

Chapter One

Epistemic Values in Curriculum Transformation

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Introduction

During a recent job interview, an applicant, when asked about curriculum change, said that ‘Trying to change a curriculum is like trying to move a cemetery.’ This marvellous analogy, intuitively plausible and illuminating, is worth a pause, as we launch into yet another discussion about Social Science curriculum reform.

For most people cemeteries have special significance; they are sacred, not merely places in which we deposit the physical remains of the dead, and humility and reverence are the proper attitudes to adopt when we enter them. For some people a cemetery is holy ground, and the desecration of graves or gravestones is a most serious violation, much more serious, for instance, than drawing graffiti on the walls of the university. Cemeteries are the repositories of precious traditions and memories, some personal, some communal, and they are links not only to past relationships and shared lives but also, for some people, to life hereafter. Cemeteries are historical, memorials of human lives once lived, places in which to reflect on the brutal fact that human beings have limited lifespans, but also to wonder at the fragility and preciousness of human lives and the achievements of departed heroes. If we think of cemeteries in Belgium and Flanders, with thousands of identical white crosses, in impeccable neat rows, each standing for the life of a healthy young person cut short by conflicts not of their own making, then we might reflect on the ways in which cemeteries can be texts from which we might learn the harsh lessons of history. But even ordinary cemeteries are symbols of the pervasive power of history in human life and the importance of the sacred to us, even if we left religion behind in our rebellious adolescence. When I lived in London during the 1960s, one obligatory pilgrimage was to Karl Marx’s grave in Highgate Cemetery. Perhaps in times to come Zwilde Cemetery

will achieve a similar status, with people visiting Govan Mbeki's grave as a way of honouring one of the pre-eminent heroes of the victorious struggle against apartheid.

Moving a cemetery is always difficult and problematic – always characterised by passionate conflict, anxiety and resistance. Even in cases where there appear to be overwhelming practical justifications to do so it is always contentious. Why is this? The explanation lies in what I have already said about cemeteries, and the significance they hold in our lives. Cemeteries are sacred – they are one of our most potent symbolic bridges between the past and the present – and to move them is to dishonour the dead.

The interesting thing about this is that reasons of this kind cannot be weighed in the same scales as the reasons we might have for wanting to build a new road or a housing estate for the poor. The projects of building a new road or a housing estate might be pragmatically incompatible, and could be in direct competition with each other for, say, money or land. Building a new road and moving a cemetery, however, might be pragmatically incompatible with each other, but there is nothing like direct competition between them. A competition presupposes some neutral rules or criteria in terms of which the competition can be adjudicated. But there are no such common rules or criteria in the case of trying to decide whether to move a cemetery in order to build a new road. Those who want to preserve the cemetery probably see the road builders as basing their view on a shallow and short-sighted form of instrumental reasoning which, although fashionable, ignores a precious dimension of our conception of human life. Those who want to build the new road are inclined to see those who want to preserve the cemetery as irrational. The two sets of reasons are incompatible with each other; they are 'incommensurable' in the sense that there is no higher principle – of, say, finance, rationality or justice – in terms of which we could weigh them in the same scales.

Let's now turn our attention to the analogy with curriculum and changing a curriculum. For some people a traditional curriculum is indeed held as sacred, with humility and reverence as the proper attitudes when we enter them. Curricula, at least some of them, are also seen by some acolytes as repositories of precious memories and traditions, as texts from which we can learn the lessons of history. Curricula especially, but not only, in the Social Sciences are bridges between the past and the future. And, any traditional curriculum will, in some measure, be a celebration of the work of those currently understood as the heroes in the relevant field. Opponents of a curriculum are likely to say it is little more than the storehouse of dead texts, or of the work of dead white men – such as Emile Durkheim or Max Weber – whose power is hereby extended beyond the grave.

Changing a curriculum is always a difficult and problematic project – one likely to arouse conflict, passion, anxiety and resistance. And this is likely to be the case even when there appear to be overwhelming practical reasons for doing so. The endless debate about curriculum change is a symptom that we are here faced with conflicts in which the contending parties are appealing to incommensurable sets of reasons which make it impossible to reach a consensual decision – there is no win-win solution, as at least one of the rival parties will have to abandon their principles.

