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A timely question: How can we not talk about becoming a professor in the context of a neoliberal and decolonising higher education?

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Abstract

Drawing from my own experiences and critical reflections on my journey to becoming a professor, I show how two types of pressures facing higher education institutions necessitate a revisiting of the role of a professor. These pressures are, firstly, to account for "market-friendliness" and, secondly, to respond to the transformation and decolonisation imperatives as a result of massification. I show the broader socio-economic and political conditions under which universities exist and the impact these have on the knowledge project. I argue that such impact manifests through instrumental reasoning and the commodification of knowledge, as well as "Western hegemony" over others. I then explore the extent to which a professorial role may need to re-adapt in order to respond to these broader socio-economic and political exigencies that continue to spill over into higher education.

Keywords: academic leadership, coloniality, knowledge project, knowledge producers, neoliberalism ideology, professorial role

Introduction

The topic of this paper is framed as a question put in the negative for two reasons. Firstly, I used "how can we not?" to denote a need to be cautious. This cautiousness is necessitated by the context within which I am discussing the subject of becoming a professor. It is a context in which almost every sector in the western world is challenged by the need to juggle the rigidity of the ideology of neoliberalism, and the commitment to ensure its consequences do not affect peoples' mental health and general wellness. Within knowledge generation industries such as universities, this includes safeguarding the academic project. Therefore, in discussing the subject of becoming a professor, I am careful not to reflect on this role in ways that are laced by what Blake, et al. (1998: 3) call the 'hegemony of instrumental reason'. It is a hegemony that tends to impose the criterion of economic usefulness to measure success. Within academia, the knowledge-

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generation, its dissemination, leadership, as well as community engagement, cannot be measured in the same way we measure productivity, say in a shoe factory, for example.

The second reason for framing the topic of this paper the way I have is that, in the South African setting, a context in which I have enacted my role as an academic since the late 1990s, there is a general political fractiousness and an undoubted awareness by all of us of the continued social and material inequality. This broader societal uneasiness has spilled over into higher education. As I will be showing in the later sections of this paper, while there are concrete efforts in the knowledge generation project that are beginning to unsettle an asymmetrical knowledge–power relations between the North and South, there is still room for an open and strong calling into question of the norms and epistemologies characteristic of universities in postcolonial/post-conflict societies like South Africa (SA). While this calling into question of the obvious inequalities that still persist has emerged mainly from students, in some Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) academics are beginning to grapple with it and call out the constraints that continue to undermine such calls. Writing about two, yet different historically white universities in which she served as a senior manager, Lange (2019: 80), for example, notes that:

> While at UFS students were alone in their protest – that is, no academic staff, especially no black academics, directly supported the movement – at UCT many staff, especially black academics, supported the students in a variety of ways, but especially through teach-ins … and these academics were already steeped in the 'decolonial turn' discourse and could be of help to the students.

In a context where there is still a need for, and to respond responsibly to, these calls, we cannot not talk about becoming a professor. Hence, as HEIs continue to operate within a climate in which the pressure from market forces co-exist with continued calls for the transformation and decolonisation of the curriculum and institutional cultures, how can we not talk about becoming a professor? This paper is thus a contribution to our attempts within the academy to re-visit our understandings of the role of a professor. I do so by attempting to offer some thoughts on two related questions: 'what purpose(s) do (or should) professors serve and, in particular, what is the basis of their distinction?' (Evans, 2017: 124). In a higher-education context that continues to negotiate its way in the face of two types of pressures: firstly, to account for their "market-friendliness" and, secondly, to respond to the transformation and decolonisation of the curriculum and institutional cultures, this conversation is timely.

