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11th December 2018

Comments on Curriculum Change Working Group Framework document

The Curriculum Change Working Group (WG) urge us 'not only to critique' their Framework document (p. 13). However, it was circulated under the Deputy Vice-chancellor for Teaching and Learning's letter-head, has been made public on UCT's website, and will be submitted to UCT Senate for approval in 2019. The chances are therefore very high that it will be adopted, officially or unofficially, (i) as a statement of UCT's pedagogical values, (ii) as guidelines for lecturers, or (iii) as binding on departments. In light of this, comments must first and foremost make the case for why this document should not take on any of the above official or unofficial roles at UCT.

My principal concerns are:

- The theoretical assumptions of the WG document (including about the concept of intellectual decolonization) are more ambitious, and consequently more restrictive and contested, than is appropriate in university-wide guidelines for pedagogy
- Parts of the document appear to endorse a general hierarchy of epistemic authority based on a person's position within intersecting matrices of social domination, even hinting at a colour bar for teaching positions at certain levels and in certain areas
- It creates a clear structural conflict of interest in UCT governance when the Academic Freedom Committee is chaired by the same person who has chaired the WG, given that the WG document manifestly raises many academic freedom concerns

Theoretical framework

The WG's investigations and conclusions are based on a specific theoretical framework, or combination of frameworks, from the social sciences.

In the first place, the WG have drawn on a blend of world systems theory (Wallerstein) and existential phenomenology (Heidegger, Sartre, Fanon, Gordon), as adopted and built upon by Decolonial Studies scholars such as R. Grosfoguel, W. Mignolo, S. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, and T. Sithole in recent decades. In the second place, they have drawn on the theory of contemporary societies as characterised by intersecting matrices of domination which is influential in Critical Race Theory and Gender Studies, and is anthologised in books such as *Race, Class & Gender: An Anthology* (Andersen & Collins).

The empirical studies they conducted were also informed by another body of theory, R. Bhaskar's Critical Realism, but this has less bearing on the points I wish to make.

All the currents of theoretical work mentioned above are interesting and, in my view, worth reading and thinking about. I think it is good that they are researched and taught at UCT. However, whether they should be presupposed or advocated in an official statement of UCT's approach to curriculum and teaching is another matter. I don't believe they should be.

A narrow, restrictive approach

It is striking that a document which claims to favour ‘an inclusive or pluriversal approach to knowledge’ (p. 46) should be so restrictive and exclusive in its approach to its master concept: intellectual decolonization.

Contrary to the impression given by the WG, many theorists who have written on intellectual decolonization do not endorse world systems theory and existential phenomenology. For example, K. Wiredu* has developed a model of intellectual decolonization for philosophy in particular which involves locating the residue of past political and religious indoctrination in contemporary beliefs, and using indigenous African languages as a heuristic to home in on problems and propositions whose status (e.g. non-trivial or *a priori* true) is deceptively portrayed when expressed in a European language (e.g. English, French). A. Appiah works with a comparable model of intellectual decolonization in *In My Father’s House*.

Like many readers of the document, these Ghanaian theorists of intellectual decolonization would not endorse the WG’s use of the conceptual repertoire of existential phenomenology, with its idiosyncratic sense of ‘ontology’. They would not connect ontology (the study of what is or exists) to the concept *being-in-the-world* (Heidegger) or *lived experience* (Dilthey, Sartre). They would, I think, be as thoroughly sceptical as I am about whether it could literally be true that some people alive today occupy ‘the Zone of Being’, while others occupy the ‘Zone of non-Being’ (p. 22). If pressed, they might introduce some different technical terms, and declare ontology the study of everything which is the value of a bound variable.

I am not arguing that the WG should have chosen a different theoretical framework, or that all UCT’s engagements with intellectual decolonization should be informed by Appiah and Wiredu. On the contrary, in an official university document about UCT’s approach to curriculum and teaching such theoretical choices should be left open. Academics should be empowered to explore the various approaches which they encounter in their reading and conversation with others in their discipline and across disciplinary boundaries. UCT top management ought surely to remain neutral as to whether existence precedes essence.

