis shifts to the aspects of the university that can be 'counted', for example, profit, efficiency and rankings. In this scenario, the commitment to social justice and the conscientisation of students is side-lined because these values do not align with the privileging of economic relations.

Because neoliberal tenets are increasingly being taken up in university contexts, academic disciplines that do not have a direct orientation towards industry and employment, such as many programmes in the arts and humanities, are more vulnerable as their intrinsic value is less obvious and more challenging to calculate (Nussbaum, 2010; Shumway, 2017). Many arguments for the value of arts and humanities programmes emphasise their importance in developing the critical, reflective and/or empathetic social agents that are necessary for a healthy democracy (Anwaruddin, 2013; Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Nussbaum, 2010). However, arts and humanities curricula are particularly susceptible to being devalued under a neoliberal value system, as these disciplines tend not to produce knowledge that can be readily commodified (Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Nussbaum, 2010; Shumway, 2017).

While the philosophical clashes between neoliberal values and arts and humanities curricula aimed at developing a critical orientation towards society have been well documented (Anwaruddin, 2013; Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Nussbaum, 2010), McKenna (2022: 6) argues that more research that reveals 'specific events and experiences that emerge from the conditioning power of neoliberalism' is needed if we are to sufficiently engage with neoliberalism in universities. This is important if we are to understand neoliberalism not just as an abstract and nebulous force which we feel powerless to change, but as something that we can point to in our classrooms and curricula (McKenna, 2022). This paper aims to contribute to this conversation. I do so by drawing on Legitimation Code Theory to take a more contextualised look at how two neoliberal practices—academic casualisation and managerialism—negatively impact curriculum alignment in an English literature curriculum at an open distance university in South Africa. The paper thus contributes a concrete example of how neoliberal forces play out in a higher education context at programme, disciplinary and institutional level. In doing so, I endeavour to contribute knowledge that will help university management to make more informed decisions around administration, enrolments and staffing if they hope to enable arts and humanities programmes to provide the pedagogical spaces that students need to gain access to disciplinary ways of knowing and a socially oriented criticality.

I begin by describing the South African distance education context of the English literature curriculum under study to highlight both the particularities of the case and the commonalities it has with many other higher education contexts. I then introduce my theoretical and analytical framework, Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), and go on to employ LCT concepts to reveal the underpinning values of the curriculum under study. I show how these findings correlate with other literature on the ways of knowing that are valued in the field of literary studies as well as arts and humanities disciplines more broadly. This is followed by a discussion of the types of pedagogic and formative assessment practices that align with and can enable the development of the kind of knower that is valued. Finally, I unpack

the specific ways in which the neoliberal practices of managerialism and academic casualisation hampered curriculum alignment within the context under study by limiting the kinds of pedagogical offerings and formative assessment opportunities that could be provided to students. By extension, this curbed opportunities for students to develop critical literacies and gain epistemological and ontological access to the values of the discipline. I go on to make some recommendations for policy and practice around administration and staffing that would support arts and humanities curricula to provide pedagogical spaces conducive to transformative learning: spaces where students can engage with disciplinary knowledge in ways that change 'their sense of who they are and what they can do in the world' (Ashwin, 2020: 3).

## Context

South Africa's legacy of educational inequality under colonial and apartheid rule continues to have significant effects on its higher education sector. South Africa faces serious challenges in terms of providing equitable access to the higher education space (StatsSA, 2019; Van der Merwe, 2021). Additionally, Amnesty International's 2020 report reveals that South Africa still has one of the most unequal schooling systems in the world, with socioeconomic status being the largest determinant of access to quality education and only 14% of learners acquiring access to university (Amnesty International, 2020). The university under study is a mega distance education institution that performs a vital function in South Africa in that it can accommodate much larger student numbers than contact universities. It enrols almost a third of South Africa's higher education students, with close to 400,000 students. This distance university has also been found to perform an important function in supporting students who are unable to study full-time for a variety of reasons, including work commitments, financial constraints and care responsibilities (Case et al., 2018).

