

Transformation discourse through a decolonial gaze: co-generating knowledge with students from rural areas in the teaching of science in higher education

Nathi Madondo

Teaching, Learning and Development Centre, Mangosuthu University of Technology, South Africa, madondone@mut.ac.za

Abstract

This paper argues for the learning that students from rural areas in South Africa bring with them to higher education, particularly in the field of science. The focus on rural students is informed by the realization that these students are, at most, cut off from mainstream discourses as these areas are characterized by underdevelopment. When these students join higher education, they are likely to experience a sense of alienation, yet they bring with them literacies and practices that could be relevant for learning in higher education. These literacies are, however, not likely to be recognized or rewarded in higher education. The close-up research question thus becomes: how can universities adapt to widening and diversifying the student body, especially in science classrooms? More specifically, what transformation discourse would enable a living and an inclusive curriculum that values all students, including those from rural areas, a social justice issue? In line with the idea of inclusivity in higher education, in her think piece, Mandy Hlengwa cautions us about the construct of ‘whiteness’ in terms of how it plays out as a constraint for genuine transformative discourse, a discourse that will allow all those involved in interactions for genuine, not just symbolic participation. The construct of ‘whiteness’ and symbolic participation are likely to be true in the field of science in the case under investigation in this paper. I argue that a transformation discourse that has a potential to enable a living and an inclusive curriculum should be informed by a decolonial gaze, in conjunction with the construct of Discourse with a capital letter D to engage with the epistemological and ontological orientations of the discipline of science. Decoloniality could be understood as a mechanism that is geared towards valuing the epistemologies and ontologies of the global South. I draw on in-depth focus group discussions conducted with 2nd year science students at a historically white and privileged university in South Africa, to develop my argument. Data shows that students’ learning from rural contexts is sometimes subjected to critical thinking practices, explanations, descriptions as well as arguments, literacies and practices which are valued in science. However, academic teachers, wittingly or unwittingly, seldom, if ever, draw on what these students already know about the texts they are expected to produce when they teach these aspects of science. I conclude the paper by discussing the implications for inclusive and living curriculum in the field of science.

Keywords

Higher education, transformation discourse, decoloniality, global South, inclusive curriculum