Grand, homogenizing narratives

The WG document claims to supply ‘a counter narrative to previously-held essentialist and reductionist positions’ (p. 13). But this counter-narrative is itself often reductive and dogmatic, restricting space for nuanced and open-minded teaching rather than opening it up.

The WG broadly endorse historical narratives formulated by N. Maldonado-Torres and R. Grosfoguel. They particularly endorse what they call ‘the Latin-American perspective on coloniality’, summarised as ‘a notion that reveals a pervasive western-led mode of civilization and modernity, that continued beyond colonisation, and sustains racism as an organizing principle that structures all of the multiple hierarchies of the world system’ (p. 20). The WG take ‘coloniality’ to involve ‘Orientalism’, which on their understanding means that ‘the West (the Occident) exists ontologically because of the “other”, the “Orient”’ (p. 15). One upshot of these phenomena is, according to the WG, ‘an institutional culture’ in a ‘Westernised University’ such as UCT ‘where bodies of a particular kind (white, and generally male) are perceived as trustworthy, and are never to be challenged’ (p. 17). Hard granules of truth can, no doubt, be extracted from these sweeping claims; but I think it’s clear there is a great deal of room for arguing (in teaching and research) that things were, and are, not quite so simple.

One gets a flavour of the Procrustean mutilations required by such reductive narratives in the WG’s discussion of the philosopher R. Descartes. On p. 20 we are told Descartes’ deduction ‘I think, therefore I am’ is ‘in fact built on “I conquered, therefore, I am” or “I

* ‘The Need for Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy’, in Mosupyo & Ramose (ed.), *The Development of Thought in Pan Africanism*

possess, therefore I am””, and that it ‘projects the only legitimate thinker as white, heterosexual, able-bodied and male’. This is a bold reading of Descartes’ *Meditations*, but one which receives no support from his text. For a start, Descartes’ dualism commits him to holding that thinkers are essentially *un*-bodied—let alone *able*-bodied (or sexed, raced, etc.).

An additional reductive and dogmatic aspect of the WG document is its assumption that current curricula at UCT are a consequence and reflection of power relations, pure and simple. It speaks of ‘curricula conceived in ways that perpetuate global systems of power’ (p. 47), and concludes that only once its approach is implemented will ‘doing knowledge ... no longer simply be about doing power’ (p. 51). We should always be on the alert for instances where ideas reflect dominant interests rather than being sensitive to truth. However, the WG do not provide anything like sufficient evidence to back up blanket statements like the one just cited, which inform the entire Framework document.

Troubling implications

The WG document endorses and then presupposes some very distinctive theoretical claims. If the document were to be endorsed as a statement of UCT’s pedagogical values and/or as binding on departments and staff, what would the implications be?

Take the case of a lecturer who taught a course on African history which stopped short of endorsing the idea that ‘the Euro-American world [is] regarded as the “Zone of Being” and the non-Euro-American world experienced as the “Zone of Non-Being”’ (p. 20). Or an epistemology lecture course which understood Descartes’ ‘I think, therefore I am’ as meaning something like ‘Because I am aware of thinking going on here, I can be sure that, whatever else (such as my sex, sexual orientation, disability status and racialization) I may be deceived about, there is some “I” which exists here’. Or a module on the sociology of knowledge which didn’t discount the possibility that at least some of the curriculum at a university such as UCT takes the form that it does because it reflects the truth about the world insofar as some of our most reliable methods of investigation disclose this, rather than because of power relations and a will ‘to mimic that which resembles Empire’ (p. 50).

Would these lecture courses be incompatible with UCT’s teaching values? Could students legitimately bring complaints against these lecturers, citing an official curriculum guidance document, for teaching outside the pedagogical restrictions endorsed by UCT? I would find it troubling if any UCT policy document answered these questions in the affirmative.