The Department of English Studies where I collected my data is a large department; in 2021, it had over 50 academic staff members, with about half of these academics teaching on courses that contain a literature component (the other courses are English language courses). The study looked at the six modules that contain a literature component and form part of the English Major. In 2021, when data was collected, the first-year English literature module had more than 12,000 registered students; the two second-year modules had just under 4000 students each; and the three third-year modules had less than 120 students each per semester. A major contributing factor to the large first- and second-year student numbers is that, in addition to students who select the courses as part of their Bachelor of Arts degrees, these courses are compulsory for certain Education students.

Because this department deals with such large student numbers and, by comparison, has only a small number of academic staff, the department makes use of external, part-time 'e-tutors' on the large first- and second-year modules to provide students with online tuition support, and external markers perform the bulk of the formative and summative assessment on these modules. While it is unlikely that any English Department at a contact university will have anywhere close to these student numbers, South African universities have seen a massive increase in student enrolments in the last two decades: between 2009 and 2020, student enrolments increased by more than 30% (DHET, 2022). This means that many university departments in South Africa are contending with large increases in their student cohorts. Massification in the higher education sector is also a global phenomenon which has coincided with increased pressures on academics to teach larger class sizes with

fewer resources (Allais, 2014; Hornsby & Osman, 2014). This is because governments and institutions have responded to the dramatic expansion of the higher education sector by turning to cost-saving strategies, including reducing permanently employed academic staff and expanding class sizes (Allais, 2014). Thus, my investigation of how neoliberal practices impact on curriculum alignment in a humanities curriculum that serves a large student body will have relevance for a broad range of contexts. Additionally, this paper will be of special interest —to those concerned with the teaching of humanities disciplines through a distance education model.

## Theory and methodology

This paper draws on Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) to make the underlying values of an English literature curriculum overt and to consider the extent to which pedagogy and formative assessment are aligned to developing the 'ways of knowing' valued within the discipline. Although the English studies major consists of ten modules, I focused only on the six modules that contain a literature component.

Academic literacies research indicates that disciplinary insiders are often blind to the academic discourses within which their disciplines function, as these discourses have become so normalised for them (see, for example, Jacobs, 2007). As an insider researcher and an academic in the field of English studies, I drew on the strong theoretical lenses and analytical tools provided by LCT to help surface what was legitimated in the curriculum. LCT provides a conceptual and analytical framework that can be used to reveal the organising principles underpinning social practices (Maton, 2014). The framework provides multiple dimensions, but this paper draws specifically on the dimension of Specialisation to reflect on curriculum alignment.

Maton (2014: 29) introduces Specialisation by explaining that social practices—such as the practices of an academic discipline—are always 'about or orientated towards something and by someone'. Epistemic relations govern *what* can be considered knowledge in a specific field, and social relations govern *who* can be considered a legitimate knower (Maton, 2014). Different academic fields place varying levels of restriction around what objects can be studied, how they can be studied and who can be considered a legitimate participant in the field. It is these boundaries that 'specialise' a specific field, making it distinct from other fields. Specialisation codes are used to express the strengths and/or weaknesses of the epistemic relations and social relations underlying a field of practice and serve to reveal one aspect of the 'rules of the game', or basis for legitimacy, that underlie different fields of practice (Maton, 2014). Understanding what specialises a discipline can help one to teach its underpinning values more explicitly to students, thus enabling epistemological and ontological access to the discipline. A specialisation analysis can also help one to detect clashes in terms of different aspects of a curriculum such as course outcomes, pedagogy and assessment practices. This can allow one to identify problems relating to curriculum coherence.

For this paper, I used Specialisation to analyse the course outcomes of the six modules under study (as specified in the course guides). Specialisation was further employed to analyse the interviews I conducted with academics teaching on the relevant modules. The data that I draw on in this paper was generated as part of a larger PhD study which comprised of two main research questions:

1. What is the basis of legitimacy and success in the undergraduate English literature curriculum under study?
2. Does the curriculum enable epistemological and ontological access to the discipline?

