EVERYTHING FOR EVERYBODY? THE NEED FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION TO BE RELEVANT TO ALL ITS STUDENTS

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The crisis, the crucible

Distance Education provides education for students spread over the whole of earth, in all time zones, on every continent, in every country. That is at once an exceptional strength of Distance Education, as it is one of its biggest challenges. The strengths are that it brings knowledge and education within reach of all peoples. The challenge is that it needs to consider the aspect of culturally meaningful learning.

According to the sciences of learning (Dunlosky et al., 2013), meaningful learning is a prerequisite for effective learning. It is not enough to teach content of a subject. It needs to be shown how this content can be applied to real life situations.

The question is therefore, is it possible to develop a course that is everything for everybody? How is it practically possible to teach content in a way that it addresses real needs of real people in diverse situations? Is what is being taught decided by the lecturer, with his or her context in mind, therefore possibly ignoring the needs of a diverse body of students?

The recent debate about the "Decolonisation of the Curriculum" at many universities attest to this need for relevant teaching and learning. Students feel that subject content is Western-oriented, thereby ignoring indigenous knowledge and bypassing local needs. Many students feel the Western content should be totally scrapped from the curriculum, and supplaced by local knowledge.

Is it possible to become relevant while still building on accepted knowledge and standards? What is needed, is a road map to help people through and out of this multifaceted and almost chaotic situation towards solutions on many fronts. This article focuses on one aspect only, namely effective learning by students who want to continue and complete their studies under the current circumstances, and the kind of teaching which could support it.

It is a conceptual paper, using a literature review to identify effective learning strategies, and on the basis of findings suggest scientifically sound workable solutions.

The article is therefore not about the reasons, rationale, validity or stupidities of the various strands and movements of the #fallist phenomena. It is also not evaluating the legitimacy or not

of the decolonisation debate, apart from one aspect only, namely the quest for meaningfulness of study as a factor playing a role in effective learning.

Point of departure is that the current situation is a crucible which will give birth to a new situation. It is important to plan in order to influence the outcome towards workable and suitable results.

The #fallist situation, with a decolonised agenda

The #fallist movement gained visibility in society and the media with the #rhodesmustfall movement, when students complained about the statue of Cecil John Rhodes on the University of Cape Town campus. According to some students, Rhodes was a racist exploiter of the local population, and even though he supported learning through a foundation providing bursaries (originally only white students but currently all qualifying students), his legacy is so tainted that everything about him should be erased from current campuses.

This then spilled over in a #feesmustfall movement, where students complained about the high cost of university tuition fees, leading to the exclusion of many students who cannot afford it.

The decolonisation debate became part of the situation, where students felt that the Western academic tradition is dominant to such an extent that it excludes the contributions from Africa and other non-Western origins, leading to feelings of alienation, non-belonging and meaningfulness. At some universities where Afrikaans is or was a language of instruction, the call #afrikaansmustfall also became part of the demands, because in South Africa Afrikaans is seen as the language of the oppressor, even though the colonial language English is being accepted as the language of choice for tuition.

The outcomes of this situation and movements are still to be seen, because it is still unfolding. in practical terms it leads to large scale violence and destruction of property such as the burning of libraries, laboratories and other facilities, as well as the disruption and eventual suspension of academic programs, with some students being unable to attend classes, write exams and complete their academic years.

Scenarios

Reactions to this situation varies, ranging from people who believe the closure of universities and the cessation of the academic program is but a price to pay in service of some bigger goal to be pursued, to people who want the movement to be crushed, with many shades of all kinds of beliefs in between.

Long term, to my mind there are at least four consequences flowing forth from these events, with related options for students who want to complete their tertiary education.

A first consequence is that these events are the "womb of the private universities" in South Africa. Private universities such as Curro, Akademia, Monash and many others will capitalise on the uncertainties and disruptions at public universities. It can already be seen that Curro

announced that they acquired campuses in Pretoria and Johannesburg, and that one in Stellenboshc is in the offing. Akademica had a full-page advertisement in a newspaper *Beeld* on a page following pages with reports on the disruption of classes and exams on public university campuses. More and more students who can afford it will definitely choose to study at private universities who are not as prone to disruptions of their academic program.