Enacting a professorial role within a neoliberal model

In *University Professors as Academic Leaders: Professorial Leadership Development Needs and Provision*, Evans (2017: 123) draws our attention to Malcolm Tight's opening question at his 2002 professorial inaugural lecture, in which he asks: 'What does it mean to be a professor?' Evans (2017: 124) then admits, as would many of us in the SA context who hold the Humboldtian (2022, Bongaerts) notion of an intellectual leader in a field of study, that 'the terms "professor" and its

etymological derivatives, such as "professorial" and "professoriate", are reserved for reference only to those at the pinnacle of the academic staff hierarchy (full professors)'. Reference to "the pinnacle of the academic staff hierarchy" implies something more than a status one receives for having spent a specific agreed-upon number of years in academia. Rather than signifying a status, being at the "pinnacle" implies that very specific activities by an academic over a longer and sustained period have brought about quality and high-level interventions with tangible educational/intellectual/scholarly and societal impact and a contribution to human knowledge.

In line with the Humboldtian view of the "professorial" identity held in this paper as briefly introduced above, I argue that some of the possible ramifications of the neoliberal model in running operations within the higher education sector seem to have been the "weakening" of this title. Both locally and internationally, there appears to be different practices on how and who is accorded the title 'professor'. While some universities still maintain that a professorial title should be awarded to individuals who demonstrate continued and sustained knowledge contribution into and leadership in a field of study, in some the title is awarded to individuals on the basis of their appointments to senior management roles (Capano, 2008). This is seen in contexts where the title is awarded as soon as an individual assumes the position of dean, deputy vice chancellor, or vice chancellor. In such cases, these appointments are "executive" and are made by selection committees. While there are instances where a distinction is made between individuals appointed to senior management and awarded the title on this basis, and those who maintain the title on the basis of their intellectual leadership in a field of study prior to assuming new management roles, other universities strip the title after a former intellectually leading professor assumes a senior management role. In at least one university, the call for members of "top management" to be awarded the professor has resulted in the establishment of the category of "management professor". The complication on the title is worsened by the fact that in the United States and some countries, all academic teachers are termed "professors", with the title "Doctor" holding more status (Currie, 1998). By and large, globally the trend is that the identifier is blurred across the higher education institutions. Among other things, I argue that this appearance of confusion about the title is symptomatic of the consequences of an imposition of a managerialist ethos in ways that continue to undermine the peculiar role universities as places for knowledge generation and dissemination are to play in society. As Bongaerts (2022: 500) puts it:

> With the emergence of the neoliberal university model in the 1990s, key elements of the Humboldtian Model have been complemented by university obligations to meet expectations from government, the business community, and society at large with regard to the usefulness and benefit of university research and educational outputs.

Instead of enhancing the role of a professor from a Humboldtian perspective, these additional pressures have led to the running of universities as businesses in which knowledge has become a commodity to be purchased. In this context, a professorial role as traditionally

understood is conflated with seniority within the corporate sector, resulting in the creation of such positions as "management professor". In Mbembe's (2016: 31) terms:

> These tendencies are inherent in an institution run in accordance with business principles: the students have become interested less and less in study and knowledge for its own sake and more and more in the material payoff, or utility, which their studies and degree have on the open market. … The task of the university from then on is to make them happy as customers.

Studies on the extent to which this neoliberal era has negatively affected higher education and the *person* or the *being* of a professor abound. For example, on the effects of the neoliberal economic principles, Rose and Dustin (2009: 398) show how 'public universities are unable to keep up with the rising costs associated with providing a higher education through tuition and taxes … more than ever, public universities must aggressively seek out external funding to make ends meet'. The unfortunate aspect of this is that universities are then likely to be confronted with questions such as:

> What happens when public universities are forced to look beyond the state for their financial lifeblood? What strings are attached to private money coming into the university? What new research expectations are placed on professors? What is the impact of those expectations on retention, promotion, and tenure decisions? How do teaching and service fare? How does the undergraduate and graduate student experience change? In short, what does the increasing privatization of the public university mean for its role in a democracy? (Rose & Dustin, 2009: 398).

On the way the role of a professor is affected by these developments, Rose and Dustin (2009: 398) note that the professoriate will be:

> inclined to pay more attention to material human welfare than intellectual or spiritual human welfare, resulting in a preoccupation with the applied sciences and vocational training at the expense of the humanities … political pressure could hinder the academic freedom of professors to think and teach openly without fear of censure.