Sixteen of the nineteen academics who were invited to participate in the study granted me an interview, and there was a good representation of lecturers who taught on each of the courses. I made use of semi-structured interviews but covered the following set of core issues in each interview:

- What academics saw as the value of studying English literature
- The attributes and skills they wished to see in English studies graduates
- The kinds of pedagogies they employed to help students develop the valued attributes/skills
- How successful the academics felt the curriculum was at developing the valued attributes/skills, and why
- Whether academics felt that literary analysis was an ability that any student could learn or whether it required some inborn aptitude; and
- What academics perceived to be the most significant challenges that students faced in mastering the curriculum

The interview questions were informed by my research questions as well as my understanding of the kinds of data that I needed to generate to conduct an LCT analysis of the underpinning values of a curriculum.

After taking some time to immerse myself in my data with the aim of picking up on recurring themes, I commenced with coding the data according to the concepts provided by the Specialisation dimension of LCT. Because the study was interested in possible clashes in terms of what was valued in the curriculum/discipline and how the curriculum was taught and assessed, I coded for instances where social relations and epistemic relations were foregrounded and/or backgrounded in the relation to disciplinary values and/or the values of the curriculum. I then looked at how these values translated or failed to translate into the teaching and formative assessment practices of the curriculum.

Wilmot (2019) explains that while LCT provides a researcher with well-defined theoretical concepts, it is up to the researcher to interpret these concepts in relation to their own data. This, as with all qualitative research, is a subjective process (Wilmot, 2019). However, it is possible to mitigate against this weakness by creating a 'translation device' (see also Maton & Chen, 2016) which affords analytical transparency, making explicit how the researcher has mediated between the theory and the data (Wilmot, 2019). For this reason, I include the translation device that I made use of in Fig. 1 below. The first column lists the specialisation codes that I made use of along with a generic descriptor of the form that each code took in my data. The second column provides a quotation from my data that I saw as a strong example of a specific code.

As I conducted my data analysis, I noted that 'critical thinking' was the most cited attribute that academics hoped English studies graduates would develop, and I found it significant that 'critical thinking' was described in many of the interviews as a kind of socially oriented criticality that had implications beyond the study of literature (more on this below). This led me to a deeper exploration of the literature on critical literacies and socially transformative learning. It was during this process that I came across

| Codes and descriptors of how they manifest in my data | Example from data |
|---|---|
| **Stronger social relations** You need to be a certain kind of person or display a specific disposition to be considered a legitimate 'literary knower' | 'So, I'm looking for a postmodernist, a person who's not rigid in their thinking, who can see many paradigms of thought together and … not be … filled with preconceptions and prejudices...' (Interview 6) |
| **Weaker social relations** Neither personal attributes nor specific dispositions are important to participate in the field of literary studies | No examples in dataset |
| **Stronger epistemic relations** You need to possess specialised principled or procedural knowledge about literary texts to participate in the field | 'This module provides a foundation for literary study. Its outcomes develop your ability to: • demonstrate an informed understanding of the literary features that characterize each genre • demonstrate an ability to identify these features in literary texts' (first year tutorial letter) |
| **Weaker epistemic relations** You can draw on knowledge or methodologies that have applications beyond literary texts when you participate in the field | 'I mean, an artwork is a narrative, so you can analyse a building as a narrative; you can analyse a painting; an art installation; a photograph. So, it's all interconnected, and they are all narratives … and literature forms part of that big narrative, and it is related to a historical period…' (Interview 5) |

**Fig. 1** Specialisation translation device for English literary studies

the literature cited in the introduction of this article, which argues that the neoliberal university constrains the potential of higher education programmes to provide a transformative education in service of the public good. Upon re-examining my data in relation to these ideas, I realised that two neoliberal practices: managerialism and academic casualisation can be seen to have had a negative impact on curriculum alignment within the context under study. It is these two issues that form the main focus of this paper. My findings were presented to academic staff in the English department under study in a seminar, with an open invitation for them to provide their inputs on the research. The ensuing discussion suggested that academics felt that I had accurately represented the contextual constraints that they face in terms of teaching the values of their discipline.

## English literary studies and the cultivation of a literary 'gaze'

Previous LCT studies investigating the underpinning values of English literary studies in a diverse range of contexts concluded that students needed to display a specific disposition or 'literary gaze' in order to succeed (Anson, 2017; Christie, 2016; Jackson, 2020; Luckett & Hunma, 2014; Maton, 2014; Sevnarayan, 2015; Van Heerden, 2017; Wilmot, 2019).

