

THE DECOLONIAL TURN REVISITED

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ABSTRACT

In a recent article in this journal, Vorster and Quinn offered a set of recommendations on how academic staff developers can advise university lecturers on decolonising their curricula and methods. Their main advice was to integrate more African cultural elements into their teaching. However, Vorster and Quinn's advice is rather general. In this paper, I wish to complement their advice by giving some specific recommendations on how the decolonisation of education can happen in the field of philosophy.

Keywords: African higher education; Africanisation; African philosophy; decolonial turn; decolonisation of education; teacher development training

INTRODUCTION

In their article, “The ‘Decolonial Turn’: What Does It Mean for Academic Staff Development?,” Jo-Anne Vorster and Lynn Quinn (Vorster and Quinn 2017) offer a set of suggestions that academic development staff should give to lecturers in terms of how to adequately respond to the calls for the decolonisation of education. In other words, they wish to propose ways that academic development staff can work with academics so the latter can model their teaching and assessment methods in ways that are sensitive to the demands of educational decolonisation. Vorster and Quinn (2017) offer some brilliant and helpful suggestions for this project; however, the suggestions offered are, broadly speaking, vague. In this article, I wish to add to those suggestions by offering a more substantive view on what can be more specifically done, following the suggestions made by Vorster and Quinn. Particularly, I wish to revisit their suggestions in light of what kind of advice they can give to philosophy lecturers in the South African context. My suggestions are that more African cultural elements are used in teaching and assessment, that contents take into account African views on knowledge and are linked to cases relevant to students’ lives and identities, and that more post-colonial theory is taught.

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Taking this on board, this article is divided into two sections. In the first section, I outline Vorster and Quinn's problematisation of the issue of education, along with their recommendations. In the second section, I substantiate Vorster and Quinn's recommendations with examples of how the teaching of philosophy can respond to the demands of educational decolonisation. Even though my focus is philosophy, I believe that other academics in the humanities can also learn lessons from my argument.

VORSTER AND QUINN ON THE DECOLONIAL TURN

The decolonial turn is, according to Vorster and Quinn, a movement that aims at removing the colonial legacy in higher education, instead substituting it with a model which does not reflect colonial forms of education. There are many ethical concerns about why the colonial legacy ought to be abandoned; however, Vorster and Quinn contend that the core reason for being concerned about decolonising education is that universities and lecturers need to be promoting the success of most academic students, while the colonial legacy decreases the success rates of black students (Vorster and Quinn 2017).

This concern is raised in the South African context because despite the end of apartheid, and the implementation of affirmative policies aimed at helping black students access higher education in South Africa, Vorster and Quinn notice that there is still a significant lack of success for black individuals pursuing higher education at university. They cite data which reveals that even though the majority of students in higher education in South Africa is now black, the number of black students in higher education is only about 16 per cent of the 18–24 year-old cohort. Additionally, the percentage of black students dropping out of university is much higher than for white students (Vorster and Quinn 2017).

Broadly speaking, according to Vorster and Quinn, the colonial and apartheid legacy¹ still present in South Africa is to blame for these inequalities. For example, the economic inequalities between whites and non-whites largely persist in South Africa and, in particular, black individuals are still largely economically disadvantaged as they were during and before apartheid. One of the things this means is that, compared with white students, the percentage of black students that have access to a good high school education is small. This, in turn, means black students are less likely to access university and, when they do, they are less well prepared than white students, with less economic means with which to sustain their education (Vorster and Quinn 2017).

In addition to the economic factor, Vorster and Quinn rightly highlight a cultural alienation factor that influences student success. Black students' lack of success in higher education is largely due to these students feeling like pariahs at university. This experience is the result of university culture being too distant from their own culture, for

1 There are arguments that affirm these are the same and others that they are different things. I do not wish to explore this topic here, but intend to point out the possibility of differences between colonialism and apartheid.

it ranks kinds of knowledge, with higher forms of knowing from the global North, and lower forms from the global South (Vorster and Quinn 2017).