Owing to this seeming onslaught by problematic market and economic-usefulness discourses, the knowledge production industries such as universities are subjected to cultures 'strange' to them: annual performance management, the quantification of outputs, the need to penalise what is seen as disobedience at the end of each year. Writing about neoliberalism as an ideology, Parker (2011: 438) points out that it favours 'self-discipline (with punishment for lapses), self-reliance and the accompanying pursuit of self-interest'. This value system would make sense if universities were producers of cars, shoes, or sausages – countable items that are

easily discernible at the end of each day, week and month. The consequences of this value system within higher education are noted by Maistry (2012: 516) as leading to:

> an increasing momentum towards a quantitative, performance driven indicator mentality. Such a mentality is likely to reduce the finely textured richness of the academic enterprise of universities and its human communities to bland, detached numerical scores. It [also] assumes level playing fields both at a global level in which HEIs of the world compete and at the micro level within individual HEIs.

As a line manager in various capacities within and across different HEIs since 2009, I have witnessed how, at micro level, the playing field is not even. Among other things, the personal circumstances of individual staff members within my units have been neither the same nor equal. For some, personal circumstances enabled them to thrive within the neoliberal culture because of the leverage to access material, technological, and emotional resources, as well as the institutional knowledge owing to their longevity within the institution. Other individuals either did not have access to such resources and/or longer periods in an institution to fully appreciate its ethos or what the institutions could offer was grossly insufficient. So, the latter rarely received bonuses and/or succeeded when promotion opportunities arose. In other words, the value system imposed upon universities by the neoliberal ethos seems not to take seriously the fact that it is often individual circumstances that either enable or constrain delivery on certain expectations.

For the most committed intellectuals and scholars, particularly at professoriate level, this gradual erosion of the culture of collegiality and unconditional support for one another remains one of the hurtful experiences (Maistry, 2012). Under pressure to deliver outputs in the same way a person working in a bakery needs to, some professors have become invisible, often cognitively absent at Senate meetings, though present in body, with little to no sustained and scholarly resistance to the erosion of the culture of defending, supporting, and sustaining the knowledge project. Indeed, there is even no time to thoroughly read long documents that serve at Senate meetings, apply our minds, and engage in defence of genuine institutional care, staff wellness and sincere support for younger academics. The urgency is focused on chasing the next publication, the completion of a research grant application process and/or to ensure a successful NRF (re)rating. Added to this is a "mechanical pushing" of students to complete postgraduate studies at the expense of quality and impactful knowledge.

For these reasons, just like Maistry (2012: 515), I had to critically 'reflect on my complicity in and my attempts to temper the effects of alienating, market-driven university discourse and culture' in my capacity as line manager. Among other things, I created a two-phased process for a publication output by my staff to enable a balance between ensuring their mental wellness and generating a dignified and impactful knowledge contribution. Over a two-year period, every academic had to commit to delivering evidence for the conceptualisation of an idea and data generation strategy, as well as a successful ethics application (Phase 1), and then in the second

year to providing evidence for writing up and submitting (Phase 2) the knowledge generated. Only in the third year was I expecting an output in the form of a publication with a subsidy-generating academic journal. The positive results that came out of this practice in my leadership practice cause me to still hold a view that individuals who have actively worked and meaningfully contributed to knowledge generation make humane and good and fit-for-purpose academic leaders and managers. Such experiences add to their repertoire of skills and aptitude to subvert and/or wisely manage the potential negative consequences of the neoliberal-era onslaught on the academic project.

In contexts where middle and senior management leadership struggles to subvert the consequences of the "darker side" of the neoliberal model in the running of universities, research seems to indicate that the majority of the professoriate receives unfavourable reflections on their contribution to supporting upcoming, younger cohorts of academic staff. Various experiences by the university community in different contexts reveal the need for a deepened re-opening of conversations on what role a professor should play in a field of study. In her study on *Professors as Academic Leaders*, Evans (2013) attempts to engage in such a conversation. She reports on the extent to which, and in what ways, academics, researchers, and university teachers think professors should be providing academic leadership to junior colleagues. Here are the highlights of some of the responses from her study participants:

> The most outstanding professors with which I've worked (regrettably the minority) are those that lead by example through engagement with the discipline. More importantly, though, has been their commitment/desire to engage with staff: supporting, inspiring, mentoring and developing them. With many others a professorship seems to have had the opposite effect, leading to non-engagement and protectionism of their own research interest/external recognition (Evans, 2013: 684).

