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Diversifying the Higher-Education Curriculum: Queering the  
Design and Pedagogy

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# DIVERSIFYING THE HIGHER-EDUCATION CURRICULUM

## Queering the Design and Pedagogy

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The contributions to this special section have provided a rich and fascinating insight into how academics working in the field of religion and theology engage the quest of “queering the curriculum”—both how they conceptualize this quest and how they put this quest into concrete teaching and pedagogy practices in their respective institutional and national contexts. As an academic not working in the subject area of religious studies myself but in the field of higher-education studies, in this concluding contribution I share more general thoughts about diversifying and indeed queering curriculum design and pedagogy. I do so writing from my own context, in postapartheid South Africa.

### **The Transforming South African Higher-Education System**

Historically, the South African higher-education sector primarily targeted and served a minority ethnic group. The years from 1948 to 1993 were characterized by apartheid, which legalized separate development along racial lines. During this time, South African higher education was marked by highly fragmented, incoherent, and uncoordinated policy and planning. The dawn of democracy in 1994 gave rise to the popularization of diversity as a value for all state organs to uphold. The South African 1996 Constitution guaranteed all South Africans rights of citizenship and equality before the law. The new government introduced educational reforms, and previously white institutions

had to open their doors to the students they previously discriminated against.<sup>1</sup> Massification of the higher-education system began in earnest, addressing issues of equity, redress, and development. New student constituencies reflected a wide spectrum of cultural backgrounds, personal histories, and religious affiliations and representing a diversity in race, ethnicity, culture, class, gender, age, language, and sexual orientation. In response to the changing student body, institutions needed to reflect this diversity in their teaching staff, institutional cultures, and curricula. Since then, various institutional reform and transformation programs have been put in place to accommodate the diverse learning needs of students in higher education.

The Council for Higher Education (CHE) formed the Higher Education Quality Committee, which oversees evaluation of curricula for various academic programs offered in institutions of higher learning.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, the CHE initiated the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP), which included institutional audits of higher-education institutions (HEIs). Phase 1 of the QEP (2011–15) focused on enhancing academics as teachers, promoting student support and development, improving the learning environment, and augmenting course and program enrollment management. As indicated in the CHE Process Document of November 2013, Phase 2 (2017) focused on the following four areas of the curriculum:

- Curriculum renewal and transformation
- Diversity and inclusivity
- Curriculum development capacity and quality
- Participation in curriculum design and development

According to the CHE QEP 2 Process Document: “Curriculum lies at the heart of students’ academic experience. It provides for students to obtain a qualification, formal recognition by an educational institution and society of a specific set of achievements. The design of the curriculum in particular ways embodies assumptions, often tacit, about what the institution considers the purpose of the curriculum (and the qualification of which it is a part) to be, a purpose which may or may not be shared by the students.”<sup>3</sup> It is to the discussion on the curriculum as a site for transformation that we now turn.

<sup>1</sup> W. Mdepha and L. Tshiwula, “Student Diversity in South African Higher Education,” *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* 13 (2012): 19–33.

<sup>2</sup> Republic of South Africa, South African Qualifications Framework Act, Act No 67 of 2008, *Government Gazette* 524, February 17, 2009, [http://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/NQF\\_act\\_2008.pdf](http://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/NQF_act_2008.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Council on Higher Education, “Quality Enhancement Project Phase 2, Focus Area and Institutional Submission Specifications,” March 2017, <http://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/FINAL%20QEP%20phase%202%20%20MARCH%202017.pdf>.

### Discerning Operations of Power in the Curriculum

Curriculum refers to the means by and materials with which students interact to achieve identified educational outcomes. It is the total of experiences that we create or deliver to our students through a systematic plan for teaching and learning. Different types of curricula exist in the higher-education context. *Intended curriculum* refers to planned interaction with students using a structure or framework. *Hidden curriculum* refers to a side effect of education, lessons that are learned but not openly intended, such as the transmission of norms, values, and beliefs conveyed in the classroom and the social environment of the campus. Any learning experience may teach unintended lessons; for example, certain values may be transmitted while we teach the official curriculum (for example, appropriate social practices, religious beliefs/nonbeliefs, and so on). *Null curriculum* refers to knowledge that designers deliberately leave out of the curriculum. These silences may indeed send covert messages about what knowledge a particular institution or program values and privileges and may reflect the epistemological focus of a particular discipline.

