

Teaching Multicultural and Multilingual classes at an institution of Higher Learning

1.1. Introduction

Multicultural education can be viewed as a progressive approach for transforming education that holistically critiques and addresses current shortcomings, failings and discriminatory practices in education. It is grounded in ideals of social justice, education equity and a dedication to facilitating educational experiences in which all students reach their full potential as learners and as socially aware and active human beings, locally, nationally and globally. Norvis (2002) believes that although most higher education institutions have changed their admission and recruitment policy, they still do not reflect the demographics of South African society. Multicultural education is not a concept that lulls the mind, but rather one that prompts debate. It has significantly impacted on higher education in South Africa. Its proponents have argued that education that excludes the experience and contributions of other diverse cultural group, robs its entire society of the treasures endowed in the multicultural nature of that society.

1.2. Background

In South Africa, there is and has been a growing interest in the concept of multicultural and multilingual teaching and learning at institutions of higher education. The language policies of tertiary educational institutions have been a point of serious concern and debate for a number of years. Historically Afrikaans-speaking or medium universities have been particularly affected by pressure to re-evaluate their policies and to provide teaching in English. The release on 5 November 2002 of the long-awaited “Language policy for higher education” (LPHE) of 5 November 2002 increase the pressure and demands for transformation of the higher education landscape. At best the policy can be interpreted as a clear directive: “develop a multilingual environment and ensure that students can use the existing

language of instruction in such a way that throughput improves” (van der Walt: 2004). To compound matters, the LPHE was followed by “the Ministerial Report for the Development of African Languages as Mediums of Instruction in Higher Education (DoE 2005). In the 2005 report, a policy framework for the development of indigenous African Languages as medium of instruction in higher education was proposed.

Currently, a number of historically Afrikaans medium universities use parallel medium teaching in their classes and in most cases students are divided into English and Afrikaans medium of instruction classes in the same course or subject. Some are experimenting with the use of “simultaneous interpreting as an alternative to parallel-medium teaching (Beukes & Pienaar: 2006). However, some historically Afrikaans medium Universities and Former Technkons (Now called Universities of Technology) are increasingly opting for education through the medium of English only while others are still sticking to Afrikaans as a medium of instruction despite government pressure to adapt and cater for an increasing intake of non-Afrikaans speaking students.

However, those historically Afrikaans speaking institutions of higher learning, which opted for English as medium of instruction or for parallel medium of teaching are often faced with students unrest with one of the grievances being the use of Afrikaans by some lecturers as medium of instruction in certain programmes and/or faculties. The one thing that such universities often neglect is among others:

- Resistance from Afrikaans speaking lecturers to switch to the use of English as medium of instruction.
- Language development to help them cope with the switch from using Afrikaans as medium to English.

If the situation was reversed and Afrikaans speaking students were to be admitted at historically disadvantaged black institutions of higher learning, one wonders if black academics there will be able to offer tuition in Afrikaans.

Most universities don't adequately prepare their staff to switch from offering tuition in Afrikaans to English and problems will continue for some time to arise.

1.3. Multicultural Education

Multicultural education is defined as a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. "it challenges and reject racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts the pluralism that students, their community and teachers represents" (Dumminy, 1968:208). A truly multicultural education implies school policies and practices which accepts and respect diversity in the classroom. It means accepting the culture and language of students and their families and embracing them as vehicles for learning (Litheko, 1994:2).

From this definition, it is evident that the concept multicultural education is based on the following fundamental believes and assumptions:

- There is strength and value in promoting cultural diversity;
- Educational institutions should be models for the expression of human rights and respect for cultural diversity.
- Social justice and equality for all people should be of paramount importance in the design and delivery of curricula.
- Attitudes and values necessary for the continuation of a democratic society, can be promoted in educational institutions,
- Lastly, institutions involved in community services, can create an environment that is supportive of multiculturalism.

It is thus through education that positive attitudes towards cultural diversity can be encouraged and prejudice removed. There are, however, sometimes unrecognized assumptions of the multicultural approach which work against the very goals it wishes to achieve. It is frequently assumed by many multiculturalists that physical appearance and culture are inexcavably bound.

The usual effect, at least in the process of education, is that prejudices are often confirmed, not removed. A particular cultural practice e.g. identified as black in a social environment which holds “blackness” as negative, is more likely to corroborate the preconceived negativity. What is worse, the process could result in the ridiculous tendency of associating that specific cultural practice with “blackness” whenever the former was found. This suggests another hidden assumption that cultures are somehow fixed and unchanging. But the most reprehensible assumption of the multicultural approach has to be insistence that only non-white culture needs to be explained. With such an emphasis multiculturalists tend to reinforce, not eradicate the inferior status of the explained culture (Gollnick, 1990:47).