In expressing what I would describe as one of the consequences of prioritising individual recognition by external bodies, as well as a negative un-intended outcome of subjecting HEIs to individual rankings, annual performance management culture and ratings by international agencies, one of the study participants noted:

> Some of our professors are preoccupied with their own image outside the institute and are not really interested in what the "little" people in the institution need, whether it be in terms of career or personal issues. Even when they listen to you, they give the impression of being concerned but when you don't get the result you know that it was just a pretence on their part (Evans, 2013: 684).

Indeed, this is not a surprising reflection by a study participant. A climate in which success is measured by providing evidence that one is better than others, a professorial contribution

takes meaningful shape only if there is something in it for the professor. As Maistry (2012: 520) notes, in a context where:

> competition is presented as an acceptable, moral characteristic and value, and incentives driving individual success; those subjects who are less capable for whatever historically determined reason are relegated to the barren hinterlands of a cold, ruthless and discriminating institutional structure.

Within this structure, the urgently needed academic leadership by and contribution from the larger sections of the professoriate in higher education therefore remain small. In writing about a professorial academic leadership, Evans (2017: 126) reminds us that:

> When applied specifically to professors, academic leadership generally connotes their influence upon junior colleagues' development into successful academics, and since professors are usually distinguished researchers, then the academic leadership they are considered best equipped to provide involves "creative", scholarly, research focused and intellectual-related development delivered through guidance, advice and example – incorporating much of what Macfarlane (2012) calls intellectual leadership.

In a postcolonial, post-apartheid, and post-conflict society like SA, these thoughts on the role a professor could play are relevant. They are in fact timely if one considers the fact that the majority of the professoriate is ageing and soon to retire, and is currently supposed to mentor and support an increasingly younger, female, and mainly black cohort of new academics (Hlengwa, 2019). A possible dilemma with this expectation for the ageing professoriate is arguably that most of the fields of study the majority of the professoriate have worked in for years have serious traces of coloniality. By this I mean most fields of study in which the soon-to-retire professoriate has worked still hold undeclared yet powerful mindsets that see Euro-American worldviews as superior to other worldviews.

The professoriate's role in transforming and decolonising higher education

While I am not at all arguing that Euro-American knowledge and the traditions accompanying it should necessarily be thrown into the bin of forgotten histories (Mbembe, 2016), I am, however, insisting that, within our fields of study, it would be prudent for the current professoriate to also draw from (or at least point younger academics to) different knowledge traditions to support their academic trajectories. The world is certainly larger than Europe and America, and we therefore cannot confine the next generation of knowledge producers to northern hemisphere epistemologies only. The implication of this suggestion raises a question: to what extent has the majority of the current and/or soon-to-retire professoriate willingly and successfully embrace, and indeed has begun to work towards drawing from alternative and/or indigenous knowledge traditions from the Middle East, Asia, or Africa? If the professoriate is to mentor and offer

academic leadership to a younger cohort of future knowledge producers, how do we ensure that this process necessarily involves a deliberate countering of the colonial, gendered, racialised, and discriminatory perspectives that have characterised various knowledge fields for centuries?

These are important questions if our commitment as a country is to enter the global stage from our own perspectives, drawn from longstanding knowledge traditions that have sustained the continent and our country for centuries. Indeed, it is the goal of every nation to enter the global stage as equal role players and partners with the so-called powerful nations. South Africa is not an exception to this rule, and higher education in general, and the professoriate in particular, have a big role to play in ensuring this. There are already existing exemplary research collaborations between SA-born leading professors and their counterparts from the African continent and the global north, in which participation appears to be in the local professoriate leading the projects and charting the direction and not their counterparts from the global north. Jansen (2021: 65) illustrates:

> … high profile “Southern projects” led by South African scholars across three different disciplines – cardiology, infectious diseases, and history. What follows are interviews with Bongani Mayosi at UCT, Quarraisha Abdoob Karim at University of KwaZulu-Natal, and Ian Phimister at the University of Free State.