Curricula reflect ideological influences and philosophical approaches to knowledge, teaching, and learning to students. In the current South African higher-education context, the “Rhodes Must Fall,” “Fees Must Fall,” and “Decolonize the Curriculum” student movements call for a “dismantling and deconstruction of the norm of old practices in order to reconstruct and transform the Eurocentric and sometimes racist curricula to reflect the experiences, voices, struggles, victories, and defeats of all racial, ethnic, cultural, religious and other social groups.”<sup>4</sup> Power relations within social structures of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation as reflected in the curriculum are examined by many academic disciplines such as critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, antiracist education, queer pedagogy, intersectionality theory to name just a few. The purpose of such analyses in the above cases may be to expose the power imbalances with the aim of social justice and respect for human rights. The aim of exploring issues of diversity, including the extent to which LGBTI issues are considered in curricula, is to look at the “ways in which difference is constructed, how its significance shifts, how it is operationalized in institutions and most critically, why difference continues to matter.”<sup>5</sup> This requires a theory that can be used as a lens to discern the “operations of power” in a curriculum.

<sup>4</sup> N. Fraser, *Justice Interrupts: Critical Reflections on the “Post Socialist” Condition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 27.

<sup>5</sup> M. Naidoo, “Transformative Remedies towards Managing Diversity in South African Theological Education,” *Theological Studies* 71, no. 2 (2015): 4, <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/19751/Transformative%20Remedies%20HTS2015.pdf?sequence=1>.

### **Critical Diversity Theory as an Analytical Framework**

The Wits Centre for Diversity Studies at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa, has adopted a critical diversity theory that provides “a critical lens through which operations of power that implicate social identities to create systems of privilege, advantage, disadvantage and oppression are examined.”<sup>6</sup> They have adapted the theory to embrace other forms of systemic social oppression—such as gender, sexuality, and dis/ability—into a set of literacy practice for scholars/researchers in diversity studies as a way of perceiving and responding to the social climate and prevalent structures of oppression. This literacy practice may prove to be a useful framework for curriculum analysis using the following list to evaluate the presence of diversity literacy in the curriculum:

- a recognition of the symbolic and material value of hegemonic identities, such as whiteness, heterosexuality, masculinity, ablebodiedness, etc.;
- analytic skill at unpacking how these systems of oppression intersect, interlock, co-construct and constitute each other;
- the definition of oppressive systems such as racism as current social problems rather than a historical legacy;
- an understanding that social identities are learned and an outcome of social practices;
- the possession of a diversity grammar and a vocabulary that facilitates a discussion of race, racism, and antiracism, and the parallel concepts employed in the analysis of other forms of oppression;
- the ability to translate (interpret) coded hegemonic practices;
- an analysis of the ways that diversity hierarchies and institutionalized oppressions are mediated by class inequality;
- And an engagement with issues of transformation of these oppressive systems towards deepening democracy in all levels of social organization.<sup>7</sup>

Lecturers in theology and religious studies (TRS) can use this analytical framework to undertake a curriculum mapping to determine the extent to which “queering” has occurred in the curriculum and their pedagogy. Scholars like Dennis Sumara and Brent Davis have inquired into ways of queering the curriculum

<sup>6</sup> M. Steyn, *Critical Diversity Literacy: Routledge International Handbook of Diversity Studies* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014)

<sup>7</sup> Wits Centre for Diversity Studies, accessed February 6, 2018, [www.wits.ac.za/wicds](http://www.wits.ac.za/wicds).

and argue that “curriculum has an obligation to interrupt heteronormative thinking.”<sup>8</sup> Michael Cross, writing from the South African higher-education context, provides two approaches to curriculum transformation in this regard, drawing a distinction between “affirmative” and “transformative” approaches to curriculum interventions.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, according to Cross, “affirmative” approaches aim to correct inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disrupting the underlying causes. Examples of this can be found in institutions that add on quick-fix courses like gender-studies modules to a curriculum or call in random experts to do presentations on LGBTI issues. Because this kind of curriculum intervention does not involve restructuring the philosophical underpinnings of the curriculum, the canon therefore remains intact. Issues of equity and social justice are also not effectively addressed in this way. The “transformative” approach, on the other hand, is more of a “head on” strategy aimed at correcting inequitable learning outcomes. This more radical approach is associated with dismantling and restructuring the underlying generative frameworks. In so doing, it challenges the canon from different perspectives that go beyond tacit content to access underlying principles and philosophies such as “higher order knowledge” and so on. Within the South African context, Cross contends that this kind of approach requires taking seriously questions of social justice and equity. The mandate of the South African Government for National Unity was to build a nonracial society based on social justice and respect for human rights after the oppressive apartheid regime. The ideal was that South Africans should be united in their diversity.