The majority of these studies also found that English literary studies legitimated what Maton refers to as a 'knower code' with a 'cultivated gaze' (Christie, 2016; Jackson, 2020; Luckett & Hunma, 2014; Maton, 2014; Van Heerden, 2017; Wilmot, 2019). A field that is dominated by a knower code is defined by Maton (2014) as a field in which the attributes or dispositions of actors are emphasised as measures of achievement and specialised knowledge and objects of study are downplayed. Thus, in LCT terms, the field is underpinned by stronger social relations and weaker epistemic relations. Maton (2014) makes a further distinction between a 'social gaze' and a 'cultivated gaze': fields that place a strong emphasis on belonging to a specific biological or social category in order to be considered a legitimate participant in the field value a social gaze, while fields that value a disposition that can be inculcated through prolonged immersion are underpinned by a cultivated gaze. Luckett and Hunma (2014: 95) explain that the cultivated dispositions that are valued in knower code humanities disciplines are usually developed through 'prolonged apprenticeship and immersion in exemplary models under the tutelage of disciplinary masters'.

The findings of these studies correlate with the findings of my data analysis discussed below. The course outcomes for the six modules under study suggested that while literature students were expected to have knowledge of literary devices, literary genres, essay composition, academic referencing techniques and literary theories, this knowledge on its own would not allow students to succeed in the modules. What was crucial was for students to harness this knowledge to formulate their own arguments about how meaning is created in literary texts. For example, one set of course outcomes required students to '*evaluate the effectiveness* of particular instances of figurative language … in writing'; to 'read literary language as a means of positioning the reader in order to elicit a particular response'; and to 'discuss the effects of emotive language, bias and point of view in writing' (Tutorial Letter 101, my emphasis). The course outcomes of all six modules emphasised the attribute of critical thinking/writing/engagement. Additionally, one of the second-year modules and all the third-year modules emphasised independent thinking and self-reflexivity. Thus, there was a strong emphasis in the course outcomes on the kind of disposition a legitimate knower needed to exhibit, and this emphasis grew stronger at higher levels of study.

Social relations were also strongly emphasised in the interview data. When I asked about the knowledge, abilities or attributes academics would like English studies graduates to have upon completion of their degree, academics highlighted knower attributes such as criticality; the ability to support one's interpretations through logically persuasive arguments; and broad-mindedness. Ten of the sixteen interview participants spoke at some length about the value of literary studies in exposing students to a diverse range of people and perspectives, and/or its value in developing a socially oriented criticality (this was also touched on more obliquely in three of the other interviews). For example, one academic mentioned that the curriculum should give students access to 'a certain set of skills' that 'should go beyond just English literature':

> I want those same skills to also help them develop their critical thinking so that when they see the way that something is represented in politics, they can use those critical thinking skills to also dismantle what is essentially just another system of signs, and so that they can see the value of these critical thinking skills in the decisions that they take as democratic citizens. (Interview 11)

Another academic felt that studying literature:

> … actually contributes to a better society in the end. Because what you want are people who are more compassionate and more insightful and more thoughtful

about the world around them and their place in the world. And I think … that sort of exposure to another person's perspective is a very useful one because it … leads you to question yourself and that leads to growth…" (Interview 2).

Overall, academics placed a strong emphasis on the idea that the ideal literary knower was a certain kind of person (stronger social relations). It was clear that they valued certain ways of engaging or interacting with literary texts, and many academics extended this disposition to ways of engaging with knowledge and society more broadly.

In terms of the development of the valued kind of knower, there was a strong emphasis in the interview data on the idea that one needs to be immersed in the discipline to develop the valued 'gaze' of a literary scholar. This immersion could take the form of engagement with a diverse range of perspectives portrayed in the prescribed literary texts; being steeped in literary theory and scholarship; and/or repeated interaction with lecturers modelling the valued ways of engaging with literary texts or providing feedback on students' attempts at literary analysis. In relation to literary theory, one academic highlighted that it was not enough to merely know a theory and then 'impose' the theory on the literary text. Instead, you needed to read and re-read a theory until you started 'to think like that; … to look at a text like that; … to employ those theoretical principles but in a very organic sort of way' (Interview 3). Thus, it was suggested that one needs to be immersed in a theory—for example, postmodern, decolonial or feminist theory—in order to develop one's capacity to see the world and the text through those lenses.