In this account, professors other than from the north appear to play the role of conceptualising research problems that lead to international collaborations with peers as well postgraduate students, offering intellectual and academic leadership in their fields in ways that present SA as the producer and not consumer of knowledge. Selected interviews with the leading SA professors reveal the level of leadership offered and benefitting participants from the global north:

> The research project that I am engaged with is about dealing with the heart disease among poor people. These forms of heart disease occur before middle age … Collaborations outside Africa have been vital in moving the African agenda forward … through the networks I established in Oxford, North America and in Europe, I have had collaborators and indeed mentors who are pillars in my work (Jansen, 2021: 66).

At face-value, it appears that indeed SA-born researchers are leading the way and partners from the global north are following. However, when one considers where the SA leading professoriate received their research training, where they themselves were mentored, and who is in fact brought in as collaborators, one begins to wonder about the extent and nature of ‘leading’ we are made to understand: ‘In North America, I’ve been fortunate to work with one of the leading cardiovascular researchers in the world today … in Italy in particular, I have collaborated …’ (Jansen, 2021: 66). Arguably, while collaboration with world renowned researcher *per se* can be beneficial, given references to parts of the world the esteemed mentors emerge, one may ask:

through which knowledge systems are the African problems addressed, and by implication, into which worldviews is the next generation of knowledge producers in the form of postgraduate students inducted? Put differently, does the fact that since the leading professors of these research projects are South African by nationality necessarily equate to the ability to think de-colonially away from Western hegemonic norms that shape how Africa has been viewed for centuries? The interviews themselves do not at all refer to some indigenous theorising/conceptualisation or worldview, or even understandings of how (diseases in general and) diseases related to what the studies were about were prevented by local people long before colonisation. Other than reference to the words of the chief from the HIV/AIDS highest-burden district in KwaZulu-Natal: 'My people are dying of AIDS. What can you as researchers do to help us?' (Jansen, 2021: 67), there is no reference to the locals as co-researchers jointly offering ideas and constructing knowledge to solve challenges. Neither is reference to local herbalists nor postgraduate students' research on indigenous knowledge systems as possible contribution to solving the pandemic.

While it is commendable that the SA-born scholars are beginning to lead the way in international research collaborations (and this must continue), it is equally important to guard against un-reflexive tendencies that blind us from our own complicity in the marginalisation of equally useful and perhaps even better locally suited knowledge systems to address African problems. This caution is critical in a context where in most fields in higher education one knowledge system has become dominant, trained leading scholars from across various continents, and has historically completely ignored the value of and/or suppressed other knowledge systems. This hegemony is sometimes perpetuated and justified, and even defended, through the globalisation rhetoric which encourages problematic versions of 'collaborations', which I describe elsewhere (Mgqwashu, 2019) as a tenet of Eurocentric ideology to which even the self-professed critical thinkers within academia in the South voluntarily surrender their academic freedom. In most post-colonies, both the globalisation and/or internationalisation rhetoric has been conveniently used as camouflage for "coloniality" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). In clarifying this concept, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013: 11) posits that:

> Coloniality must not be confused with colonialism. It survived the end of direct colonialism. In post colonies it continues to affect the lives of people, long after direct colonialism and administrative apartheid have been dethroned. What, therefore, needs to be understood is not just the "not yet uhuru" postcolonial experience but the invisible vampirism of technologies of imperialism and colonial matrices of power that continue to exist in the minds, lives, languages, dreams, imaginations, and epistemologies of modern subjects in Africa and the entire global South.

The understated negative effects of the power of coloniality on theories about learning and teaching, on research and supervision of master's and doctoral research, as well as on academic leadership by the professoriate, mean that the scope for revisiting the professorial role in our

context is wider than can be imagined. I argue that most of what we consider to be scholarly professorial knowledge contributions and academic leadership (as discussed above) could still be extended to also include deliberate and concerted efforts to inspire dialogic encounters across various knowledge systems for the benefit of future scholars, academics, and researchers.

