



A socially just curriculum reform agenda

Suellen Shay & Tai Peseta

To cite this article: Suellen Shay & Tai Peseta (2016) A socially just curriculum reform agenda, Teaching in Higher Education, 21:4, 361-366, DOI: [10.1080/13562517.2016.1159057](https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1159057)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1159057>



Published online: 29 Mar 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1143



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 9 View citing articles [↗](#)

EDITORIAL

A socially just curriculum reform agenda

In 2015 a social movement swept across the South African higher education sector fueled by the anger of the ‘born free’ generation, the youth born since 1994. The movement spread beyond South Africa’s borders finding solidarity in other parts of the globe. At the time of writing it does not appear to be abating. The demands are wide ranging and the tactics at times controversial. As the days, weeks, months pass the picture is likely to get messier as the movement becomes stage to a host of diverse and contradictory larger political agendas. Nonetheless, the movement has put a spotlight on the global academy that, like the society of which it is a part, is increasingly characterized by inequality. At its core the movement is calling for a more socially just higher education system. This call is profoundly dissonant to the dominant neoliberal discourses currently shaping higher education.

Against the backdrop of these discourses and the unprecedented pressures on higher education curricula, this special issue is dedicated to exploring what a socially just curriculum reform agenda might involve. The importance of this task is illustrated in Millar’s contribution (2016). She brings into sharp focus the ways in which curriculum reform is driven by instrumentalist purposes. In this case policy-makers are co-opting interdisciplinarity as the solution to the demand for graduates who can ‘solve societies’ big problems. This instrumentalism glosses over the epistemic complexities of interdisciplinarity both from the point of view of academics responsible for their design and delivery, as well as for students who may ultimately be ill-served by these narrowly driven agendas.

A social justice reform agenda requires us to approach curriculum, as Anwaruddin (2016) argues, with less of an interest in what curriculum is than what curriculum does, that is, the role that curriculum plays in relation to inequality. Bourdieu (1996) asserts the ‘double life’ of higher education as social practice. It can harden patterns of inequality or break them. It can break them by challenging the structural conditions that alienate, demean, and ultimately reduce life opportunities not only for individuals but also the communities they come from and future generations. These dynamics play out in complex and contradictory ways and there is no better evidence for this than through curricula.

The authors of this issue share a commitment to socially just curricula and a concern about the ways in which curricula are deeply implicated in the processes of producing and reproducing inequality. Each paper opens up a different vista on the contested curriculum space. The papers draw on a range of theoretical tools – Archer, Bernstein, Giroux, and Maton to name a few – to illuminate the contestation. Perhaps even more importantly they also draw on a range of voices from both inside and outside the academy. It is our privilege in this editorial to engage these authors in dialogue, working with and across the grain of each contribution trying to make sense of curriculum contestations in these turbulent times.

We draw on the political theorist Nancy Fraser’s multi-dimensional framework of social justice. Fraser (2005) defines justice as ‘parity of participation’. She writes, ‘justice

requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life' (73). This notion of 'parity of participation' at first may sound like a rather modest goal for justice. But what would it mean to have a curriculum in which all students and faculty could participate as full partners? Full participation requires, Fraser argues, dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on par with others. The dismantling of obstacles thus provides one way into the reform agenda.

Fraser identifies three kinds of obstacles: economic, cultural, and political. In terms of the economic, 'people can be impeded from full participation by economic structures that deny them the resources they need in order to interact with others as peers' (73). This is distributive injustice. In terms of the cultural dimension, people can be impeded from participation 'by institutionalized hierarchies of cultural value that deny them the requisite standing' (73). This points to inequality of status and Fraser calls this 'misrecognition'. In later work Fraser (2008) argues that the distributive and recognition dimensions are not enough. People can gain economic and cultural parity but still be under or misrepresented in the political sphere of decision-making. These dimensions need to be re-situated or re-framed through a third political dimension of representation. This requires full participation in the governance and decision-making processes. The economic, cultural, and political form a multi-dimensional framework for analyzing the ways in which people are impeded from full participation.

We now apply this framework to a critical engagement with the contributions of this special edition. Not surprisingly, given the call for papers, much of the contestation focuses on knowledge. We take distributive justice to refer to the equitable distribution of symbolic resources. So we need to ask, in what ways do our curricula give access to the powerful forms of knowledge that students require not only to successfully complete their degrees, but also to participate fully in society? This theme is one which social realists have been arguing for some time, pointing to the injustice of curricula which deny students access to powerful knowledge, that is, the specialized knowledge which enables them to engage in political, moral, and other kinds of debates (Muller 2000; Young 2008; Wheelahan 2010).

This theme is taken up in a triad of contributions by Hordern, Coleman and Winberg, Engel-Hills, Garraway, Jacobs and Winberg. These three contributions weigh into a particularly contested site of occupationally oriented curricula where the criteria for value have a dual accountability – to the disciplines and to the changing contexts of practice. Hordern makes the case for how the 'recontextualization' of such curricula – the way in which knowledge is dislocated from one context and relocated to another – may give opportunities to stakeholders to 'fake' knowledge value in ways that accord with their priorities or conceptions of value. The potential effect is to obscure or downgrade forms of inherently valuable knowledge.