There are additional considerations that we can add for why curriculum change is difficult. One of these is that any current curriculum embodies a set of intellectual habits and routines which have become comfortable for those who teach that curriculum. At a deeper psychological level, committed teachers' self-images and professional identities, and their fundamental convictions about the values and standards of academic practice, are likely to be deeply embrangled with the curriculum they teach. To ask them to change the curriculum, in effect, is to ask them to develop a new professional identity and probably also, in their eyes, to fatally compromise their standards, and to abandon their arduously acquired understanding of the disciplines they teach and the significance of their academic practice. Unlike simply changing one's clothes, these are far from easy kinds of change to accomplish, and the more so if the reasons offered for change seem to be irrelevant to what they understand to be the purpose of academic work and the defining mission in their professional lives. As Thomas Khun once remarked: a paradigm shift sometimes has to await the death of the old professors.

But not all curriculum change is as traumatic as this implies. As in the case of any changes, there are many degrees and rates of change. Some changes are merely cosmetic, others are more radical; some changes are accomplished gradually, and others more swiftly. These variations apply too in the case of curriculum change. Those who call for 'curriculum transformation' usually have in mind a profound and abrupt change of the curriculum – perhaps on the scale of a political revolution. In a sense it is not that they aim to move the cemetery, but to eliminate it; not to reform the curriculum but to replace it with something completely different. There are three comments we can make about such a radical suggestion.

First, a radical change of a curriculum is much more difficult to accomplish than might be imagined by the revolutionaries. One reason for this can be found in debates about what has been called 'the hidden curriculum'. Over the past decades, curriculum theory, influenced by a theory of ideology,¹ has been shaped by a well-known distinction between the explicit and the 'hidden curriculum'. The explicit (or official) curriculum is constructed around formally stated content or outcomes,

such as the 'knowledge, skills and attitudes' of the National Qualifications Framework. What learners actually learn, however, includes much more than that. It also includes '... the unstated norms, values, and beliefs that are transmitted to students through the underlying structure of meaning ...' (Giroux as quoted in Muller, 2000: 18). A curriculum, in other words, embodies a tacit framework of meaning, a grammar, seldom explicitly spelt out, which is below the level of articulated consciousness but which shapes what is learnt in far more profound ways than the explicitly formulated outcomes or content. There is a clear analogy with learning a language. When we learn a language we learn its vocabulary and rules of syntax, but we also learn its grammar which, although it might not be formally spelt out in the contexts of acquisition, provides the generative frame for being able to speak and understand the language. To change the grammar of a curriculum is far more difficult than merely changing the titles, topics, content or internal sequence of our learning programmes.

Secondly, other than at a rhetorical or polemical level, there is no direct link between the degree and speed of curriculum change, and its significance or importance. It is possible that gradual changes, each relatively minor, could be at least as significant as some major and rapid transformation. Indeed 'curriculum transformation' always runs the risk of throwing out the baby with the bath water. Part of the reason for this lies in the inherent conservatism of practices, and the extent to which our current practices are the basis for intelligibility. It is far from clear that the dramatic introduction of vaunted transformative *Curriculum 2005* into the South African schooling system has achieved any improvement in schooling for the majority of learners.

Thirdly, and this follows from the previous comment, curriculum change is not by definition beneficial, and, as social scientists, we need to be wary of the rhetorical force of words such as 'reform' and 'transformation'. The tendency to think that any change must be good no doubt arises out of bitter experiences of colonialism and apartheid, and the liberation struggles against those forms of oppression. During those struggles the view flourished, understandably, that any change was better than what we then had. This view tended to be transferred into the sphere of curriculum change, perhaps because of the significant role played by students in that struggle. But, on sober reflection, it is clear that only some kinds of curriculum change represent an improvement. The climate of the times inclines us to be blind to the principle: If it ain't broke,² don't fix it.

But whatever we mean by 'curriculum change', do we in reality have any choice about whether to change our higher education Social Science curricula?