Other major factors that contribute to this pariah experience include the following. First, the contents of the curricula mostly originate from the global North, while very little about African thinkers and culture is taught. Second, the methods of teaching, such as the delivery of lectures and assessment are ways of learning that are alien to black cultures; furthermore, black students feel that these new ways of acquiring knowledge reflect the ideologies of the global North, making knowledge acquisition more difficult. Third, black students feel there is a widespread colonial symbolism apparent at universities which makes them feel uncomfortable and unwelcome in their study space (Vorster and Quinn 2017); some examples are the Rhodes statue on the UCT campus or the name “Rhodes” for Rhodes University.

All these factors make black students feel a sense of alienation in their place of education, and this sense of alienation contributes to a lack of success. That is, students who feel unfamiliar with and dislocated from the teaching, social environment and methods used at university, are more likely to be unmotivated and less prepared to learn.

Answering this diagnosis, Vorster and Quinn prescribe that academic development staff should work with lecturers in the direction of making the latter more aware of their contexts; thus lecturers should be encouraged to critically engage with their curriculum, methods and assessment choices. This, more specifically, indicates three things.

First, academic developers should help lecturers become more aware of the epistemological background of their students and, as a result, lecturers should facilitate epistemological access for a diverse student body. This means that lecturers should be aware that cultural ways of knowing and expressing are different, and should thus work to accommodate this difference. In practice, this entails engaging with knowledge and modes of learning and assessing with which of these students are familiar (Vorster and Quinn 2017).

Second, academic developers ought to help teachers become more aware of the relevance and impact that the materials they teach have on their students’ lives. Particularly, lecturers ought to be aware of whether the knowledge offered has any practical use for their students’ lives, as well as how the materials relate to their students’ identity (ethnicity, social class, and so forth) (Vorster and Quinn 2017).

According to Vorster and Quinn, the third aspect points towards academic developers cooperating with lecturers by stimulating them to question the rationale for using teaching materials and techniques that largely reflect the global North (Vorster and Quinn 2017).

To summarise, Vorster and Quinn recommend a decolonisation of education. This decolonisation requires looking at one’s teaching methods, content, and assessment techniques, and critically analysing whether these are justified and adequate for an African context. This is an activity that also requires an assessment of who students are, how they perceive things, and how their cultural groundwork shapes them. To conclude, even though Vorster and Quinn do not express it explicitly, part of the project of the

decolonisation of education entails an Africanisation of education, i.e., constructing educational institutions strongly based on African values. They wish for education in South Africa to reflect African culture in its methods, content, and forms of expression (Vorster and Quinn 2017). The reason why I argue this is their goal is because they acknowledge that decolonisation means different things according to context, while going on to argue that African ways of knowing ought to be taken into consideration in this teaching.

AFRICANISATION IN THE TEACHING OF PHILOSOPHY

In this section, in continuation with Vorster and Quinn, I wish to argue how their advice regarding the teaching of philosophy can be substantiated. With respect to the point on epistemological access, I contend that, in the teaching of philosophy, there are at least four actions that lecturers can take to Africanise teaching and assessing methods.

First, teachers should include more oral assessments than are currently used. African culture, broadly speaking, has a strong oral tradition; most forms of interaction are done orally, while within African culture for someone to be a good speaker is a form of praise (Appiah 2004; Coetzee and Roux 2004; Hallen 2009; Horsthemke 2015; Metz 2007; Olupona 2014). Equally, philosophical wisdom has been, with few exceptions in history, mostly transmitted orally—that is, until the end of colonialism. Only by the end of colonial domination had the philosophy produced in Africa gained a written form (Gade 2012; Hallen 2009; Metz 2007). So, philosophical wisdom has mostly been transmitted from still existing older generations to current younger generations in an oral form (Horsthemke 2015; Metz 2007; Oruka 1990).

Second, the forms of expression used in the classroom do not always need to be made in the Western argumentative form, but can instead be expressed using traditional, non-Western methods of expression. In African culture and in the African philosophical tradition, knowledge and arguments are not expressed in an analytic argumentative form, as in the West, but rather in the shape of myths, proverbs and art-forms (for example, story-telling, poetry, theatre and music) (Hountondji 1995; Metz 2007; Olupona 2014; Oruka 1990).

