



Decolonising & Africanising: Discussing Current Challenges of Curriculum Development in a South African University Journalism Programme

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Abstract

Higher education in South Africa is currently beset by calls to transform, decolonise and Africanise curricula. However, while university managements across most institutions are attempting to heed this demand and request that staff decolonise and Africanise, there have yet to be any clear instructions as to how this should occur, or what, in fact, is meant by these terms. While some argue that a decolonised and Africanised curriculum would include building “a foundation of faith that differing African men and women can develop their own styles of [...] education” (Hochheimer, 2001: 97), others in South Africa have called for the complete eradication of any material or teaching method that derives from the West (Wingfield, 2017). In addition to such demands, these directives become even more challenging when teaching journalism and media studies because South African newsrooms are shaped by Western liberal pluralist values, ethics and practices. As argued by Botma (2016: 106), such a “context presents a substantial ethical challenge” as journalism programmes are expected to train and prepare students for a career which adheres to such a paradigm, but simultaneously conform to non-descript definitions of decolonisation and Africanisation that often contradict the ethos of South Africa’s newsrooms. Therefore, this paper, in its discussion of these challenges and what they mean for the development of journalism curriculums in South Africa, uses the journalism programme at the University KwaZulu-Natal as a case study to highlight how such strategies can be incorporated into a South African curriculum in order to remain relevant to the needs of South Africa’s journalism industry and heed the call for decolonisation and Africanisation.

Keywords: Journalism education, decolonisation, re-Africanisation, South Africa, teaching practice;

1. Introduction

Considering the fall of apartheid was almost thirty years ago, it appears that many South African universities have been somewhat superficial in their approach to transformation, with most being content to merely transform “as a change of colour of face rather than a total mind-set” (Odora Hoppers, 2000: 4). Only recently has there seemed to be real discussion taking place about how higher education curriculums should ‘decolonise’ after student protests drew attention to the ideological non-transformation of the University of Cape Town (UCT). Students opposed both the University’s seemingly Eurocentric, and thus alienating, curriculum and its non-apologetic display of colonial figures, such as the now infamous statue of Cecil John Rhodes. This protest spiralled into further action across the country as students challenged both the government and universities to transform what O’Byrne & Bond (2014) call managerial (or commercialist) models of education to provide free higher education, as well as decolonising curricula to become more Africanised.

However, this has become a somewhat stalled exercise on a number of fronts, mainly because there is little consensus among students, academics, university administrations or the government as to how this can be implemented. This paper discusses some of these challenges, beginning with the concepts of Africanisation and decolonisation. It then moves on to briefly discuss the current journalism landscape in South Africa and finally uses the journalism programme from the University of KwaZulu-Natal as a case study to highlight how, despite these challenges, a journalism curriculum could Africanise and decolonise.

2. Defining Africanisation and Decolonisation

The call to decolonise education is not a new one. In almost every country after the fall of colonisation there have been discussions as to how to embrace and incorporate indigenous knowledge systems into education (Mamdani, 2016; Adams, 2011). Some writers, however, argue that to decolonise is to rid a system, whether educational, political or social, “of any colonial elements” (Mngomezulu & Hadebe, 2018: 70). We argue that this is problematic, especially for university curricula, on three

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counts. Firstly, merely to replace one system with another leaves little room to engage critically with one's past, present or future. Secondly, we question how it is possible to discern what qualifies as a colonial element as cultures have become inexplicitly intertwined over time. And finally, one risks becoming just another type of coloniser because such an approach "arguably fails to do justice to diversity" (Horsthemke, 2014:585).

However, this does not mean that decolonisation cannot and should not take place. Our argument rests on the work of Higgs (2011), who argues that decolonised education in Africa should take on a trans-traditional vantage. In other words, decolonised educational curricula and research should be cognisant of other knowledge systems (whether they be European, Asian or African) and be integrated with local knowledge systems. As pointed out by Wiredu (1996), many of the issues facing decolonised countries have roots in a system for which indigenous systems may not, traditionally, have a solution, so are reliant on other knowledge forms. Therefore, decolonisation "does not only attempt to revive and reinstate indigenous [...] knowledge systems" (Higgs, 2011: 46), but also takes into account the "impact of modernity and industrialisation" (Ibid: 46).