If we fail in this, the consequence will be that future scholars inducted into various knowledge fields will be confined and limited to where their mentors (the professoriate) have ended. In some cases, future knowledge producers will be mere replicas of their mentors, giving an appearance of parity of participation, yet ignoring the fact that the participation of different knowledge systems is unequal. Future knowledge producers will in turn struggle to use their knowledge in ways that will enable the generation of alternative knowledge traditions for solving known and long-standing global challenges. Leibowitz (2017: 100) explains the consequences of this much more clearly:

> The problem with an emphasis on the known and the given is partly that it impedes the consideration of what other societies or groups have to offer, and it impedes knowing what has not yet been said.

One of the consequences of relying on theories of learning and teaching (here I include research teaching and postgraduate supervision) informed by Western hegemony is a perennial tendency to still frame our work mostly from our middle-class positions and privileges, ignoring and/or excluding the voices of the "un-educated" majorities that have drawn from centuries of indigenous knowledges and practices to survive. Writing about the limitations of this Western worldview in theorising teaching and learning, Leibowitz (2017: 68) notes:

> … several important interrelated phenomena are seen as bounded [within Western hegemony]: knowledge [is seen] as separate from learning and as separate from language; the personal as separate from the social; and curriculum as separate from pedagogy or teaching and learning.

Some lessons from the 'mis-recognised' social practices within academia

Our four-year research project titled, *Southern African Rurality in Higher Education* (SARiHE) (2017 to 2020), enabled us to generate data that expose the poverty in theorising learning and teaching because of the ways in which it mis-recognises some social practices and constructs them as necessarily inferior. I thus use "mis-recognition" to denote the absence of equal respect and value accorded to practices various students bring into higher education (Fraser, 2003). It is from this collaborative international research project involving South African and United Kingdom (UK) partners I draw from to illustrate how some social practices within the academy are constructed in deficit terms, as well as those who draw from such practices to make sense of learning. In this project, by means of analysing students' practices prior to entering university, we developed understandings on how students from rural contexts negotiate the transition from

rural communities and schools. We also wanted to understand how prior cultural and educational experiences enabled or constrained their higher-education trajectories (Timmis, et al., 2019).

To avoid treating students that were involved in the study as subjects we were studying, we deliberately positioned them as core researchers. We did this as a way of signalling, and indeed acknowledging, that who they were, what they knew and how they learned from and within their communities were aspects that constituted their identities and daily lives, and only they could educate us to understand these dimensions fully. By means of analysing practices embedded in the communities from which they came, our data analysis enabled us to learn from and through them, gaining access to alternative ontological orientations and epistemological traditions on which our years of university learning could not educate us. Only they could educate us about how indigenous ontological orientations and epistemological traditions enabled or constrained their negotiation of their transition to and through the lived spaces of higher education. To be educated on these matters, we relied on narratives, digital artefacts, and focused group conversations. These data generation techniques enabled us to gain access to understanding how family and community, including religious, study and self-help groups, influenced their transition into higher education and their journey through university. Among other things, our study revealed that:

> … students' histories and lived experiences in rural contexts help them to negotiate their trajectories across different lived spaces, including spaces still laced with colonial legacies that underpin HE curricular, systems, practices and values, thus shaping their identities, agency and sense of belonging (Mgqwashu, et al., 2020: 943).

From the professorial point of view, the study findings humbled me when I realised how the "worlds" and the accompanying practices that enabled them to negotiate membership in their communities and society from birth through schooling into higher education "evaporated" as they entered university education. Highereducation knowledge traditions seem to have de-valued all the practices that have enabled them to define and understand the world, who they are in it, and what contributions their "worlds" have equipped them to contribute to human knowledge. Directly or indirectly, all of them were "forced" to dissociate themselves from the very apparatus that (at least until late teens) gave them a sense of identity.