Another academic talked about how difficult it is to teach close reading—the deep, attentive level of reading that is valued in literary studies—by giving students a study guide to work through in their own time:

> [I]n an ODL [online distance learning] environment, it is a very difficult thing to teach. I think if you are in a classroom, … you can have your slides up … and you can demonstrate what close reading is. … [T]his is just the kind of thing where students need to learn by seeing someone do it and repeating. (Interview 2)

Here, the value of learning from a disciplinary insider who models the legitimated literacy practices and provides opportunities for students to try them out is emphasised. The importance of mutual/dialogic engagements between lecturers and students was highlighted by another academic in this way:

> … an educational context should be a thought context. And a thought context should be one in which there's a meeting of minds rather than one person, like, trying to … just download all their knowledge onto paper and then make someone else upload that knowledge into their brain… (Interview 12).

Academics reflecting on ways to assist struggling students to develop their critical reading and writing abilities emphasised the importance of personalised engagement between the lecturer and the student. This could take the form of individualised contact sessions with students to help them to translate their ideas into the literary essay form and/or detailed individualised feedback on written work (sometimes involving students doing multiple drafts of the same piece of work, each time incorporating the lecturer's feedback). As one academic pointed out:

> … the core of it is they need to practise…, I need to provide feedback on what they've done, and they need to go back and practise again. …I think in terms of writing skills, it's not something you can read to learn how to do. (Interview 9)

On the whole, academics' responses suggested that teaching students to analyse literature requires time-consuming, interactional pedagogic and formative assessment practices (on behalf of the lecturer and the student) to cultivate the valued gaze and related literacy practices.

When one turns to the literature on the teaching and learning of English literary studies, one finds recommendations for pedagogies that aim to cultivate the valued gaze by providing spaces in which students can be immersed in the discipline as well as a strong emphasis on social interaction. For example, Chick (2009) recommends teaching literary analysis not as a set of lectures in which an established academic presents their own polished analyses of literary texts, as this can lead to students thinking that what is required of them is to reproduce the analysis provided by the lecturer. Instead, the classroom should be a space for students to 'participate in conversations (oral and written) evaluating and negotiating different interpretations, theories (and) critical responses' so that they can learn how knowledge is made within the discipline and thus learn to produce their own critical readings of texts (Chick, 2009: 48). Moreover, Doeke and Mead (2018) highlight that there is a long tradition of English educators and literary theorists emphasising the importance of the classroom as a social space where students can collectively engage in the interpretation of literary texts, making meaningful connections between their personal experiences and the world of the writer.

When Nussbaum (2010) argues for the value of a humanities education in developing empathetic critical thinkers and democratic citizens, she highlights that:

Teaching of the sort I recommend needs small classes, or at least sections, where students discuss ideas with one another, get copious feedback on frequent writing assignments, and have lots of time to discuss their work with instructors. (Nussbaum, 2010: 125)

Thus, these kinds of engaged and time-consuming pedagogies are recommended not just for developing literary knowers: they may be crucial to any arts or humanities curriculum that endeavours to cultivate a socially oriented criticality. This aligns with Zembylas's (2022) argument that, because a socially oriented criticality involves people's emotions and subjectivities and is not just a cerebral process, higher education programmes need to create spaces which recognise and facilitate the identity work that students need to do in order to take on sometimes radically different ways of understanding the world.

I now turn to a discussion of how neoliberal practices within the context under study served to constrain opportunities for students to develop the critical reading and writing abilities that are valued in the discipline of literary studies as well as constraining their opportunities for socially transformative learning.

## The effects of managerialism and academic casualisation on pedagogy and assessment

Managerialism was identified in the data as a significant factor causing misalignments between the underpinning values of the curriculum, and the pedagogy and assessment practices that were employed. Brown (2016: 115) explains that the

Everyday practices of managerialism involve an intensified control and disciplining of the workforce evident through strategies and surveillance tools such as performance reports and outcome measurements… The emphasis is on productivity and keeping costs low while taking power away from those who do the work and increasing the power of those in administration.