Diversity is still a buzzword on South African campuses of higher education. Decolonization, antiracism, and antisexism debates permeate our society as we speak. Our country is in a state of crisis some twenty-four years after we gained democracy. The higher-education sector is also in crisis. How can we as higher-education scholars and practitioners contribute epistemologically and pedagogically in transforming our institutions of higher learning to be places where all students who attend leave *transformed*? How can we contribute to a society that is nonracial, nonsexist, and nondiscriminatory where all people can recognize each other’s differences while at the same time live in peace and harmony? How do we embrace our diverse classrooms?

### **Diversifying Pedagogy: Lessons from the Literature**

The theoretical foundations of inclusive teaching stem from Lev Vygotsky’s social constructivist pedagogy, which focuses on the nature and organization

<sup>8</sup> D. Sumara and B. Davis, “Interrupting Heteronormativity: Toward a Queer Curriculum Theory,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 29, no. 2 (1999): 191–208.

<sup>9</sup> M. Cross, “Institutionalising Campus Diversity in South African Higher Education: Review of Diversity Scholarship and Diversity Education,” *Higher Education* 47 (2004): 387–410.

of society and its response to diversity rather than on the nature and extent of the individual's differences.<sup>10</sup> Proponents of this model believe that overcoming inequalities and discrimination due to differences requires addressing the structural conditions that lead to such inequalities and discrimination in the first place.<sup>11</sup> Institutional culture and classroom pedagogical strategies may be transformed to respond to the diverse needs of our student body in not only policy but also practice.

Corinne Meier and Caryl Hartell confirm that the increasing cultural diversity in South African educational institutions necessitates that lecturers teach and manage students with cultures, sexual orientation, languages, and backgrounds often unfamiliar to them.<sup>12</sup> They concede that higher-education providers should embrace and adopt a social model as it supports and guides the ways in which pedagogy, curricula, and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant, and accessible to all. They embrace the view of the individual and individual difference as the source of diversity that can enrich the lives and learning of others. Below are some considerations from the literature regarding the educational benefits of the diverse classroom.

Higher-education scholars suggest that when students are exposed to diverse groups or attend a highly diverse institution, they are often exposed to experiences, perspectives, and opinions different from their own. This intergroup contact and exposure to diverse perspectives renders critical opportunities for learning to occur.<sup>13</sup> Studies have shown that students who participated in diversity-related activities reported higher levels of academic challenge, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.<sup>14</sup> TRS scholars (and their curriculum and pedagogy) have historically foregrounded and highlighted through interpretation of religious texts a centuries-long tradition of patriarchal and heteronormative agendas. Several studies have also indicated that Christianity

<sup>10</sup> L. S. Vygotsky, *The Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky: Problems of the Theory and History of Psychology*, ed. Robert W. Rieber and Jeffrey Wollock (New York: Springer Science & Business Media, 1997), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Council on Higher Education, *Higher Education Monitor South African Higher Education Responses to Students with Disabilities. Equity of Access and Opportunity?* (Pretoria: CHE, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> C. Meier and C. Hartell, "Handling Cultural Diversity in Education in South Africa," *SA-eDUC JOURNAL* 6 (2009): 180–92.

<sup>13</sup> J. C. Garibay, *Diversity in the Classroom: CCLA Diversity and Faculty Development*, 2014, 7, <https://equity.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/DiversityintheClassroom2014Web.pdf>; and E. T. Pascarella, M. Edison, A. Nora, L. S. Hagedorn, and P. T. Terenzini, "Influences on Students' Openness to Diversity and Challenge in the First Year of College," *Journal of Higher Education* 67, no. 2 (2001): 174–95.

<sup>14</sup> P. D. Umbach and G. D. Kuh, "Student Experiences with Diversity at Liberal Arts Colleges: Another Claim for Distinctiveness" (paper presented at the 43rd Annual Forum for the Association for Institutional Research, Tampa, FL, May 17–21, 2003).

has been instrumental in the social exclusion and discrimination of people who identify as LGBTI.<sup>15</sup> What can we draw from the literature to diversify our pedagogies in order to eliminate such discriminatory and exclusive practices?

