Chapter Nine

The Focus of an Undergraduate Social Science Curriculum for Southern Africa: Historical Consciousness, Human Rights and Social and Development Issues

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Introduction

In this paper, we want to revisit the idea of the university in the Southern African context, and ask the question: *what should be the focus of a social science degree in this context?* We draw on the experience of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Port Elizabeth in order to reach some conclusions about what should constitute the basis of a general undergraduate social science curriculum in the Southern African context. The authors' intention here is to take a step back from the dynamics and politics of the university as an institution, embodying as it does competing interests, role-players and financial concerns.

At the end of the 1990s, the UPE Faculty of Arts, with a combination of great enthusiasm for interdisciplinarity and 'relevance' on the one hand, and significant anxiety about declining student numbers, our continued existence, and pressure from the University management, on the other, created a number of inter-disciplinary programmes. At the same time, the administrative structure of the Faculty changed, so that there were no longer departments of traditional disciplines but three schools – of Music, Languages, and (of most relevance in this paper) Social Sciences and Humanities.

If one defines the success of academic programmes in terms of student numbers, then a number of the interdisciplinary postgraduate programmes created at UPE (Development Studies, Conflict Studies, South African Politics, Public

Administration) were successful. Two of the new career-focused undergraduate programmes, however, were particularly unsuccessful – the BSocSci in Development and Leadership and the BA in Politics and Public Administration. The successful new undergraduate programmes were the BA in Media, Culture and Communication and the BA in Human Resource Management. It seemed to many of us that it was the more skills-based, market-oriented programmes that had been successful. We still believe, however, that the curriculum changes and organisational restructuring in the UPE Faculty of Arts have had some negative consequences. The combination of modularisation and organisational restructuring away from traditional discipline-based departments has led to a fragmentation in which programmes that do not have a specific career focus, lack an intellectual rationale. At the same time, those that are career and skills-based are in some senses intellectually 'hollow'. This led us to ask the question: is there still a role for a general undergraduate Social Science degree, and if so, what should its focus be?

What Should the Focus of a Southern African Social Science Degree Be?

Skills versus content

We take as a starting point the idea that Social Science students should emerge from an undergraduate degree programme as 'critical thinkers'. We are agreed that our aim is to design a curriculum which produces students who are 'living creatively and critically in the world' and are 'able to sustain a conversation about truth.'[1] These are the fine ideals of higher education in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Nor is there argument with the progressive pedagogy entailed in such an education: one which emphasises the centrality of student development and experience, the importance of students engaging in critical discourse about the world as partners, and understanding rather than processing knowledge.

But within the framework of such lofty ideals are the real skills and content of a curriculum in the Social Sciences. There are certain 'skills' (put in quotation marks to distinguish them from the 'hard' skills discussed below) that can be considered generic or fundamental academic skills. These are things such as methods of observation, interpretation, and analysis; the ability to analyse both empirical data and opinions with a critical mind; the ability to read with comprehension and to summarise large quantities of information; the ability to construct categories and generalise from the particular, and the ability to write clearly and to construct an argument.

Such academic skills are both marketable and adaptable to various real-life contexts, be they the management of businesses or NGOs, formulation and implementation of government policy, or more abstract intellectual work such as the creation of new knowledge through good research.

These generic skills should be distinguished from the additional specific skills that university students may acquire in the Social Sciences. These include 'people-oriented' skills, such as facilitation, mediation and conflict resolution, qualitative interviewing techniques and working with groups of people, as well as 'technical skills', such as computer skills, quantitative research and data manipulation, and media production.

While these inter-disciplinary skills are a valuable part of tertiary education in our context, it is unfortunate that the emphasis on Social Science courses that develop 'marketable skills' has meant that in some cases these skills are taught to the exclusion of any empirical or theoretical content. Thus one can take courses in subjects such as 'leadership' or 'group dynamics' or 'training for community development' which, at undergraduate level, are not based on any sound theoretical or empirical understanding of the context.

We have heard individual political scientists and economists openly eschewing knowledge of history, claiming that it is irrelevant to their understanding of contemporary society. They have embraced the idea of 'training' or 'skilling' students so that they can sell their commodified intellectual labour in the 'market', instead of educating them to be critical and proactive human beings, who contribute to society through changing it for the better. But although our social and economic context does demand skilled, competent managers and administrators, these managers and administrators will never be more than mediocre if their education has been limited in this way. In order to create the visionary intellectual leadership that is capable of transforming society, a broader and deeper knowledge of society has to be embraced – both by students and by the institutions in which they learn.

So, what should be included in a general undergraduate Social Science degree? A useful starting point is the World Bank 2000 Report on 'Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise' in which the description of an 'educated person' is one who has a 'critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves', who has 'a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times, and [is] able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to historical forces that have shaped it', and has 'some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems' (Quoted in Gevers, 2001: 2).

