

Chapter 10

Connecting Higher Education Learning Spaces in a Blended Zululand Teaching and Learning Ecology

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to conceptualize a blended teaching and learning ecology in a South African institution of higher education which is grappling with issues of relevance, equity, and calls to decolonize the curriculum. This case study draws on past experiences and prior learning in higher education and suggests that a good teacher needs to understand the diversity of their students—how they develop and learn and that most “deep” learners actively construct and transform their own knowledge for their specific needs. Acknowledgement of this diversity also highlights that students from different backgrounds can have different perceptions, beliefs, and ethics, which all act as filters of information and thus learning. The epistemological and methodological foundations, together with the effect of participant diversity and proposed pedagogy, will contribute to dialogue on holistic curriculum development and deeper learning spaces in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

It can be argued that the roots of higher education and its scholars were largely responsible for establishing the morals, cultures, economies and religions of many different civilisations which embraced the founding principles i.e. striving to acquire, question and create new knowledge in order to resolve problems in society. Higher education and the evolution of the university is clearly outlined by Barnett (1990) who points out that originally the Greek idea of higher education lacked the institutional framework, but existed in a relatively unadulterated form. This can be demonstrated by some of Plato’s dialogues on developing solid community leaders, including how pupils can use an open and critical discourse with a master to

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acquire a solid understanding of the body of knowledge being debated (Barnett, 1990). The outcome of this early account of higher education would seem to be for the 'elite' to achieve self-determination in the trilogy of body (health), mind (academy) and spirit (religious conviction).

The medieval idea of higher education constituted a slightly more inclusive approach, which resulted in large communities of students and teachers who jointly participate in the formation of self-governing communities of scholars (Barnett, 1990). These self-governing communities were largely given academic freedom from the rest of society and degrees were awarded to graduate scholars who could then teach universally at recognised academies (Barnett, 1990). Newman's ideas on the 'scope and nature of a university' date back to 1852. He proposed that knowledge generated from the various sciences of life should be housed in one university to create the realisation that the combination of these fields would foster an understanding of the wholeness and interdependence of the world and its scholars (Barnett, 1990). Newman believed that universities' education should be 'liberal' in the knowledge they imparted and that knowledge gained could be an 'end in itself' and not necessarily connected to the achievement of physical and personal needs such as wealth, power and fame, which Newman believed was beyond the scope of discussion of a university (Barnett, 1990). Newman's holistic view of the utility of higher education suggested that intellectual knowledge was the start but that this should then be combined with physical experience and reflection in order for the knowledge holder to become truly wise, capable and self-empowered in that domain (Barnett, 1990). Karl Jaspers' idea of a university included four key performance areas including research, teaching, a professional education and the transmission of a particular kind of culture (Barnett, 1990).

While Jaspers and Newman had similar ideas, that a university should be liberally whole in nature, Jaspers identified that the fragmentation of different disciplines now required their own academic cultures in order for them to validate the truth (Barnett, 1990). For example, the humanities and the natural sciences often use different paradigms as their foundations to research, which creates different epistemologies. Jaspers also acknowledged the role of the university to transform graduates into 'whole' people who are able to criticise themselves and/or their surroundings in order to contribute to the social, political and economic development of modern society (Barnett, 1990). This was echoed more recently by Kerr in Cloete and Maassen (2015). He observes the pluralistic roles of a university in society including production (global graduates, research) consumption (general education, community of practice) and citizenship (democratisation, socialisation). Drawing from Kerr and Castells, Cloete and Maassen (2015) go on to identify four key roles of a university. Firstly, historically, universities promoted ideologies of theology school values, for example at Oxford and Harvard, and social legitimation justifying western dominance in the colonial realm (Cloete & Maassen, 2015). Secondly, the selection of the political and/or socio-economic elite in the colonial times, and more recently the academic elite characterised for example by the Ivy League institutions in the United States (Cloete & Maassen, 2015). This criterion has changed dramatically with the massification of higher education — driven by demand and the growth of service industries and the knowledge economy (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). Scott in Cloete and Maassen (2015) showed that massification is not just about the expansion of access and participation; it is also associated with changes in socio-economic, cultural and innovation landscapes. Thus the third role identified for universities was the training of the labour force, which differed from the previous process of reproduction or transmission of 'accepted' knowledge to 'learning to learn' and the individual's acquisition of the ability to change and adapt to many different technologies and occupations in the course of one's working life (Cloete & Maassen, 2015). The fourth role of universities originated from the German research university model in the second half of the 18th century which was

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