Coleman gives us a close up view of this 'fake' knowledge in the classroom and its consequences for the academic literacy practices of two occupationally oriented programs in a university of technology in South Africa. These universities of technology themselves represent highly contested spaces as they compete for the forms of cultural and social capital valued in the field of higher education. Coleman argues that the institutions themselves bear the 'inequality markers of the past' that continue to operate in constraining ways. In the same kind of institutional space, Winberg et al. provide a model for how engineering curricula can explicitly enable students to gain access and transition through the

epistemological shifts or ‘waves’ between abstract theory and the complex problems of practice. They argue that controlling this ‘semantic wave’ is central to a transformative approach to curriculum, and to giving students access to powerful knowledge.

The role of curriculum in the redistribution of powerful knowledge is critical. It is a necessary condition of any curriculum reform agenda especially in developing countries. Yet increasingly, it is a global phenomenon as public schooling systems fail to prepare the majority of school-leavers for tertiary education.

However, the current student movement (and other social movements of the 1960s and 1970s) reminds us that the redistribution of symbolic resources – access to disciplinary knowledge – is not enough. The very interventions that intend to redistribute may misrecognize the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’. Reform calls for a critical analysis of the ways in which curricula misrecognize particular forms of cultural capital and values as normal and/or universal. This kind of misrecognition, as Luckett shows, goes further than individual stigma. It constitutes ‘positions’ which enable or disable individual and collective agency. The misrecognition of institutions, students and faculty in ways that challenge or perpetuate injustice is another theme found in the contributions by Luckett, Abbas, Ashwin and McLean and Anwaruddin.

Luckett uses Archer and post-colonial scholarship to expose the layers of structural and cultural conditioning that meet students as they climb the steep steps of entry into a South African historically white university. She argues that these conditions position students in particular ways with some awarded the full status of ‘citizens’, others awarded lower status as ‘subjects’. Indeed all black students she argues will ‘invariably experience a cultural system and curriculum that devalues and negates their home languages, cultures, histories and identities – thus positioning them as culturally deficient’. She critiques the ‘affirmative’ curriculum interventions that position black students as ‘objects of “disadvantage” and subjects of adaptation in need of development’.

Anwaruddin extends the theme to a fascinating critique of the field of Second Language Teaching Education (SLTE) where he argues that the curriculum works as an ‘ideological apparatus’ through its silence. ‘Despite the fact that thousands of students are learning English in conflict-ridden contexts and that they carry with them (post)memories of violence, the curriculum of SLTE is alarmingly silent about preparing teachers to deal with violence-conflict-peace issues.’ To overcome this, he calls for a re-imagining of SLTE curriculum in light of ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ and proposes a set of principles for ‘disrupting the silences’ that misrecognize and may serve to perpetuate violence.

Abbas et al. explore the potential of curriculum (and pedagogy) to transform students’ perspectives and further to transform society. Their study focuses specifically on the inclusion or exclusion of feminist knowledge in the undergraduate sociology curriculum of four different English universities. They are interested in what ways the acquisition of this specialized disciplinary knowledge can transform students’ ways of viewing the world. The task, they argue, is to ‘counter the impact of malestream knowledge, which is represented as universal but provides partial perspectives on the world’s problems, creating and maintaining women’s disadvantages’. Their study surfaces a range of challenges in embedding feminist knowledge in the curriculum creating an uneven transformation across male and female undergraduates, ultimately impacting on whether graduates contribute to, or challenge, gender inequality in the wider society.

To re-cap so far: to the extent to which curriculum maldistributes powerful knowledge and misrecognizes knowers, it perpetuates inequalities and social injustice. Fraser adds to these economic and cultural dimensions of justice a third political dimension – representation – which necessitates a re-framing. This is best understood in Fraser’s distinction between affirmative and transformative approaches or interventions. It is possible to design curricula intended to redistribute the educational goods, to level the playing field, so to speak. It is also possible to design curricula that recognize students in ways that are more respectful of their rich capital and true potential. These may however simply constitute ‘affirmative’ rather than ‘transformative’ reforms. The latter will simply enlarge the ‘frame’, for example, more students are given access to the educational goods and more students feel included, but the frame itself is not challenged. (In fact some ‘affirmative’ interventions may result in the opposite of the intended effect leaving students feeling stigmatized, a point made by Lockett.) Transformative approaches on the other hand recognize that the frame itself may be an injustice. The framing, and its underlying assumptions, misrepresents the problem leading to solutions that may inadvertently reproduce injustice. In such cases, the intervention needs to be critically reviewed and if necessary dismantled.