To ensure other elements of our findings are accessible to the higher-education community, this project has documented its findings through dissertations written by doctoral graduates, publication outputs in several local and international journals, and a book titled *Rural Transitions to Higher Education in South Africa: Decolonial Perspectives,* published by Routledge in 2021. All this body of work shows the limitations in relying just on a monolithic Western worldview to prepare the next generation of thinkers and professionals in a post-colonial context like SA.

Thus, with the aid of fellow professors in our research team, this body of work shifted our view of students from rural contexts in fundamental ways. Rather than a deficit construction of

this group of students that we held as a result of our subconscious tendencies to equate a lack of resources in rural areas with cognitive mediocrity, our findings revealed how students utilised this prior collective experience in rural contexts and their own agency to move into new worlds. In one of the discussion groups of April 2017, a student co-researcher noted:

> … we found that we have a common thing … we know in rural areas that we were struggling … in terms of resources, teachers, and that thing of struggling made us to be able to read for ourselves, to be able to seek for information … (Discussion group, Town, April 2017)

This is an example of how what Western hegemony constructs as a deficit is actually an example of the development of good work ethic, dedication and commitment. It emerged very strongly from student co-researchers' narratives and as part of their daily practices in rural communities. Incidentally, this is a disposition that is necessary to succeed at university. It continued to emerge as we generated data, as another student co-researcher noted in May 2017:

> … you have to do things for yourself in the rural areas. I think that's one basic thing about us as children from rural areas. In primary school, children had to clean the classrooms with cow dung and when it rained, they had to cover the holes with paper (Discussion group, Urban, May 2017, F).

Within the higher education context, this good work ethic translates to academic involvement in the form of self-directed learning as well. This is more pronounced in cases where there was an absence of an educator for a particular subject during their schooling or where they struggled in terms of resources and subjects taught. As I show below, co-researchers found ways to negotiate these challenges and worked collectively in a self-directed learning manner. This was translated by students into coping with university life, as one of the student co-researchers noted:

> In grade 12 there was no Physical Science teacher, so students studied the subject in groups in the evenings. We had to take responsibility for our own learning … Poor quality education … lack of educational resources, did not stop us from teaching ourselves (Discussion group, Town, May 2017, F).

These brief findings from our study reveal, among other things, the poverty implicit in the manner in which a Western worldview theorises on teaching and learning, with its insistence on constructing critical aspects of human life as separate. To suggest that knowledge and its generation are separate from the gender, race, social class, location, the day-to-day, contextual, cultural, and linguistic elements of those generating knowledge, is plainly misleading. It is even more embarrassing to accept that this simplistic rational has continued to shape curricular design, its development, pedagogy, and assessment within formal education. Leibowitz (2017: 96) asks

questions I believe every pedagogue who still holds a Western worldview on the theory of knowledge, knowing, teaching, and learning needs to take seriously: "… what would be the means for students who do not share social worlds with the world where such theory is developed, to engage with this knowledge? How would they come to know it?"

In another 2019 collaborative case study in which we and colleagues from the SADC region generated data that exposed the limitations of attempts to separate knowledge from the context of its generation and the knowers, we intended to contribute:

> … to efforts to shift the paradigms of reason on matters concerning social justice and higher education, namely repositioning the focus from the global North by concentrating instead on a lesser-discussed region: southern Africa. In doing so, we highlight[ed] the value of the use of drawings, or, as known in participatory research literature, participatory learning and action (PLA) techniques in place-based geographic research which, we argue, fits within the band of "socially just" and "decolonising" research methods (Leibowitz, et al., 2019: 28).