To what extent should the content of such a degree be contextually determined? We refer here to contributions on the need for an 'African-centred curriculum'. We would argue that instead of looking at the replacement of European examples or theories with African examples or theories, as subject content in a curriculum, we should pose a set of questions which does not offer one 'set' of subject contents as a replacement for another. Southern African students in the Social Sciences should not be made to make a choice between two different 'sets' of contents: one Eurocentric, global, market-oriented; the other African, local, community-oriented.

Similarly, students should not be faced with a choice between the 'African renaissance' ideal, (the celebration of their own identity and culture), and the rejection of tradition in pursuit of integration into the modern, global culture and economy. Instead, such a curriculum can pose where we are – in Southern Africa – as a question, and further challenge students to think about where we should be – on a continuum between the two poles of local self-confidence and global identity; between local self-sufficiency and the global market; between appropriate technology and the high-tech society.

Interdisciplinarity versus disciplinary boundaries

Piet Naudé has noted that in the late 20th century, there were important shifts which resulted in the weakening of disciplinary boundaries: the narrow disciplinary approach 'quickly emerged as insufficient to grasp the multiplicity of skills required in problem solving'; the old 'dichotomy of values and facts is becoming obsolete'; and the 'fundamental historical nature … of all sciences came to the fore' (see Chapter Five).

At the same time it has been argued by Johan Muller, among others, that certain disciplines have a stronger 'grammar' than others: thus economics has a stronger grammar than sociology; history a stronger grammar than politics. In an interdisciplinary programme, it can be argued that the 'stronger grammars' tend to dominate the weaker; thus the more methodologically open-ended Social Sciences risk losing out to those disciplines that are more rigid.

We argue, however, that it is not essential that 'traditional disciplines' in the Social Sciences such as History, Anthropology, Sociology, Philosophy and Politics be confined to rigid departmental or disciplinary boundaries. What is essential is that the 'essence' of these disciplines be retained and integrated into a curriculum that is relevant for the Southern African context. Our aim, in this project, is to make some contribution to isolating what this 'essence' is.

History and the Southern African Context

We argue that the retention of subjects in strict disciplinary boundaries is not helpful to an abstract discussion of 'content'. Thus while History is a discipline in its own right, the teaching of Anthropology, Sociology, Geography, Political Philosophy as well as newer fields of study, such as Development Studies or Gender Studies, all involve the understanding of at least some history. No Anthropology student can begin the study of the Archaeology and prehistory of Southern Africa without some mental time-line which enables her or him to situate artefacts within a specific historical context, usually working backwards from the time of European colonisation of Africa. Similarly, no Philosophy student can read Plato without learning something about the functioning of ancient Greek society – slavery, class divisions, gender roles, the conduct of war, the nature of the state – and this historical understanding of the context of Plato's philosophy links up with concepts used in Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science and Conflict Studies.

Thus, with regard to History, all Social Science students should be able – as one of their core 'learning outcomes' – to place themselves, current events, and what they read, in historical context. What they need is not the study of history as long lists of dates and facts, but the more abstract 'historical consciousness' that enables them to understand how things came to be as they are. Given the low number of high school students who obtain a matriculation certificate with History, and the even lower number who were privileged to have had an inspired and interesting history teacher, one cannot assume that an undergraduate student has any understanding at all of such seminal processes and events as the Reformation, the Industrial Revolution, the Second World War, or the de-colonisation of Africa. Essential elements of any syllabus would have to include:

- An understanding of world economic history in the broadest sense: ancient civilisations, feudal Europe, pre-colonial Africa, trade and slavery, colonialism, industrialisation. Such content need not be taught in a dry way as a 'history course'. There are undergraduate American students who read Jared Diamond's (1998) inter-disciplinary study, *Guns, Germs and Steel,* and through this develop an understanding of history;
- A more detailed understanding of 20th century history. The reading of a book such as Eric Hobsbawm's (1994) *Age of Extremes* could be made a core, compulsory component for all undergraduate students;
- A detailed understanding of Southern African history, including the pre-colonial history that is currently being consciously resurrected as part of the 'African Renaissance'.