The institution under study made liberal use of managerialist practices. Staff were subject to performance management reviews three times a year, with each round involving the completion of a detailed report as well as an interview with the departmental management committee. Although multiple sets of managers were involved in this process, it usually took the department at least a week of full-time interviews to get through one round of the performance reviews for their more than seventy staff members (including both academic and administrative staff).

A recent analysis of academic staffing at South African public universities shows that academic staff at the university under study have a particularly high ratio of their work allocation devoted to administrative activities and that they also have the worst staff to student ratios in the country (Cloete et al., 2022). My interview data indicated that the multiple demands placed on academic staff members, as well as the inability of the performance management system to accurately reflect the time and effort that went into tuition activities, had the potential to shift academics' focus away from teaching. For example, in discussing strategies to assist students who were struggling with their English literature modules, one academic suggested that it might help to have one individual on a module team assigned specifically to providing individual tutoring to students:

> … it wouldn't be a popular position to be in, but that person can be given extra points in the IPMS [integrated performance management system] to help students step by step … The thing is… the IPMS doesn't recognise enough the amount of work that goes into tuition. … I don't know how it can be measured, but there should be different … ways of measuring … (Interview 13).

This comment aligns with Burke et al.'s (2022: 12) findings on the topic of pedagogical care, who showed that certain dimensions of student engagement that are key to students' positive online learning experiences—such as a sense of personal connection and developing a relationship with their lecturer—'cannot always be measured by the metrics that are commonly relied upon'. They go on to argue that, given that.

> academics are under considerable pressure to work more expediently within tight workload provisions for their teaching, the danger is that what 'matters' to students may not be adequately enacted if the workload for academics is not provided. (Burke et al., 2022: 12)

This is especially debilitating for study programmes aimed at cultivating specific knower dispositions and enabling socially transformative learning.

There was great variance in the interview data in academics' descriptions of their online engagements with students on the three third-year modules under study (at third year, academics rather than tutors are responsible for these interactions). One module consistently provided online engagements between lecturers and students as well as online workshops/activities for each of the prescribed texts on the module; an academic on one of the other modules mentioned that their team had not had as much capacity for online engagement with students over the past two years as had been the case previously (Interview 10). An academic speaking about the third module felt that more was needed in terms of student engagement but explained that staff disillusionment and burnout contributed to the limited engagement that was provided to students (Interview 6). This illustrates how regular engagement between disciplinary insiders and students, which is crucial for the cultivation of the valued literary 'gaze', can easily fall by the wayside when academics are contending with too many institutional demands. Additionally, as one academic argued, a managerialist approach of trying to squeeze as much output from staff members as possible has negative

implications for the quality of what *is* offered in terms of pedagogy and formative assessment:

> … I think there's a lot of things wrong with the way we do things. And starting with the way we treat the staff, it's very *Animal Farm*: you just have to work harder and work harder… And that doesn't work because that doesn't bring the whole person to the task. It doesn't bring a lecturer's kindness to an essay. (Interview 6)

Many academics also highlighted that the kind of detailed engagement with student writing that they recommended for developing students' critical reading and writing practices was impossible to provide on the large scale that it was needed. Thus, academics ended up helping only the handful of students who contacted them directly to request their help. The rest of the students got feedback on their work only three times per year or twice per semester, as this was the number of assignments that students were required to submit for each year or semester module. Additionally, the module teams with larger student numbers sometimes struggled to ensure that students received feedback on one set of assignments before the next assignment was due.

University management did not consult academics regarding the pedagogic requirements of their discipline and their related staffing needs when decisions were taken about student admissions and registration. The number of students assigned to each external e-tutor was also not decided in consultation with academics. At first-year level, there were 700 students assigned to each e-tutor. This calls into question the extent to which the academics or tutors could really help cultivate the literacy practices or the more socially oriented values of the discipline. As one academic pointed out in relation to teaching critical engagement:

> … if I think of second-year teaching, for example, where you have really thousands of students and you don't have the opportunity for a consistent engagement with anyone really… I can't think of any way in which one can do it, because of exactly all these important aspects of teaching our discipline. They need those things: you need modelling; you need immersion … And so, what I think then happens is that those things which at the beginning I said are potentially of value in the study of literature maybe become bracketed and eventually fall away in lieu of a variety of sort of measurable … more easily teachable sort of outcomes. (Interview 12)