A second consequence is that dedicated Distance Education Universities such as the University of South Africa (Unisa) will get more students. Unisa had some disruptions about outsourcing of staff – something that has been engineered by a previous minister of Education, Kader Asmal – but as of late has not as exposed to disruptions as the other universities. it is therefore still a public university which provides affordable internationally accredited qualifications, and therefore some students will enrol there.

A third consequence is that students who can afford it, will move to face-to-face universities overseas. In many countries tertiary education is free for qualifying students. Qualifying means students with proven academic performance, and it is therefore definitely not a free-for-all situation. Challenges for these students will still be a matter of cost, because their cost of living in these countries are not free and with an unfavourable exchange rate it will still be affordable for only a very small part of the population. Added to this is the language of instruction, which will be the mother tongue of the country they go to. Tuition on English speaking countries such as the UK and the USA is everything but free, being out of reach even for their own citizens, making study abroad in English not much of an option.

The fourth consequence is that public face-to-face universities in South Africa will introduce a blended mode of delivery, introducing an online component. The online component will probably be complementing face-to-face contact classes throughout the academic year by making learning material electronically available on their learning management systems as has in any case been done for some time now, but might become the dominant mode of tuition delivery in times of violence and disruptions. They may even introduce online examinations as has already been done at some institutions.

Decolonisation

An important aspect of this drive relates to experiences of alienation. Students feel that what they have to learn does not speak to their lived reality, the people teaching it do not seem to understand their lived reality, and the sources referred to does not come from their lived reality. They struggle to make sense of and master to work prescribed in the curriculum, and therefore believe if the curriculum changes they will find their studies more meaningful and they will be more successful in their studies.

A contributing factor is the issue of language of instruction. Many students are not conversant in English, but they still choose English as the language of choice. English might be the language of colonisation and Rhodes, but at least it is a language that should give them access to broader understanding and entrance into the employment market. Afrikaans (in South Africa), however, carries the burden of 1976 and apartheid. Therefore, they believe Afrikaans should fall

too, because if they have to study in a language other than their own, Afrikaans students should not enjoy the headstart of studying in their home language.

Once again it all boils down to the basic question, namely how to study effectively, under trying circumstances where even the language is a barrier.

All of this points to the fact that students want relevant tuition that takes into account local context. Is Distance Education aware of this, and more importantly, up to the task of providing relevant education to a diverse student population?

The need for effective learning strategies: students need to become self-directed life-long learners

Whatever route a student chooses to continue their studies and circumvent the current disruptions, the need for being able to study effectively will become even more necessary as it is currently.

It is a well-researched and documented reality that students are not well prepared for tertiary studies. At schools they are often coached to pass instead of being taught how to learn. Many schools, especially in South Africa with a large part of schools being dysfunctional or under-performing, do not prepare students adequately for tertiary studies where students have to master vast amounts of work with much less support than they might have been used to at school. The high drop-out figures and non-completion rates attest to this fact. This boils down to one conclusion - students need to learn how to learn effectively. This is even the case for students who are passing and are performing adequately or even well, but who still uses ineffective and outdated study strategies. The high attrition number in distance education institutions, is even more alarming, and flies in the face of claims that distance education provides education to all. If people do not pass or drop out, education is not provided.

Add to this the fact that lecturers often also do not know how to engender effective learning. Lecturers are appointed based upon their disciplinary prowess and subject knowledge, and rarely appraised on their tuitionary knowledge and skills. This is an issue in face-to-face classes, but at least there is the possibility that students might ask questions and clarify uncertainties in the moment, even though this does not always happen. When these classes are pushed online, the chances of misunderstanding become all the more a possibility.

Bottom line is, students need to learn how to learn effectively, and lecturers need to learn how to teach their students how to learn effectively. The reality is that it does not happen, with dire consequences for student success, and when being pushed online, the consequences will become even more pronounced.