There is an important sense in which we do not have a choice: the whole terrain has shifted and bulldozers have already moved in and are busy obliterating the cemetery. There are forces abroad, especially in our post-colonial, post-apartheid, post-modern historical situation, that make it extremely difficult to resist the demand to change our curricula. Those tempted to resist are digging their own graves, or are likely to be seen as dead wood which needs to be cleared to allow the new growth to flourish.

We can classify the bulldozers into three broad categories: the market, political pressure and epistemological change. The first two have their source outside of the academy, and the last, at least in some degree, from inside. Bulldozers are immensely powerful machines and, in the words of an erstwhile South African president, we seem to be faced with Hobson's choice: 'adapt or die'. If we ignore these forces we may well find ourselves rotting away in an abandoned cemetery.

Vast literatures, familiar to this audience, cluster around debates about these three kinds of forces, and their impact on the academy and its curricula. Here we can very briefly remind ourselves of some of the outlines of these bitter debates.

Higher education is enormously expensive, it takes a significant slice of the education budgets of all societies, and this is especially so in societies such as ours still struggling to keep poverty and destitution at bay and to get on to a productive development path. Even within state education budgets, the slice for higher education has to compete with the slices for basic and secondary education. State funding for higher education has shrunk significantly over the past few decades, and higher education institutions, in order to survive, are increasingly being forced into competing in the market place. Students get redescribed as 'consumers'; the 'knowledge' which it is the job of higher education to 'distribute', becomes a 'product' which can be bought and sold; and we need to 'package' our programmes in attractive ways. In the words of Johan Muller, tertiary education institutions are forced into developing '... market responsive curricula, which are "targeted" and "niched" to capture some or other "market segment" and to respond to some or other market need ...' (Muller, 2000: 105).

But we can notice here how the deeper conflicts about curriculum change are neatly sidelined by the presupposition that financial considerations override all others. The 'bottom line' is treated as the final court of appeal, rather than merely a boundary of possibility, and other kinds of considerations are not even allowed a hearing. Any cemetery is movable or removable if there are strong enough financial incentives to do so! The model of 'the market', which is the anchor for this kind of argument, is naive. In particular, the assumption that 'the market' satisfies the

pre-existing desires of consumers completely ignores the obvious ways in which markets manufacture needs and desires as opposed to merely responding to them. And another qualification must be made: students are not 'customers', and the goods of education cannot be 'bought'. Real customers buy already manufactured goods, and, apart from the effort of shopping and making the money to shop with, they do not have to work to acquire them.

Moreover, our brave new democracies generate enormous political pressure for the transformation of our societies to be underwritten by the transformation of education, and its curricula. Participatory democracy is the fashion of the day, uncomfortably harnessed to stakeholder politics. Higher education institutions must now be publicly accountable, accountable to their stakeholders – which includes all interest groups who might conceivably be affected by what those institutions do. The 'governance structures' – such as Institutional Forums and Councils – must be representative of all stakeholders, and must be conceived of as the chief governing bodies of the institutions. But changing the governance structures is not enough.

The actual substance of the teaching and research programmes of higher education needs to change or be changed to reflect our new political reality. Teaching and research activities need to be demystified, and made transparent to all stakeholders, the Eurocentric curriculum must be got rid of, and we need to acknowledge that we are in Africa with its own alternative forms of knowledge. Academic freedom might have been available in the cemetery, but there are economic and political reasons why we can no longer afford it. The political reasons revolve around the ways in which the so-called 'academic freedom' of the past simply reinforced and perpetuated the systems of oppression of colonialism and its virulent offspring, apartheid. Academics need to understand that whatever their intentions and self-images, they were the ideological props of oppression, the reproductive organs of non-democratic regimes. Education, including higher education and especially the Social Sciences branch of it, needs to be democratised. We need to accept that the state cannot afford to fund irrelevant teaching programmes and research projects. Access, transparency, relevance and accountability will become the watchwords of higher education, and its curricula will be forced to change to accommodate to this new political reality.