Multicultural education therefore is a concept that incorporates cultural diversity and provides equality in educational institutions. For it to become reality, the total environment must reflect a commitment to multicultural education. The diverse cultural backgrounds of students are as important in developing effective instructional strategies as are their physical and mental capabilities. Further, educators must understand the influence of racism, sexism and classism on the lives of their students and ensure that they are not perpetual in the lectureroom (Schoeman, 1 1993:14).

1.4 Students Concerns

Language at historically Afrikaans speaking institutions of Higher Learning seems to be the main problem on which students focus when embarking on strike action. This became evident recently when students at my university embarked on an unofficial strike over rumours of the increase of fees for tuition and hostel in 2008. The SRC cited the following main student grievances:

- Educational Standards
- Afrikaans Instruction
- High failure rates

Though the strike started as dissatisfaction about the proposed fees increase out eight listed grievances, five were on Afrikaans as language of instruction. The following put five grievances were put forward by the SRC:

1. When class questions are asked in Afrikaans, the discussion switch to Afrikaans but the lecturer does not translate the questions and the discussion.
2. The use of Afrikaans as medium of instruction and school/faculty meetings limit student/SRC participation.
3. The prescribing of Afrikaans textbooks – especially in Civil Engineering.
4. The 70% use of Afrikaans in some classes – especially in Hospitality.
5. Afrikaans instruction – who pays for extra – classes being offered, is it the participants or every students

The response of management to this grievances is academic, what I wish to highlight is the grievances over tuition and hostel fees was a smokescreen as at issue here was the use of Afrikaans as medium in some classes. One can understand the grievances of students about the use of Afrikaans or medium of instruction since most students from SADC countries especially those from Lesotho and Botswana – of which the University has quite a number do not understand Afrikaans at all.

The composition of the students' population at Central University of Technology (CUT) roughly consists of 30% "Afrikaans" speaking students and when issues of language are discussed this group of students seems to be left out of the equation. CUT is a former historically Afrikaans institution of higher learning and in the past Afrikaans was the sole medium of instruction. This group of students, who constitute 30% of the CUT student population, is often not vocal about their grievances on the issue of language. It is a fact that most if not all "black" academic staff member offer tuition exclusively in English. Those academics from SADC countries are not in a position to understand Afrikaans. The question is: Are these students not disadvantaged and discriminated against especially those Afrikaans students from small Free

State Province towns? The answers to these questions lies in the responses from the results of the study I undertook at CUT about these students' problems in the lecture room.

1.5. Data Collection Instrument

To collect data for this study, I used the university "Evaluation of the lecturer by students" questionnaire instrument. In this questionnaire students are asked to be as honest and objective as possible in their responses to the questions on the lecturer's teaching methods and their own experiences with regard to the lecturer his/her teaching methods and the subject itself. The questionnaire further requests the respondents to maintain a professional sense of judgment and not to compare lecturer with one another. The completion for this form is on a voluntary and anonymous basis.

The questionnaire (available only in English) consist of four sections namely:

- The lecturer as a person
- The lecturer as academic leader
- The subject
- The student himself/herself

The questionnaire is a Likert Scale type of instrument from 4-Always to 0-Never. The assumption in a Likert Scale is that the interval between each number on the scale is used to register the extent of the student's satisfaction with the lecturer as a person or as academic leader. The higher the scale (4-Always) the higher the level of satisfaction. The items are independent so that no answer to an item depends on the responses to any other items.

1.6. Results

It was the result of the second section of the questionnaire that I was interested in as students in this section provide written remarks to a series of questions; e.g.

- What is the strongest positive characteristic of the lecturer?
- What is the strongest negative characteristic of the lecturer?
- In your opinion, what can be done to improve the subject?
- In your opinion, what are the short comings of the subject?
- How would you be able to improve your performance in this subject?
- e.t.c

it is not the questions per se that I want to focus on, but their responses and remarks that shed light on their problems with the use of English as a medium of instruction. This point is best illustrated with these responses:

- “Because I thought I know more English than I could, I am disappointed because I cant talk it in class”,
- “Die dosent het dalk regte kwalifikasies maar kan nie ‘n les oordra of kommunikeer nie”. (The lecturer maybe possesses the right qualifications but cannot put the lesson through or communicate).
- “Mens kry die gevoel daar word teen Afrikaans gediskrimineer”. (A person feels that Afrikaans is discriminated against)
- “Die dosent kan nie tot studente se vlak daal nie”. (The lecturer cannot come down to the level of students).

From the afore-mentioned quotations, it can be seen that the problems students encounter in the lecturer-room is not simply one of language, but more of a general cultural phenomenon for which language becomes the main indicator. This represents the greatest challenge not only to institutions of higher learning but to our education system today. Such responses are

typical of students from monocultural education system which, among other things,

- Does not recognize diversity and differences in class,
- Exclude and ignore the contributions of students of colour, woman and other subordinated groups,
- Tries to prevent and defuse conflict in the classroom,
- Places power and authority with the teacher, creating an unsafe and destructive environment for a women and students of colour,
- Blames women and black students for possible lower performance and participation.

and

- Sees any concessions to a diverse student population as compromising excellence.

