

Book Review

Understanding higher education: Alternative perspectives (2022) by C. Boughey, and S. McKenna.

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In August 2023, I enrolled for a Short Learning Programme in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education at the University of Johannesburg's Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies. *Understanding Higher Education: Alternative Perspectives*, by Chrissie Boughey and Sioux McKenna, published by African Minds in 2022, was one of the books we had to study for our first assignment. These authors, like those of other publications that concentrate on current discussions in higher education, use their extensive knowledge of higher education (HE) studies to contribute to the discussion about the goals and prospects for modern HE in Africa, and in South Africa specifically. I found the book to be a fascinating reflection on the discourses that dominate HE systems in the Global South.

First, Boughey and McKenna investigate the significance of context for effective teaching and learning in South Africa's HE system both directly and indirectly, complementing the efforts by other academics working in this area, such as Hlatshwayo (2020), Jansen (2017), Mhkize (2015), and Ndimele (2016). Research has shown that decontextualized approaches to teaching and learning are still evident in the South African HE sector and in that of the Global South generally (see Ndimele (2016) and Odhiambo (2016)).

Given these concerns regarding the HE environment in the Global South, a review of Boughey and McKenna's book is timely. My focus here is on the ways in which they define decontextualized methods of teaching and learning in HE. Additionally, I show how these authors illustrate the ways in which decontextualized methods of teaching and learning are common in Africa in general and in the HE sector in South Africa in particular. I conclude by making some recommendations based on these findings that may help HE systems in the Global South go beyond these decontextualized methods in their instruction.

Generally, scholars agree that context in higher education teaching and learning encompasses the social and cultural settings, the application of scientific theory, professional practice, and the state of technology (Boughey & McKenna, 2016; De Jong, 2008), although Boughey and

McKenna acknowledge here that there is no consensus on the meaning of context. They note that to address students' diminishing interest in the subjects they are studying, contextualized HE places an emphasis on social understandings of teaching and learning. In Boughey and McKenna's words,

teaching and learning should be understood as deeply immersed in the socio cultural context, and not as the neutral transmission of knowledge to a decontextualised individual. (p. 75)

For them, learning cannot be viewed as autonomous of context. Rather, learning should be primarily understood as connected to the history and culture of the context in which it takes place. Msimanga and Shizha (2014), too, noted that students' interest and motivation are heightened when globalised higher education institutions (HEIs) incorporate teaching and learning with reference to real-world situations.

Boughey and McKenna bemoan the low levels of student engagement that arise from the persistence of traditional teaching methods in South Africa and many other African nations, despite improvements in efficiency and equality brought about by the impact of globalisation and neoliberalism on HE over the previous 50 years. Mass education systems have replaced systems of HE that were created expressly for an elite, homogenous population and have included necessary changes in the curriculum. However, in spite of this, there are ongoing calls for changes to the HE system in South Africa, in particular, to fit the country's expanding and varied student body.

According to Boughey and McKenna, decontextualized teaching and learning that ignores the social context in which students and higher education systems are placed is still part of South Africa's HE practice. This kind of teaching and learning, wherever it takes place, disregards a nation's national history in its creation of curricula and its choice of teaching philosophies and techniques. In addition, the identity, color, ethnicity, gender, language, culture, along with the associated needs of the learners are not given enough, if any, consideration. Although this may well be an accurate picture of HE in general in South Africa, I see it also as a critique of HE systems across Africa, a continent that is still working to liberate itself from decades of colonialism, decolonialism, and coloniality as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) pointed out ten years ago.

Following their earlier work in 2016 and 2017, Boughey and McKenna spent several years rigorously examining South Africa's HEIs, only to find that South African universities and colleges continue to reject the importance of context in HE. As a result, there are still misconceptions about the relationship between and among students, curricula, teaching, and learning theories in South Africa's HE system.