Third, teachers should incorporate methodologies for truth verification that are African; for example, in various African cultures, like the Yoruba, the main source of truth verification is testimonial evidence. To know if something is true, the ultimate proof is whether someone has testified it; other forms are, generally, considered less relevant (Bewaji 2004). In fact, elders are routinely considered wise precisely because they have testified to various events in life that have given them wisdom (Oruka 1990).

Fourth, communities as a whole and community sages more specifically should be included in the shaping and teaching of philosophy modules. This means, for instance, that some classes ought to be taught by communities and sages. Traditionally, in African philosophy the two main subjects of philosophical knowledge are community sages, and/or communities as a whole (Oruka 1990).

The point I wish to make here is that black students would demonstrate more skills, and feel much more confident, integrated, and familiar, if they could express their understanding in a cultural form that corresponds to their culture. These examples are elements of their culture; as such, they can succeed better because they are more familiar with them, and can thus articulate them in a better way. Additionally, integrating these methods which are part of their culture symbolises that their culture has value, giving students more confidence and motivation to engage in higher education.

With respect to making the curricula more relevant for students, I wish to make a general point about the value of knowledge in Africa, before making some suggestions for topics to be used in the classroom.

It is important for lecturers to understand that, broadly speaking, many African cultures do not perceive knowledge as something valuable in itself; rather knowledge has value only if it has instrumental value (Metz 2009). It is important to know this anthropological fact as it leads to an understanding of why students may sometimes not be motivated to learn some of the materials provided in class. Taking this on board and in order to motivate students, lecturers need to select philosophical topics that may have some instrumental value for them in the South African context.

One example would be to discuss the value of truth; that is, whether saying and knowing the truth is always a good thing or not. This discussion can be relevant for a discussion of the merit of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission. To address the harms of apartheid, this South African based commission included a guideline whereby the truth should always be told in order to make reparations (Tutu 2000); however, some people could argue that in certain circumstances the victim would be better off if the truth was not told (Walker 2010). A discussion about the value of truth may be used for self-reflection about one's and significant others' identities, as well as how to address future harms in the South African context.

Another example is the philosophical discussion relating to what happens to the soul after the body dies; this discussion can be instrumentally used for students to debate the common African belief that ancestors exist, and can interfere in individuals' lives (Horsthemke 2015).

The third point that Vorster and Quinn address is not so much about what and how to teach, but a general request to lecturers for self-reflection. My response in this paper is mostly about how to substantiate their advice when it comes to teaching, so my suggestion regarding this is more limited than the previous ones. Hence, regarding this point, I would suggest that academic developers can insist that teachers include more post-colonial theory in their teaching. The reason why I suggest this is because research suggests that the best way to understand a topic in detail is to teach it, as the activity of having to explain a topic to others, as well as anticipating and answering questions on it, is one of the most efficient ways to gain in-depth knowledge of something. Thus, given that post-colonial theory is precisely the kind of theory that challenges the dominant use of global Northern literature and methodologies, this would potentially be a positive way for lecturers to question their own curricula and methodological choices.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this paper is a reply to Vorster and Quinn's article on the decolonial turn in education. My aim is not to challenge their suggestions here; nevertheless, I did find that their original suggestions lacked specificity. Taking that on board, I wished to substantiate their claims with some theory and examples on how to understand the decolonial turn in the teaching of philosophy. Broadly speaking, my recommendations are three-fold; first, I suggest various African ways of knowing as part of the teaching and assessing methods; second, I alert lecturers to the understanding of the value of knowledge in many African cultures, providing examples on how to make philosophical topics more relevant for black students; third, I recommend the inclusion of post-colonial theory in the syllabi as a way for lecturers to question their own curricula choices.

Further research should look at how to take the decolonial turn outside the humanities. Particularly, how can traditional forms of healing be integrated in courses such as medicine?

Further research should also focus on the decolonial turn outside Africa. As Vorster and Quinn contend, decolonisation means different things according to the context. So, the recommendations I make may not be valid for other former colonised contexts such as Latin-America or East Asia.

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