To address this, at least three issues need to be addressed. The first is that Distance Educators should understand what is effective learning, and especially how to support application oriented learning. The second is that there should be an appropriate theoretical understanding and practical implementation of culturally relevant teaching and learning. The third aspect is that

there should be theoretically based and workable strategies for implementing culturally relevant teaching and learning.

Effective Learning: needs and strategies for lecturers and students

Mind, Brain, and Education Science is putting forward solid research about what effective learning is. Articles and books such as Dunlosky et al. (2013), Brown et al. (2014), and Doyle, and Zakrajsek (2013) showing the way, based on reputable neuro- and cognitive science research.

Effective learning strategies, according to them, is the following:

- Practice testing;
- Varied Repetition;
- Application Oriented;
- Integration (self-explanation);
- Mnemonic strategies (e.g. Memory Palace);
- Sharing and Teaching;
- Mindfulness;
- Focus without multitasking;
- Interleaved, Spaced.

Strategies with moderate utility includes:

- Write concepts out;
- Old papers and memoranda;
- Mnemonics.

Ineffective strategies are often the most widely used:

- Read and re-read;
- Highlighting and Underlining;
- Summaries;
- Cramming.

Many lecturers and students still use ineffective learning strategies. However, it is imperative that they should become knowledgeable about effective strategies, and start using them. In the context of this paper, it is the Application Oriented strategy that needs to be used, in order to support meaningful learning. If any activity is experienced as meaningful, people will spend time on it, and if guided well, will want to excel in it.

Knowledge can be described as consisting of a basic stem like that of a tree, which represents the accepted and time-tested body of knowledge. Branches spread out in various directions, touching local realities, as it were. The leaves are the new developments taking place every day.

In order to master a field of knowledge, all three aspects need to be touched upon. The experience of alienation is when only one aspect of knowledge, usually the accepted and time-

tested aspect of a discipline as developed in Western context, is taught. Inclusion of the other two aspects of knowledge needs to be embraced and included.

Culturally appropriate education

Much has been written on respect for the viewpoints and worldviews of others. Zhou and Fischer (2013) attempted this from a Mind, Brain, and Education Science point of view. According to them, "Culturally appropriate education focuses on educational competence needed in a global world and respect for different world views of learners and teachers from different cultural contexts. The relationship between gene, brain, and culture is complex and dynamical. Cultural experience and learning sculpts the anatomy and function of the human brain and shapes human behavior. This neuroplasticity is the basis of educability in human beings. Education reform should reflect cultural diversity and embed teaching practices into the cultural history of a nation and should promote positive inclusion of minority and indigenous history so as to maximize successful adoption by teachers and parents. This tenet is at the core of the concept of 'culturally appropriate education'. Successful educational reform and pedagogy require that teachers become culturally and neuroscientifically literate."

With this, they provide a theoretically sound and practice tested way of understanding differences, and celebrating it in educational circumstances. It provides a point of departure with a specific inclusive end goal in mind. We live in a multicultural world, and therefore cultural intelligence is needed "the capacity of individuals ato function effectively in multicultural situations" (Early & Ang, 2003).

Workable strategies to provide culturally appropriate education

Tracy Tokuhama-Espinosa (2010) is an eminent protagonist of the Mind, Brain, and Education Science movement. In a pre-recorded plenary presentation at the CALL and the BRAIN 2016 meeting titled "Neuroconstructivism and the Modern Classroom" (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2017), she suggests "Topical readings and videos at different "entry levels" of complexity. In this way lecturers can teach basic information and knowledge, but allow fir individualised application in particular contexts.

This allow for a combination of Surface, Deep and Transfer Learning (Chin & Brown, 2000; Hattie & Donoghue, 2016), in the sense that basic knowledge is shared, but in allowing it to be applied in real life situations, deep learning and eventually transfer learning also take place.

Conclusion

Distance education institutions and lecturers need to become aware of the need for culturally appropriate education in order to skill their students for working in real life contexts. The Mind, Brain, and Education Science discipline provides well researched and useable results to make this a reality. Knowledge and use of effective learning strategies are necessary. Celebration of diversity is crucial, as well as providing tuition in such a way that students are guided to apply what they learn in their contexts. This is true, useable and sustainable "decolonisation of the curriculum".

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