It is evident therefore, that monoculturalism unfairly Singles out, Exclude, Ignores or discounts students on the bases of Gender, Race, Ethnicity or Sexual orientation. It establishes one set of accepted behaviours and expect everyone else in the lecture room to assimilate it (Litheko, 1994:10).

1.7 Didactic guidelines for a multicultural lectureroom

The situation in South Africa is unique and comparison with other countries is of limited value. It is generally acknowledged that South Africa comprises one of the most multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural societies in the world. It is an open question whether multicultural education can make a significant contribution towards meeting extensive education institutions like ours with the implementation of multicultural education. To achieve this, all teaching at institutions should be multicultural and all lecturerooms should be models of democracy and equity. This requires from us as lecturers that we should:

- Place the student at the centre of the teaching and learning process,

- Promote human rights and respect for cultural differences,
- Believe that all students can learn,
- Acknowledge and build on the life histories and experience of student's micro-cultural membership.
- Critically analyze oppression and power relationships in order to understand Racism, Sexism, Classism and Discrimination against the disabled, young, aged, blacks and women.
- Critique society in the interest of social justice and equality,
and
- Participate in collective social action to ensure a democratic society (Hessari. R. et. Al 1989:13)

From the aforementioned, it becomes evident that a multicultural lectureroom is therefore, one in which,

- The lecturer is aware of how his or her cultural identity impacts learning and lecturerooms dynamics,
- The content, readings, language, assignments, tests and evaluation reflects diverse cultural styles,
- The lectureroom norms and ground rules are reflective of cultural diversity,
- The participation of all students is sought, and culturally diverse style of communication and participation are recognized.
- Differences are appreciated and welcomed and ways of using differences to enrich everybody's educational experience are sought,
- Conflict, both overt or covert, is used constructively to negotiate differences, establish honest dialogue and increase learning,
- A multicultural lectureroom is therefore one which is Participatory, Fair, Liberating, Enriching and Humane.

1.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to point out that every lecturer comes to his or her own definition of what “Good Teaching” is. We have all read books or at least our share of them, and we have taken courses. But whatever it is that we know about teaching, we did not learn from books, nor did we learn it from credits shown on our transcripts. It is true that books presented us with skills, they instruct us in how to make lesson plans, and they taught us conventions for writing lesson objectives. And those were useful things to know. But they are not what good teaching is about. The books did teach us how to teach. And as for other courses, (except for Practice Teaching) they were almost totally irrelevant (Saunders, M. 1982:64).

Whatever you and I know about teaching, we learned it in the only way I believe good teaching can be learned, that is, from those teachers who believed in what they were doing. From all of them, we have learned to teach. From their examples we are able now to say this is what teaching is about, namely:

- Good teaching is to know your subjects and keep abreast of new developments in it,
- Good teaching is truth. If you do not know, to admit it. If you do know, to have the courage of your convictions and to speak them without equivocation at the appropriate moment,
- Good teaching is to know who you are, to speak in your own voice, to show your weakness as well as your strength,
- Good teaching is an art which requires discipline,
- Good teaching is being able to say to your students, teach me. I can learn from you,
- Good teaching is accepting the responsibility for helping to make the journey for your students, as interesting, as exciting and as rewarding as possible, (Litheko, 1994:11).

Finally good teaching in a multicultural content involves, understanding the experiences of your students from different cultural backgrounds, and using that knowledge to help them learn the subject matter, your sensitivity to those differences can be used to make students from the dominant culture, feel as comfortable in your class as those from the historically disadvantaged groups.

Limitations of the paper are that the results obtained in this paper cannot be generalized to other historically Afrikaans higher institutions of learning and that they are based only on the “general remarks” section of the questionnaire excluding result of the Likert scale section. Also, the sample used consists only of one of my first year classes at CUT.

References

- Dummy, P A :African pupils and teaching them. Van Schaik Ltd, Pretoria, 1968
- Gollnick, D M :Multicultural Education in a pluralistic society. 4th ed. USA, 1990.
- Hessari. R :Practical ideals for multicultural learning and teaching in the Primary School. Routledge, London, 1989.
- Hansen, E U :Plain talk about teaching, Improving College and University teaching. Volume XXV, Oregon State University USA, 1977.
- Lewis, I :The students experience of Higher Education, Groom Helm, London, 1984.
- Litheko S R S :Perspective on Multicultural Teaching and Learning. Interim, Bloemfontein, 1994.
- Litheko, S.R.S: :Didactic Guidelines for the Multicultural Lectureroom. Interim, Bloemfontein, 2003
- Saunders, M :Multicultural Teaching. A guide for the Classroom, Mcgraw-Hill Ltd, England, 1982.
- Schoeman, D :Multicultural teaching in the University, London, 1993.
- Squelch, J M :Education for Equality. The challenge to multicultural education in Dekker E.I and Lemmer, E M (Eds). Critical issues in Modern Education, Johannesburg, 1996.