The reasons for including 'historical understanding' in any Social Science curriculum are many, and have been eloquently argued by Sean Morrow. His key argument is that an 'historical approach is … one that reveals connections, that integrates and that binds together. This makes it an essential element in the curriculum' (1999: 1). In relation to the pressure on universities to adopt a 'relevant' and 'outcomes-based' approach, Morrow's argument about the characteristics of (good) historians are as follows: historians 'tend to have in common a sense of change over time and a distrust of claims to permanence, a quizzical approach to grand systems and a corresponding sense of the particular, and an insistence on the need for evidence and the necessity for documentation. These are characteristics that no university should risk diluting, and which are vital well beyond the locality of academic history' (2000: 2). History thus serves as a necessary antidote to the arrogant certainty of more empirical and contemporary Social Sciences. But not least among the reasons for learning history is the maxim of George Santayana that 'those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it'. Coming as we do out of a history of oppression and violent conflict, it must be considered one of the ethical roles of higher education – of all education, in fact – to make students aware of the past of their own country, so that when they become the new 'ruling elite' they can avoid the repetition of the cruelties of the past.

Human Rights

Linked to this, another crucial element of content that should be an integral part of any Social Science degree is some understanding of human rights. Conventionally the preserve of law schools, and sometimes taught as part of Philosophy or Political Philosophy courses, the notion of 'rights' has been largely ignored by the Social Sciences. Yet, as Constitutional Court judge Zac Jacoob argued recently at the University of Durban-Westville:

> Our Bill of Rights cannot be hidden away within the cocoons of departments of constitutional law for the purpose of erudite study. It needs to permeate every aspect of every institution of every university.

This need is not limited to our students' need for an understanding of their rights in a democratic society – something which surely should be part of every citizen's education, so that they can understand and respond when their rights or the rights of others are violated. It is linked to the broader need for historical or social consciousness discussed above: how can students understand the need for a 'Bill of Rights' without any understanding of the history of a century that produced the concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer war, the gulags of Stalin's vision of social

engineering, the Nazi genocide of the European Jews, the slaughter of intellectuals by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the cruelty of the Rwandan genocide and the persecution of the Matabele in post-independence Zimbabwe? Even closer to home, every Social Science student in Namibia, South Africa and Mozambique needs an understanding of the human rights violations perpetrated by regimes and their opponents in the second half of the 20th century, in those protracted wars of liberation and their aftermath. Whether this is taught as a course in contemporary Southern African History, Political Philosophy, Human Rights or Critical Reading Skills is irrelevant. No Social Science student should go through university without reading Primo Levi (1988) on the Holocaust of the Jews, Terence Ranger (2000) on the Zimbabwe genocide of the Matabele, and Antjie Krog (1999) on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In this way, students develop a social and historical consciousness; an ability to place themselves in time and space, in the Southern African and global context, at the beginning of the 21st century. Through making sense of their own lives, they develop a critical self-awareness, an ability to make connections and see the 'bigger picture'; to understand the social dynamics of race, gender and inequality. From their specific context, they learn to generalise and learn the universal lessons.

Social and Development Issues

The long-standing artificial division between Anthropology and Sociology has no place in the construction of a curriculum for Southern African Social Science students. There is no place for learning about 'African cultures' in isolation from an understanding of the concept of culture per se; there is no place for a 'European' sociology which denies the diverse reality of our society on the Southern tip of the African continent. Of course, both Sociology and Anthropology departments at most Southern African universities will strenuously deny that they uphold such divisions. Many anthropologists are engaged in very relevant development-related areas of research and teaching – of particular importance in South Africa, Mozambique and Namibia are issues such as land usage and distribution, environmentally sustainable agriculture, methods of farming and food security, migrancy and patterns of agricultural labour.

These areas of study are not confined to departments of Agriculture; they cross the boundaries of the disciplines of Sociology, Geography, History, Anthropology, Ecology, Demography and Botany, and they enter the cross-disciplinary fields of Development Studies, Gender Studies, Agricultural Studies and Environmental

Studies. If one brings in crucial issues such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the impending world water crisis, and periodic droughts and floods, we cross into other related areas of expertise such as primary health care, public administration, resource management and disaster relief management. Okungwu and Mencher (2000) have argued convincingly of the potentially crucial contribution of anthropology to the development of social and environmental policy in the 21st century. Noting that 'Anthropologists have tended to write mainly for other Anthropologists, not for those who have the power to change the world', they argue – following Peacock (1997) – for the importance of anthropology 'moving to shape public policy, to assist in formulating the critical issues of our society and all societies on this planet, to propose solutions that meet the desires and needs of local people, and to create a synergy between theory and practice' (2000: 109).

Moreover, the participatory and critical methods of anthropological research, often developed and applied 'in the field' by development activists, are more appropriate to the development of policy in the Southern African context than methods which are "top down" and bureaucratic. Okongwu and Mencher (2000: 107) select six arenas of public policy to demonstrate the relevance of Anthropology. The arenas they identify – including globalisation and national policy; social welfare policy (including employment and family welfare survival strategies); the impact of structural adjustment and economic restructuring on migration and labour force incorporation; and policies related to global agriculture and social inequality, sustainable agriculture and the environment – are all crucial policy domains facing the countries of southern Africa. One would expect Social Science graduates to have some understanding of at least some of them.