Endorsing questionable hierarchies

Discussing their engagement on Hiddingh Campus, the WG record that ‘students felt that while white academics had expertise in specific areas, they could not claim authority on blackness, black pain, African ideology, course material and productions, or as overseers of curriculum’ (p. 40).

It is perhaps not completely clear how broad an exclusion is envisaged here, and the WG report this recommendation without saying whether or not they endorse it. However, it does chime with the WG’s statements that the WG itself ‘needed to be black-led’ (p. 4) and that its being ‘black-led’ helped ‘safeguard the legitimacy of its work’ (p. 36). The WG don’t make explicit to what extent they believe these claims would generalise (e.g. to courses, departments, other task-teams of the university). But it is noteworthy that in these statements the Hiddingh students and the WG go beyond endorsing diversity, supporting a policy of preference for redress purposes, or advocating removing barriers to demographic representativity. Rather, the suggestion in these statements is that UCT positions at certain

levels and in certain areas should be *restricted* to people of a particular demographic category, due to the authority/legitimacy associated with different demographic categories.

The Hiddingh students' recommendation is probably not based directly on a nationalist or racist ideology. Rather, the context indicates it is based on the idea that personal experience of forms of disadvantage, oppression or domination is what makes one epistemically authoritative in particular areas. This idea is prevalent in some contemporary work in Gender Studies and Critical Race Theory. The WG endorse a (relativist-sounding) version of this idea when they say that 'marginalised people' need to 'take a central place' in universities, and 'engage in research and teaching through their own epistemologies', so that the world is no longer seen 'through colonial eyes' (p. 26).

There is indeed some plausibility to the idea that in certain areas of social relations, those who have first-hand experience of, or have been on the receiving end of, particular phenomena will tend to be more proactive and effective at articulating the nature of those phenomena. However, one cannot justifiably make the leap from this observation to a general theory about the ability of different categories of people to attain and communicate knowledge. The enlightening impact of 'lived experience' should not be overstated. A university, of all places, must not lose sight of the access to truth which systematic study of first-hand accounts, constructing and testing the coherence of reasoned theoretical explanations, and testing hypotheses against bodies of evidence, can provide. Practitioners' ability to attain and communicate knowledge in an academic field should be assessed on the basis of individual accomplishments, not inferred from highly speculative general theories about the epistemic impact of intersecting matrices of power on categories of person.

Given that the WG document, including the Hiddingh students' statement, has been in the public domain for several months, it would be helpful for UCT to make clear it has no plans to introduce a colour bar for teaching positions either at certain levels—e.g. course design and curriculum oversight—or in certain areas—e.g. teaching of African writers and theorists.

Governance issues

Status of the Framework document

It would have been helpful for the Deputy Vice-chancellor for Teaching and Learning to specify the potential role or roles which the WG document was being considered for, when she circulated it for comment. A draft binding code of teaching conduct would need to be reviewed in a different way from a non-binding statement of values or a discussion document. It would be helpful if the status of the document could be clarified as soon as possible. If it remains public on the UCT website with a thoroughly ambiguous status, as now, it might well start being taken as a binding code of conduct by some lecturers, or being invoked by students when they make complaints about courses, even though it was not necessarily intended to be used in those ways.

Conflict of interest

It strikes me as a problem that the Chair of the Curriculum Change Working Group is also Chair of the UCT Academic Freedom Committee. A body providing direction on how academics ought to change their teaching is inherently likely to raise concerns about encroachments on academic freedom. Even if the Chair moderated discussions on this topic in the Academic Freedom Committee with absolute integrity, there would be legitimate concern from those not privy to discussions that issues arising from the WG document and the WG's future activities were not receiving adequate scrutiny. I think it would be helpful if UCT clarified how this structural conflict of interest in governance is going to be addressed.