The curriculum under study was also extensively impacted by the neoliberal practice of academic casualisation. Academic casualisation refers to the tendency for more and more academic staff to be employed on a temporary or part-time basis and a reduction in the number of permanently employed academic staff, with the security that comes with such a position. Brown (2016: 117) explains that:

> The aim of university administrations is to keep costs down and academic labour resources docile and compliant. Precarious faculty often feel they cannot speak out or carve out space for their research. A focus of neo-liberal labour reform is to make labour more "flexible." Flexibility is a mechanism that ensures greater profit and control while making it easier to hire and fire people.

The marked increase in academic casualisation in the global north has been the focus of much concern in scholarship (Brown, 2016; Giroux & Giroux, 2004; see, for example, Leathwood & Read, 2022). Giroux and Giroux (2004) raise the concern that creating a perpetual 'underclass' of part-time higher education workers is not only exploitative, it can also lead to the 'de-skilling' of academics since adjunct educators have little power to resist

increasing teaching and marking loads and thus can easily find themselves in a position where they have no time for research and are unable to keep up with new knowledge in their disciplines. Consequently, undergraduate students often end up in oversized classes taught by overburdened lecturers (Giroux & Giroux, 2004).

Academic casualisation is a cause for concern in the South African context as much as it is elsewhere. In 2019, only 36% of academic staff were permanently employed with the other 64% on temporary contracts (CHE, 2021). The department under study struggled with the typical issues of lack of continuity and staff insecurity related to several of the academics being employed on fixed-term contracts. Furthermore, the department dealt with an even higher level of casualisation in terms of the large numbers of part-time tutors (employed for 10 h per week) and external markers (paid per script) who performed the bulk of the engagement with students as well as the assessment on the large first- and second-year modules. Despite being involved in most of the pedagogical encounters, these people were not members of the department. For example, in 2021, the first-year literature course (with over 12,000 students) had seven full-time academic staff members, 25 external markers and 19 external e-tutors assigned to it. The fact that tutors and markers were employed on short-term contracts increased the chances of employee turnover and made it more difficult to ensure that there was a shared understanding of the focus and aims of the curriculum.

The reliance on external workers had also shifted the nature of the responsibilities of the academics who were assigned to these large modules away from fulfilling traditional academic roles. Academics performed more of a quality assurance function – moderating marking and monitoring e-tutor sites to try and ensure that students received quality engagement. This left little time to engage with students directly on these modules. The minimum qualification required for e-tutors and markers was an Honours degree in the relevant field. This meant that there was a good chance that first- and second-year students in the English department would receive tuition support from someone who had had less time to cultivate their own literary gaze than the academics who found themselves increasingly performing a quality assurance function on the modules. The tutors and markers were also paid only to perform these specific activities, so if they were interested in furthering their knowledge through research into the discipline, they had to do so on their own time and at their own expense.

Possibly the most negative effect of the 'out-sourcing' of tutoring and marking in the department was how this diminished the power and voice of the people doing the actual teaching when administrative decisions were made that impacted their work, as these people were almost completely excluded from forums where they could raise their concerns with departmental or university management. This had resulted in administrative regulations around the kinds of engagements that e-tutors could provide to students that were misaligned with the pedagogic requirements of the discipline and the kinds of knowers that the department hoped to develop. My interview with an academic who managed the e-tutors assigned to the first-year module (Interview 9) as well as an academic who had been previously employed as an e-tutor on a second-year module (Interview 8) highlighted that the tutors were severely restricted in terms of how they could engage with students. All communication with students had to happen through the online learning platform, and, at the time, the relevant administrative department had determined that e-tutors were not to post videos or podcasts for students or to set up online contact sessions. The interviewees believed that the reasons for this related to the capacity of the learning management system to store audio and video information as well as the fact that the administrative department was responsible for surveilling all e-tutor activities, and it is more time-consuming to check

audio-visual material than text-based material. These restrictions contradict many of the recommendations I discussed above regarding pedagogies for humanities curricula focused on nurturing a critical gaze.