A further theme advanced in the special issue – offered more tentatively – points to clues as to what the re-framing might look like. It requires that we go back and engage more critically with the notion of ‘powerful knowledge’. The point that there are more or less valuable forms of knowledge is accepted. Beyond formal access to higher education, curricula must provide students with epistemic access, that is, access to ‘better and more reliable explanations of the world and abstract ways of thinking’ (Clegg 2016). But is it possible that this notion of powerful knowledge has its own ‘blind spot’? Maton (2014) puts it succinctly – knowledge is always about something and by someone. The social realists in their zeal to defend (and rightly so) the ‘about something’ have perhaps occluded the ‘by someone’. Following on from Fraser, the ‘who’ (not just the ‘what’) raises the political dimension of justice – who is representing whom in the design and delivery of our curricula. The question of *whose* knowledge is important after all and not inconsequential to notions of powerful knowledge.

Clegg (this issue) takes up the issue explicitly in a careful engagement with the social realist argument (which she supports). She references previous social movements of the mid-twentieth century – feminism in particular but other influences as well – where knowledge outside of the academy fundamentally challenged the ‘sacred’ knowledge of the inside. The feminist movement highlighted ‘serious flaws and absences in existing scholarship’ (xxx). These historical reference points, she argues, are important reminders in our present global context where ‘knowledge making practices and actors (are) often excluded from debates about knowledge’. This is a clear illustration, in our view, of Fraser’s representational dimension of justice. Knowledge inside the academe, in the form of disciplines and professions, cannot and should not lay sole claim to the production of powerful knowledge. She writes,

we need to consider the sort of knowledge, engagement, and opportunities that are open to newer actors, both educators and students, especially if debates ... encompass the global ‘south’ and are not confined to the global ‘north’. Ultimately we ‘cannot ignore demands for curriculum reform from new actors in higher education’. (xx)

Nowhere are the demands from ‘new actors’ more evident than in Lockett’s paper which takes us to the restless students of the ‘post-colonial university’ in the ‘south’. Other actors are implicit in Anwaruddin’s article and will include, for example, a new generation of Syrian immigrants seeking full participation in European higher education institutions. Other new actors will be the growing numbers of academic colleagues who have relocated by choice or by necessity to other parts of the globe, for example, those who come to South Africa from the rest of the continent. In what ways are they able to participate fully in the current debates about ‘decolonizing’ the curriculum? In what ways is their wisdom and experience in other, older post-colonial contexts drawn on as a resource? These are but a few ways in which the ‘who’ of curriculum reform in higher education needs to be re-framed.


In conclusion, these themes demarcate at least a few of the many contemporary imperatives of curriculum reform in higher education. A socially just curriculum will need to pay attention to the redistribution of knowledge – ensuring formal and epistemic access. As social realists have been arguing for nearly two decades, distributive justice will only be served when curricula offer students access to powerful knowledge. While significant headway has been made in mapping out empirically what this looks like particularly in professional and occupational fields, those most vulnerable to ‘fake’ knowledge, more work needs to be done. Particularly important, because there is less of it, is to follow the knowledge ‘relay’ (as Bernstein calls it) into the classroom as Coleman does to gain insight into its pedagogic effects. Much of this work uses and extends Bernstein’s theorization of knowledge. Many of these studies draw on the more fine-grained analytical tools of Legitimation Code Theory to expose the underlying principles (or codes) that constitute knowledge practices. As is evident in this special issue, this is a thriving body of scholarship, much of it conducted by scholars who are insiders to the disciplines and professions they are researching.

What is particularly exciting about this special edition is the way in which its contributions remind us that any socially just curriculum reform agenda, in addition to ‘recentering knowledge’, must also ‘bring the knower back in’. This is a knower who is challenging the misrecognitions of our curricula; these knowers – include students, academics, and those outside the academy – who demand full participation in the reform process. Each of these papers in one way or another gives an insight into how we might embark on this challenging task.

References

- Anwaruddin, S. M. 2016. “Contesting the Violence of Tylerism: Toward a Cosmopolitan Approach to the Curriculum of Second Language Teacher Education.” *Teaching in Higher Education*. doi:10.1080/13562517.2016.1155550.
- Bourdieu, P. 1996. *The State Nobility*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Clegg, S. 2016. “The Necessity and Possibility of Powerful ‘Regional’ Knowledge: Curriculum Change and Renewal.” *Teaching in Higher Education*. doi:10.1080/13562517.2016.1157064.
- Fraser, N. 2005. “Reframing Justice in a Globalizing World.” *New Left Review* 36: 69–88.
- Fraser, N. 2008. *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Maton, K. 2014. *Knowledge and Knowers: Towards a Realist Sociology of Education*. London: Routledge.

- Victoria Millar. 2016. "Interdisciplinary Curriculum Reform in the Changing University." *Teaching in Higher Education*. doi:10.1080/13562517.2016.1155549.
- Muller, J. 2000. *Reclaiming Knowledge: Social Theory, Curriculum and Education Policy*. London: Routledge.
- Wheelahan, L. 2010. *Why Knowledge Matters in Curriculum*. London: Routledge.
- Young, M. 2008. *Bringing Knowledge Back in: From Social Constructivist to Social Realism in the Sociology of Education*. London: Routledge.

Suellen Shay
Centre for Higher Education Development, University of Cape Town, South Africa
 suellen.shay@uct.ac.za

Tai Peseta