Yet, one could replace 'Anthropology' with 'Sociology' or 'Political Economy' or 'Development Studies' or 'History' and ensure that the same essential content is covered. A South African who has recently obtained a Doctorate in history from Oxford, Luvuyo Wotshela, noted that in recent years there has been a renewed interest in research on the rural areas of Southern Africa – in particular, a focus on revision of existing analyses which see land policies as state-driven, and a focus instead on how local community dynamics influence the implementation of policy. While his thesis examines the consolidation of the former Ciskei homeland in South Africa, there are currently MA students in Development Sudies, and PhD students in Anthropology, looking at similar processes in contemporary Mozambique and on the Mozambique-South African border. Such studies are inherently inter-disciplinary and embrace the notion of sustainable development as well as people-centred development, and can surely play an important role in addressing critical policy issues in Southern Africa.

While some of these issues are more appropriately dealt with at post-graduate level – the UPE MA in Development Studies, for example, deals with most of them – it should be clear that a Master's student would need to have completed an undergraduate degree that at the very least introduced him or her to certain concepts and understandings. Migration, labour markets, employment, family structure and the history of land use all form part of undergraduate courses in Sociology, Anthropology and History.

Such an emphasis on 'relevance' in terms of current policy options and debates in Southern African countries does not mean that Social Sciences become unthinking 'tools' of the developmental state. Some of those present at a meeting of Eastern Cape sociologists in May 2000 noted that there were two common responses from academics in the Social Sciences to the political transition in South Africa: one was to fall into the developmental state 'trap' and become ideologically tied to state policy, the other was to become cynical and aloof from social change and policy debates, to be non-engaged at best and actively resistant to change at worst – to retreat into the academy. Of course, there is a 'third way' – that of critically engaged, responsive, relevant and yet independent Social Science.

Some understanding of economics is also crucial to a comprehensive Social Science degree. While professors of Economics may choose to place Economics as a discipline in other faculties, or to teach Economics solely as an adjunct to Business Management degrees, they cannot deny the Social Sciences the 'economic content' of any good programme. Economics is still considered in some places to be an Arts discipline, rather than a science; the combination of Politics, Philosophy and Economics offered at undergraduate level at Oxford University is still considered prestigious for the good reason that it provides a breadth and depth of understanding that equips young people to become 'leaders' in their society. In the USA, some understanding of economic thought is considered an essential part of a 'general education' for all undergraduate students; thus Social Science students at Harcourt University, an 'e-university' in the USA, all take as part of their 'general education' requirement, a course in Social Science, which includes three broad topics: understanding the USA, understanding people, and economic thought.

It should be clear from these 'topics' that Social Sciences include content from History, Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology and Economics, that does not have to be organised according to those disciplines. In the Southern African context, even where Economics has become 'alienated' from the Social Sciences, it can be taught as part of courses in Industrial Sociology, Economic History, Environmental or Human Resource Management, Political Economy, or Public Policy Formulation.

Those involved in the attempt to implement an undergraduate programme which was 'development-oriented' at UPE, found it increasingly difficult to draw disciplinary boundaries in the areas which are of most relevance to Southern African students. Even within the Social Sciences, there is considerable overlap without even considering the natural, economic and health sciences at this point. Geography and Anthropology deal with some of these 'development' issues; History and Sociology provide the tools of analysis for understanding all societies; Political Science and Public Administration provide the tools for understanding the power relations involved in 'developing societies', as well as the tools for formulating and implementing development policies.

Conclusion

What have we learnt from our experience at UPE? We think that the inter-disciplinary approach taken in the attempt to create new degree programmes in the Social Sciences and humanities was worthwhile and can be defended. However, the market orientation of the programmes has in some cases diluted the critical content of such programmes, leaving them intellectually 'thin'. We feel strongly that there is still an urgent need in Southern African universities for an inter-disciplinary general Social Science degree at undergraduate level. We would argue that it is possible to retain an essential core of critical skills and knowledge in such a degree, incorporating some of the elements outlined above, while still allowing for flexibility in the particular content and applied skills taught in particular modules or programmes.

We conclude, notwithstanding out attempts to distil the essence of an ideal Social Science degree, with the suggestion that the power of the university lies precisely in the fact that its purpose and ambit cannot easily be defined. It must remain an ambiguous space in which intellectuals can remain 'precisely those figures whose public performances can neither be predicted nor compelled into some slogan, orthodox party line, or fixed dogma' (Said, 1993).

Endnote

1 Thanks to Martin Oosthuizen's presentation on 'Issues of Quality' to the Arts Faculty planning workshop, 9 March 2002. His source was Barnett R (1992). *Improving Higher Education. Total Quality Care*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

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