We might note that if the kind of knowledge in which higher education institutions deal could be made transparent then there would be no need for three- and four-year degree programmes, except perhaps for the incredibly stupid and dull. And 'access' would be merely a formal matter of changing our admissions

policies and getting rid of all the bureaucratic barriers to access. But the forces that demand popular accountability are making the empiricist assumption that spontaneously expressed preferences are the rock bottom of political legitimacy. And it is said that knowledge itself has changed,³ that there is, again in the words of Johan Muller, a ‘...global trend against certainty in the social sciences...’ (Muller, 2000: 126). Old certainties have been eroded, and in the post-modern world we are adrift in a wild relativist ocean in which it has been revealed that knowledge claims are nothing more than the play of power and interests. The fraudulent claims of traditional academics have been unmasked, and we need to accept that knowledge is nothing other than a personal or social construct which serves to defend our interests. The traditional claims of the academy have been revealed as nothing but the claims of a particular interest group in society bent on defending its particular status, power and position. And seeing that we now, at last, have a grip on this truth, we can understand that constructed knowledge can be deconstructed and reconstructed to serve different sets of interests.

However, this stance digs its own grave. And furthermore, if this is all true how can we explain the manifest technological success that is an outgrowth of the growth of knowledge and which, over the past three centuries, has utterly transformed human life? And also, if all this is true why bother to have educational institutions at all? One way to try to eliminate a disease is to kill the patient.

Such, in crude outline, is the shape of some of these debates, the trajectories of the bulldozers reconfiguring the landscape of higher education and the ducking and weaving of those trying to halt the bulldozers in their tracks. These are forces that powerfully incline us to suppose that we do not have a choice – that we will simply have to transform our curricula to conform to these forces. But let’s be at least a little wary of this fatalistic position. It is clear that there can be no argument with a bulldozer, but bulldozers have drivers, and perhaps we can at least try to argue with the drivers. There is some room, small as it might be, for manoeuvre and argument, and let’s try to locate it.

We can begin with a truism: if we are thinking about curriculum change then we need to think about knowledge and the practice of inquiry. This threatens to open a very ancient can of worms, at least as ancient as Plato. But let’s take a line that can yield some results without digging down to the bottom of the can. A conviction that is shared by the drivers of all three bulldozers is deep scepticism about the kind of knowledge characteristic of higher education. Let’s think about this.

Scepticism about claims to knowledge is not a new phenomenon, although it might have attained more visible (and perhaps virulent) forms in a borderless world

that has been transformed by the development of new information and communication technologies, and released from the traditional restraints of academic communities. But scepticism is the twin of claims to knowledge wherever the suffocating marriage between knowledge and religious certainty has been broken. Knowledge claims are always provisional and are essentially open to challenge – but not any kind of challenge. And this latter phrase opens up the way to think about curriculum transformation, and how to argue with the bulldozer drivers.

The bulldozer drivers have a tendency to deny that there is any significant distinction between different kinds of challenge, and in this sense their challenge is shallow. There are various versions of this position. Sometimes the implicit claim is that no challenge to a knowledge claim can be disconnected from the personal or sectional interests which are the driving forces of successful markets. And all challenges are to be understood in these terms, with only the cosmetic difference that sometimes this is acknowledged while at other times, it is obscured in talk about ‘disinterested’ inquiry. And sometimes the assumption is made that knowledge and power are so intimately entangled with each other that all knowledge claims are simply the expression of power, so any challenges to a knowledge claim are more properly understood as power struggles. At other times, driven by a self-defeating assumption of universal relativism, it is assumed that a challenge to a knowledge claim is to be understood as nothing more than the expression of a different point of view. But, as Social Scientists, we should not be taken in by any of these versions of the denial that there are significantly different kinds of challenge to a knowledge claim.

To challenge a claim to knowledge is not merely to reject it. Rejection is easy; challenge is more arduous. Rejection might be based on mere ignorance or prejudice; challenge requires disciplined thinking based on relevant knowledge.⁴ It is easy enough, for example, merely to ‘reject’ a theory in advanced nuclear physics. But to ‘challenge’ it, I need both to understand that theory – itself unlikely without some education in the relevant field(s) – and to be able to appeal to some evidence which is relevant in assessing the warrant for that theory. A challenge must rest on some evidence which shows that the initial claim is false or fraudulent, and this implies that a challenge to a knowledge claim must itself be based on some notion of evidence, and stronger or weaker evidence for the kind of claim in question. The challenge consists in saying that the evidence which is supposed to support the claim is either suspect or that it is weaker than the evidence against the claim. We are here talking about epistemic values, and what the argument shows is that challenges to knowledge claims are themselves committed to epistemic values.

