

The role of academic mentorship for staff and students in contributing to transformation and decolonisation at a South African University

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Abstract

In response to Dr Hlengwa's paper, this work in progress paper is drawn to her discussion on the kind of mentorship that is offered for new academic staff, more specifically the kind of mentorship that happens epistemically. We, too, question to what extent young black academic staff have the space to contribute to substantial transformation. Drawing from each of our research areas, which focus on black students' experiences and academic staff experiences in the Humanities respectively. In this paper we discuss the level of, what has been conceptualised as, epistemic mentorship that occurs during the process of moving through the undergraduate degree to becoming an academic staff member completing a PhD. Our work in progress paper explores our different but related PhD study trajectories. Masixole's research focuses on decoloniality in South African higher education and the history of knowledge making, and Kelly's research is about how students understand the purpose of a humanities degree. Bringing these two together, we ask the question: do disciplinary mentors (both lecturers and new staff mentors) legitimate global north knowledges at the expense of global south ones in their mentoring approach?

This paper grapples with the question of how colonial Western dominant centric ways of knowing and producing knowledge are reproduced. We explore whether academic mentorship contributes to reproducing the colonial Western dominant centric ways of knowing and research in institutions of higher learning. This creates what we conceptualise as epistemic mentorship, where students and young and emerging academics are encouraged to adopt the already existing theoretical and ideological lens in their scholarly work within a specific discipline which contributes to the reproduction of dominant Western colonial centric ways of knowing. This paper will also reflect on the agency of students and academics as emerging scholars and the institutionalized power relationship in academic mentorship. We question if mentorship encourages staff and students to be critical of the knowledge that is selected for curricula or if it reproduces the status quo of only sticking to the canons?

We will look at how new academic staff position themselves in an academic department and how they approach their roles. Through this paper, we aim to show how disciplinary knowledge mentorship plays a key role in contributing to decolonising and transforming universities, both epistemologically and ontologically.

Keywords

Decolonisation, transformation, mentorship, epistemology, academic staff, students