Amrita Kaur, Mohammad Noman, and Hasniza Nordin recently found that exposing students to diversity and inviting their participation in inclusive practices offers students an opportunity to solve psychological and social conflicts and experiment with new ideas, relationships, and roles, which in turn facilitates active thinking skills, intellectual development, and motivation.<sup>16</sup> Juan Carlos Garibay also points out that meaningful engagement with diverse peers and exposure to diversity issues in the curriculum prepares students for life in an increasingly complex and diverse society.<sup>17</sup> He reports that brainstorming sessions among diverse groups have been shown to generate ideas that are of higher quality in feasibility and effectiveness when compared to brainstorming sessions with homogenous groups of students. Group discussions that include viewpoints from diverse students have been shown to stimulate discussion of multiple perspectives and previously unconsidered alternatives showing a higher level of critical analysis of decisions and alternatives.<sup>18</sup>

Garibay has also conveyed that engagements with diversity foster students' cognitive and personal growth, including expanded cultural knowledge and understanding, increased leadership abilities, and a firmer commitment to promoting understanding about issues of sexual orientation and sexual identity. Students develop more accurate knowledge and they learn to think more deeply, actively, and critically when they confront their biases and change erroneous information.<sup>19</sup> Individuals educated in diverse settings are far more likely to work and live in diverse environments after they graduate.

Developing curricular and cocurricular programming for today's university student population requires lecturers to shift from looking at diverse, first-generation, and underresourced college students with a deficit mindset simply because they do not possess the characteristics of typical college students of previous generations in terms of race, gender, socioeconomic status, academic preparation, and enrollment patterns. Lecturers should adopt a view

<sup>15</sup> E. Chitando and A. van Klinken, eds. *Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Contemporary Africa* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> A. Kaur, M. Noman, and H. Nordin, "Inclusive Assessment for Linguistically Diverse Learners in Higher Education," *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 42, no. 5 (2017): 756–71.

<sup>17</sup> Garibay, *Diversity in the Classroom*.

<sup>18</sup> A. L. Antonio, M. J. Chang, K. Hakuta, D. A. Kenny, S. Levin, and J. F. Milem, "Effects of Racial Diversity on Complex Thinking in College Students," *Psychological Science* 15, no. 8 (2004): 507–10.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



of the current diverse college student population that focuses on the assets they bring to college and capitalizes on those assets to support their success.<sup>20</sup>

The literature I've reviewed above puts the onus on HEIs to make crucial proactive changes to their inclusive pedagogical and curricular practices in order to ensure that teaching and learning endeavor to be inclusive so that all students can make the most of their university studies. However, in most current cases, university lecturers adopt what Meier and Hartell call the "assimilationist approach—when lecturers expect students to adapt to the existing character of the institution and to curricula that have been implemented for a different student population as per the past regime."<sup>21</sup> We now have an opportunity to more radically evaluate our curricula and redesign our programs with the view to embracing the diversity of the current student body who reflect the diversity of our societies.

Diversity, as I have highlighted in the South African context, is recognized as one of the core values of higher-education institutions, though it remains unclear how this value is considered in programs, modules, and classrooms; around campus; or within the student population. University programs must now be designed in order to accommodate the diverse groups of the South African population.<sup>22</sup> When designing courses, programs, modules, and projects, we must know who our students are and where they come from. Understanding the general background of students enables us to plan and address academic programs and strategies, cocurricular programs, pedagogical strategies, and so forth. In the South African case, the constitution is clear regarding human rights and equality for all its citizens before the law. The Education White Paper 3 initiated the transformation of the South African higher-education system with the aim of establishing a single, unified, and nationally coordinated system that is "democratic, nonracial, and nonsexist."<sup>23</sup> It would further provide educational opportunities for all irrespective of "race, age, gender, class, sexual orientation, or any other forms of discrimination." South Africa is a prime example of a country where the pendulum has thus swung toward us as academics, educationalists, and curriculum experts to evaluate and design curricula that are relevant, appropriate, and inclusive in ways that enable us to achieve the goals and purposes of higher education and our societies. As the contributions to

<sup>20</sup> E. Sandoval-Lucero, "Serving the Developmental and Learning Needs of the 21st Century Diverse College Student Population: A Review of Literature," *Journal of Educational and Developmental Psychology* 4, no. 2 (2014): 47–64.

<sup>21</sup> Meier and Hartell, "Handling Cultural Diversity."

<sup>22</sup> Council on Higher Education, *South African Higher Education Reviewed: Two Decades of Democracy* (Pretoria: CHE, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Council on Higher Education, "Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education," July 1997, [http://www.che.ac.za/media\\_and\\_publications/legislation/education-white-paper-3-programme-transformation-higher-education](http://www.che.ac.za/media_and_publications/legislation/education-white-paper-3-programme-transformation-higher-education).

this special section demonstrate, this is a demanding responsibility but also a fascinating and enriching journey.

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