Epistemic values are those values that shape and guide inquiry which has as its regulative goal the discovery of the truth about some matter, irrespective of whether that truth is convenient or inconvenient, and supports or does not support any particular personal predilections or sectional interests. Epistemic values are the grammar of the practices of disinterested inquiry; the 'hidden curriculum' of academic study. Any 'curriculum transformation' that does not embody these epistemic values, that fails to respect the distinctions between knowledge and propaganda, a normative notion of warrant and the descriptive notion of acceptability (Haack, 1998: 92), cannot be a benefit either to society or to the students who follow that curriculum.

We can add three notes to this conclusion. The first is that the epistemic values I have gestured towards in the previous paragraph are formal and content-neutral. They guide disinterested inquiry in relation to any topic to be investigated. Sometimes when people advocate 'curriculum transformation' – especially in the Social Sciences – they have in mind simply changing the content of the curriculum. Instead of learning about Bismarck and the unification of Germany during the nineteenth century, we should concentrate on historical events in our local region. To say that any 'curriculum transformation', if it is not to betray students and society, needs to respect epistemic values, is compatible with major changes of content. The vocabulary can change, what we talk about can change, but the grammar of inquiry, although not cast in stone, provides the sheet anchor for our own research and our teaching of students. Resistance to curriculum transformation can very often reside in the inability of academics to disconnect the relevant epistemic values from the particular content in terms of which they gained an understanding of those values.

The second is that these epistemic values cannot be re-invented at will, or modified without good reason that is accepted by the relevant academic community. They are products of traditions of inquiry which stretch over many generations, during which they were refined and modified. These values are not sacred and can themselves be challenged, and, clearly, they can come into conflict with other values (such as the value of a peaceful and secure society). But anyone who merely rejects or abandons these values – perhaps under the aegis of 'curriculum transformation' – can no longer be regarded as engaging in academic work, including teaching.

The third is that in teaching, one of our primary tasks is to enable our students to achieve a rich operational understanding of, and commitment to, the relevant epistemic values. We are trying to teach our students how to become participants in

disciplined inquiry. This involves their learning and becoming committed to the grammar of inquiry in some field – epistemological access requires that they come to understand, and care about, the relevant epistemic values. Unless, in our practices as Social Scientists, we maintain and demonstrate our own commitment to epistemic values, we are frauds in institutions of higher education. One of the primary functions of such institutions in society is to constitute and maintain the vitality of epistemic values. And to the extent that we are diverted from this task by the insistent threats of the bulldozer drivers we betray the societies and the students we are committed to serving. In transforming our curricula we need to be vigilant in the protection of the epistemic values which are our vital contribution to the development of our societies.

Let us, finally, return to the analogy between changing a curriculum and moving a cemetery. The position we have now reached is, in effect, a rejection of one element of the analogy. A cemetery is a place of the dead – and there are indeed some curricula which fit this description – but other curricula, those we aspire to achieve in ‘transforming’ our curricula, are full of vitality, energy, and promise. Their embodiment of strongly-articulated epistemic values opens up lines of inquiry, previously not envisaged, that can serve our societies in profound ways unimagined in the populist and shallow rhetoric of the bulldozer drivers.

Endnotes

- 1 ‘To study ideology ... is to study the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination.’ (Thompson, 1984: 4).
- 2 The ambiguity of the word ‘broke’ is appropriate in this case.
- 3 I must confess that I find it extremely difficult to understand what it could mean to say that knowledge has changed, rather than that the content, the generation, the distribution, etc. of knowledge has changed.
- 4 In South Africa there is a constant tendency for people to use the word ‘refute’ when they mean ‘reject’ – as in: ‘The Minister refuted suggestions that there had been anything underhand in the deal.’ ‘Refutation’, like ‘warrant’, is a normative notion which implies that the appropriate standards of evidence or argument have been used to show that some claim is false.

References

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