Such a conclusion lends itself well to how one goes about Africanising a curriculum. Despite the many viewpoints on what constitutes Africanisation (see Mamdani, 2016 and Higgs, 2011) and what this means, a consistent point which emerges time and again argues that Africanisation should be about using local contexts to inform how and what is taught in an African university. Such a definition avoids two possible pitfalls of the Africanisation argument: it does not homogenise all Africans to be the same, and it does not exclude those who may not be from Africa. Additionally, most writers place emphasis on the communal value systems of African traditional life and the participatory culture which emerges therefrom. In line with earlier work done by Pitcher (2014), such emphasis, we argue, fits well with the changing nature of journalism and communication worldwide, and is something that should be incorporated into South African journalism programmes.

3. South African Journalism Landscape

South Africa's press are, for the most part, self-regulated and consist of 46 commercial newspapers, 250 community publications, one paid-for satellite broadcast service (which includes a number of international news broadcasters like Al Jazeera and Russia Today), one public broadcaster (SABC), one independent South African news channel (e-News), seven community television stations and approximately 300 radio stations (public, community and commercial) (Garmin & van der Merwe, 2017). Additionally, as a former British colony, South Africa's newspapers and broadcasters were developed under a similar guise as the British press and British Broadcasting Company (BBC) (de Beer, Pitcher & Jones, 2017). And while the press tends to follow a more liberal pluralist norm of operation, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) has to balance this with a governmental model as they report directly to South Africa's Parliament (Ibid).

Therefore, despite calls for Africanisation and decolonisation in education, when training potential journalists South Africa's higher education sector has to adhere to a profession which is still ideologically embedded in a Western framework of practice. And to make things even more complicated, South African "[j]ournalism educators are under constant pressure to revise curricula to take account of the major upheaval of the digital revolution and [...] political stresses brought to bear by the [African National Congress] ANC as the South African government" (Garman & van der Merwe, 2017: 311). Only recently have journalists avoided being placed under government watch as the ANC attempt to tone down the 'watchdog' nature of South Africa's press.

4. Taking Journalism Education Forward

All this makes developing a relevant journalism curriculum rather challenging. However, we believe that what is being done at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) can offer some guidance into how to approach a decolonised and Africanised curriculum. UKZN was formed in 2004 after the formerly white, English-speaking University of Natal merged with the formerly black University of Durban-Westville, with the current journalism programme developed thereafter. Currently, the discipline offers two undergraduate courses which focus on media writing, as part of a more general Media and Cultural Studies degree, and a postgraduate Honours specialisation in journalism. As with most university courses our curriculum has been influenced by the global 'theory vs practice' debate, and the call to modernise students' skillsets to embrace new media advancements.

This presents two problems for our curriculum discussion which is quite unusual for other, more wealthy, universities. Because our student body consists mostly of black students, a majority of whom are on financial aid, and come from either peri-urban or rural backgrounds, many of them do not have basic literacy in many digital technologies. Many of our students arrive at university having never seen



a computer, let alone the ability to type, conduct internet research, or use sophisticated software. Therefore, not only are we asking students to engage with alien concepts, grounded most often in Eurocentric norms, but we also run the risk of alienating them in terms of the tools they are expected to use to be successful in the profession.

However, this is where we argue that local context can make a valuable contribution to students' learning. As already argued, one of the key tenets of Africanisation is to engage students with knowledge with which they are familiar. Despite many not being computer-savvy, this does not mean that they are technophobes. Quite the contrary. Most students are mobile-savvy and most not only own mobile phones, but access information in innovative ways using mobile platforms. Consequently, we have adapted our curriculum both to teach students conventional digital journalism practice, and learn from students' mobile habits and shortcuts. Not only does this change the nature of conventional education, but it also empowers students rather than alienating them.

Additionally, in spite of the fact that journalism in South Africa follows a Western tradition of ethics and practice, this is not the only approach we take. We encourage students to question these approaches. We have adapted more African-centred philosophies, such as *ubuntu* and communitarism, into our teaching, and highlight how they can be used alongside, as Higgs (2011) proposed, other normative frameworks of practice.

Finally, we also ensure that examples of best practice are highlighted in context specific ways. As pointed out by Adams (2011), most students in Africa, and South Africa in particular, are ignorant about facts that pertain to the continent and their local contexts. However, we would add that most of our students, due to their poor primary and secondary schooling, have poor general knowledge all around and an embedded diversion to reading. Therefore, we propose that educators look to more participatory forms of teaching and learning, requesting that students present ideas orally and visually. This does not mean that we forgo more conventional notions of reading and writing – these are fundamental to the journalism profession – but it helps provide a more balanced approach to teaching that does not simply dismiss many of the more traditional formats of African knowledge production.

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