In their explanation and illustration of several intriguing characteristics, Boughey and McKenna expose the degree of decontextualization of teaching and learning in HE in South Africa; I will discuss the most significant areas. First, the rhetoric about higher education in South Africa tends to ignore the larger social structures that affect student success and

attribute it to individual traits like aptitude, motivation, and intelligence (see, too, Boughey & McKenna, 2016, 2017). In seeing students' successes and failures as being solely their own responsibility and ignoring elements like individual institutions, society, country history, and curriculum evolution (or the lack of it), the prevailing language decontextualizes student success and failure. For example, low academic performance is frequently explained in terms of a lack of student motivation, as evidenced by data from institutional audits at universities.

Second, Boughey and McKenna make it clear that scholars in South Africa's HE system may disregard the correlation between social class and academic achievement in viewing the entire higher education system as a meritocracy. In the discourse of meritocracy, the success of students is attributed to personal qualities like aptitude, intelligence, and motivation while failure has to do with their absence.

Students are defined as people who either put in a lot of work or do not, are self-motivated or not, are intelligent and gifted or not, and, as a result, either belong in the right course or not. (p. 54)

The fact is that learners' academic progress is hampered by how social factors such as gender, race, and colour are perceived, whether as irrelevant or as obstacles to the reorganization of educational institutions and, by extension, to curriculum reform.

While the country's HE system embraced the contentious student-centered ideology of the 1990s in order to accommodate a diverse student body and veer away from conventional teacher-centred methods that challenge the narrative of the decontextualized learner by emphasising the needs, desires, and behaviours of the students (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994), this movement has been misinterpreted, resulting in an oversimplified and decontextualized understanding of them. Language relating to contextual difficulties and disadvantages that perpetuate misunderstandings and limit students' experiences is the primary discourse. Commenting on the student-centred approach that still characterises HEIs in South Africa, Boughey and McKenna argue that this approach emerged to reinforce the discourse of the decontextualised learner. For them,

[s]tudent-centredness may have emerged as a concept from an understanding that higher education has a role to play in achieving social justice but it is often misused to justify a focus on students' deficits, once again absenting the notion of the university as a social structure and the student as a social being. (p. 59)

Additionally, these authors have noted that academic literacy courses taught at South African universities mostly employ Decontextualized Theory (DT). In these institutions, the connection between identity, language, and academic literacy practices is frequently disregarded given that DT holds that by eliminating the university's history, ethos, and values from its philosophies, methods, and curricula, HEIs produce students who are estranged from their surroundings. For Boughey and McKenna, "This would of necessity have raised questions about how the university values some ways of being over others" (p. 59) had social

accounts of students been more obvious. HEIs must recognise from this stance that their instruction and learning cannot be independent of context.

Furthermore, for these authors, in teaching academic literacy courses, institutions should recognize that there are different kinds of academic literacy, such as those found in political science, pediatric medicine, and philosophy, as opposed to the unitary or generic course offerings. Generic academic literacy courses are taught in South Africa (as well as in Namibia, Zimbabwe, and other African nations) regardless of the disciplines in which the students are located and this restricts their access to effective teaching and learning (see Mungungu-Shipale, 2016). In the words of Boughey and McKenna,

Thus, we hear of ‘academic literacy courses’ that are generically offered to students who come from widely disparate programmes. There is thus no understanding that the academic literacy practices to which students seek access emerge from the values and structure of the target field. (p. 69)

This emphasises the need to recognise that there are different academic literacies that result from viewing students as social beings, universities as social environments, and literacy practices as social constructs, and noting that these perspectives all have an impact on instruction.

Still commenting on academic literacy and the tutors in South African HE contexts and beyond, Boughey and McKenna argue that language experts work in universities and colleges all over the world to help students with their language needs. In South Africa, this helps people who might not otherwise be able to find work. They provide writing centers that are frequently thought of as resource rooms for impoverished students, academic literacy classes, and life skills courses. Instead of treating the underlying problems, this self-serving industry can make student failure and uneven success rates even worse. It is also important to note that this strategy focuses more on trying to prescribe answers in a decontextualized, non-ideological way than it does on creating employment prospects. This view was also reported in other contexts in earlier studies in Namibia (Mungungu-Shipale, 2016) and Nigeria (Ndimele, 2016).