Of course, even if e-tutors had been completely unrestricted in terms of the pedagogies they could make use of, it would have been challenging for them to engage meaningfully with the ideas of 700 students during the 10 h they were employed for per week. However, the kinds of bureaucratic decisions described above offer serious additional impediments for aligning pedagogies with the values of the discipline. And the temporary nature of the e-tutors' employment makes it unlikely that they will find ways to resist the audit culture that has been imposed on them. As shown earlier in relation to the performance management system for full-time staff, this is another example of how assurance processes that are meant to ensure quality can have unintended negative consequences for student teaching and learning.

While the curriculum under study aimed to inculcate a critical disposition towards literary texts and the worlds that they describe, the neoliberal practices of managerialism and academic casualisation served to constrain pedagogical spaces in the curriculum where students could become immersed in the discipline through engaging with disciplinary insiders and trying out the practices of literary criticism. Neoliberal practices also limited opportunities for students to form connections with their lecturers and tutors, making it unlikely that students would come to engage with disciplinary knowledge in ways that could transform the ways in which they understood themselves and how they related to society.

## Implications, limitations and recommendations

This article has shown that there are significant clashes between the kinds of pedagogies required to cultivate critical literacies through a humanities curriculum such as English literary studies and the pedagogic possibilities that are afforded within a university underpinned by neoliberal values. The findings of the paper highlight the importance of taking into account the pedagogical needs of specific disciplinary fields alongside larger political and economic forces when decisions are made regarding administration, enrolments and staffing.

It should be acknowledged that some of the findings in this paper are specific to the large distance education context under study and are therefore applicable mainly to other large distance education humanities programmes. However, as pointed out in the 'Context' section above, South African universities are generally contending with large increases in their student cohorts, as are many universities across the globe, and neoliberal practices are rampant. This means that the implications of this study will have applicability to a wide range of contexts.

My paper demonstrates how Legitimation Code Theory provides a useful language that academics in the arts and humanities can use to articulate the values of their curricula more clearly to disciplinary outsiders, and to explain how certain kinds of pedagogies are necessary to create opportunities for all students to gain epistemological and ontological access to the values of the curriculum. I believe that this will allow academics to push back more effectively against the neoliberal policies that negatively impact on teaching and learning in their fields. It is especially important for permanently employed academics to highlight their concerns in the forums available to them, since temporary staff sometimes have fewer spaces in which they can engage with university management, and their more precarious employment can make it more difficult for them to speak out. While large-scale systemic

changes will not occur overnight, it is necessary for academics to develop a culture in which they engage actively in higher education policy and management discussions. It is also important for them to point out minor changes (that will not incur extensive costs) that could improve the ways in which their disciplines are taught. For example, in the case under study, changing the ways in which tutors engage with students could bring major improvements in the pedagogy without incurring additional costs, as could employing fewer tutors for more hours on a permanent basis.

My findings provide a contextualised example of Nussbaum (2010) and Giroux and Giroux's (2004) arguments that humanities curricula cannot effectively provide socially transformative pedagogical spaces when constrained by neoliberal university practices. A limitation of this paper is that it looks only at the structural factors that impede these kinds of pedagogies. Academic and institutional cultures are likely to pose additional obstacles. Furthermore, it should be recognised that many universities, especially universities in less resourced countries, face challenges in terms of providing citizens with equitable physical/formal access to higher education spaces while working with limited resources, and this is an important priority. However, this paper shows how it is possible to provide students with 'formal access' (Morrow, 2009) to a university programme while, at the same time, institutional constraints can make it unlikely that students will gain epistemological and ontological access to the values of the curriculum. The broader implication of this paper is that, if governments and higher education institutions are serious about transforming society and developing a critical citizenry, changes are necessary in how humanities programmes are staffed and administrated.

## Declarations

**Ethics approval** This research was conducted as part of a PhD study. I received ethical clearance from Rhodes University (reference number: 2020-1575-4652) as well as the University of South Africa (reference number: 90225945 _CREC_CHS_2020) to conduct the research. All interview participants signed informed consent forms.

**Conflict of interest** The author declares no competing interests.

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