Third, the curriculum at certain South African universities and colleges is not socially equal, inclusive, nor accessible. Hlatshwayo (2019) highlighted the significance of an inclusive, accessible curriculum as well as the necessity of challenging the validity and structure of target knowledge. According to Mkhize (2015), certain college courses are designed with a particular in-group in mind. Additional features of decontextualized teaching and learning in South Africa have been brought to light here by Boughey and McKenna. These include concerns about academic freedom, pay inequality, and the impact of institutional histories on curriculum creation. To support this view these authors make reference to the absence of academic freedom in South African HE and say that,

[u]nlike teachers in schools with a national curriculum, university academics have fairly extensive agency to design their curricula, albeit conditioned by various

mechanisms. One significant mechanism that conditions such agency is the location of universities in society. (p. 94)

Curricular contextualization is necessary in HE to address the issues raised by Boughey and McKenna because of the difficulties that decontextualized approaches to teaching and learning in higher education confront. In contrast to these approaches in HE, these authors support the adoption of Archer's Social Realism philosophical standpoint and that of John Dewey's Pragmatic School of Philosophy. According to these two philosophies, curriculum development and classroom activities that take into account students' social structures, backgrounds, cultures, and local features are essential to their wellbeing.

Boughey and McKenna add that, if data on student performance reveals inefficiencies and unequal treatment of social groups—Black South Africans, for instance, suffer more than their white counterparts (e.g. in terms of lower levels of funding)—then the emphasis on abstract notions of injustice and inefficiency conceals the personal experiences of thousands of students, since up until the middle of the 20th century, almost all HEIs worldwide catered to a select group of students from specific social backgrounds. This highlights the need for a more comprehensive analysis of the underlying issues behind unfairness and inefficiency, as well as the necessity for more racially integrated campuses. Scholars of higher education and decoloniality (Hlatshwayo, 2020; Jansen, 2017; Mhkize, 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013) have questioned the sincerity of the discourses of equality, equity, transformation, and inclusivity in South Africa's HE sector in light of the current state of the country's HEIs. This was amply demonstrated by the student protests such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall that began in March 2015 and proliferated throughout South African universities and colleges and beyond, (Jansen, 2017).

Geographical separation between institutions is another pressing issue that Boughey and McKenna examine because it significantly affects faculty staff, students, and funding. Whereas white universities are concentrated in large cities, Black universities are found primarily in rural areas. The mere fact that Black universities and colleges are situated in isolated, rural places has a significant impact on how curricula are designed, how these institutions support students, and how teaching and learning are carried out and this could prevent Black universities from moving past decontextualized methods. I have not seen many white students enrolling at rural colleges in QwaQwa and Limpopo, despite the fact that South African universities started to accept students from all social groups in the 1980s.

The assertion made by Boughey and McKenna that instruction is still mostly decontextualized in South African HEIs is mostly true. A decontextualized HE system is evident in the prevalence of dominant discourses that decontextualize and fail to take into account the student's socio-historical and political conditions, as well as in the misapplication of ideologies (e.g. how the student-centred approach continues to be used to perpetuate the discourse of the decontextualised learner) and misinterpretation of curriculum. In brief, Boughey and McKenna contend that the (South African) university, through its current practices, plays a role in reinforcing the unjust social status quo and this is a bitter pill to

swallow. Furthermore, it raises a number of challenges about how our pedagogy, curricula, and institutional cultures could be re-structured to alter this (p. 58)

Instruction in HE also presents a variety of difficulties concerning how our institutional cultures, curricula, and pedagogy may be reformed to change the unjust status quo in South African HEIs. Reforming the HE sector will require a holistic examination of the socio-cultural context in which it operates.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned difficulties, I agree with Boughey and McKenna that, in order to boost students' interest and motivation in a particular subject and, eventually, their success, South Africa and the Global South in general require a decolonised and contextualised HE sector that is responsive to their needs, identities, histories, socioeconomic and geographic conditions, and technological contexts.

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