The name of this case study was *Decolonising Research: The Use of Drawings to Facilitate Place-Based Biographic Research in Southern Africa*. In this work, we used our findings to suggest concrete strategies to resist the blatant denial of the embeddedness and contextuality of 'coming to know'. We achieved this by using what we consider to be the decolonising method. It involved hearing the stories of the five senior academics through pictures depicting their way of looking at their educational journeys through their own eyes rather than through the eyes of another person, thus bringing to the fore their own experiences and interpretations. This approach has also been taken up in the South African context by, among others, Leibowitz, Swartz, Bozalek, Carolissen, Nichols and Rohleder (2012). They all drew from Zembylas's (2015: 2010) work on learning and emotion. This work:

> … stresses that learning is not only cognitive: it is active and affective, and experiential (Michelson, 2015). The problem with the view that knowledge is most importantly theoretical, is once again that it is viewed as disembodied, and separated from process, context and experience (Leibowitz, 2017: 99).

I was introduced to the idea of learning as active and affective and experiential at undergraduate level by Prof Michael Anthony Samuel. It was in 1997 when I was a final-year BPaed student at the then University of Durban-Westville (UDW). One of the assignments he gave us in the *English Method Course* was titled: "Who am I?". We were all offered an opportunity to reflect in writing on how we were taught English, learned English, and learned in English. Not only did this assignment convey a message to a young person from a working-class background that my experiences were valued at university level, but also that my life in a black township, as well as rural context, and my schooling in grossly under-resourced schools, were in fact great

ingredients for making a great English teacher. Testimony to this is a closing comment he wrote to my assignment: “I would not mind if you taught English to my children”.

As though to further testify to the value of the idea of learning as active and affective and experiential, in the same year that assignment was converted into my first-ever conference presentation at the *National Postgraduate Conference* hosted by the University of Cape Town. It is the same assignment, furthermore, that became my first-ever academic output published in an international academic journal called *Language Learning Journal.* The title of this 2009 publication was ‘On becoming literate in English: A during- and post-apartheid personal story’. This particular Vol 37, Issue No. 3 was edited by my mentor, colleague, doctoral studies supervisor, and line-manger, Prof John Robert Balfour. In their own unique individual ways, over a sustained period, both Michael and Robert assured me that I had something significant to contribute within academia. I will forever be grateful to them both, my dear colleagues, friends, mentors, and at various times, my line-managers.

Concluding thoughts

The thrust of the two-pronged argument presented in this paper is that since all persons across societies, nationalities and languages are differently intellectually capacitated, measuring achievements and making judgments on these require a nuanced contextualisation. I argue that the use of a “one-size fits all” neo-liberal matrixes or a specific knowledge system to the exclusion of others in HEIs reduces the knowledge project to statistics and curtails critical contributions to human progress just to a few. More specifically for this paper, such trends reduce the professorial role to that of either a “glorified” chief executive officer with a task to ensure high productivity within an inequitable system, or an unsuspecting victim and/or defenders of an asymmetrical and unjust longstanding knowledge generation traditions into which they have been assimilated. The paper then simultaneously presents a caution and possible concrete practices to tackle both conundrums. References to autobiographical experiences both as a line manager and researcher suggest practical instances where agency is exercised, firstly in ensuring that individual staff capabilities are developed and enhanced, secondly, through engaging in a research project that made explicit ways in which mis-recognised and de-valued practices within the academy have in fact enabled successful transition through university learning.

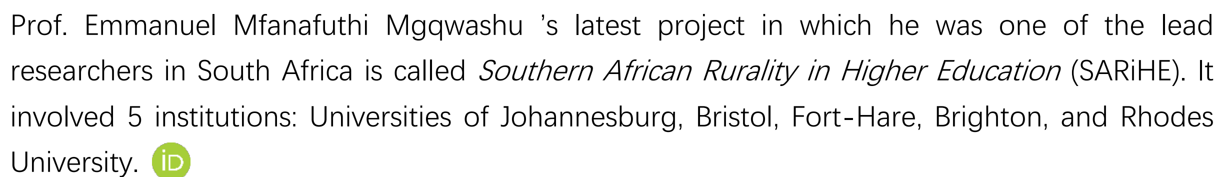
Overall, the message from this paper is that all higher education needs is a professoriate that will consciously resist complicity with the hegemony of instrumental reason and the discourses that normalise the supremacy and infallibility of Euro-American knowledge generation traditions that continue to shape various fields of study. It is a professoriate that will consciously enable their mentees to critically reflect on and be reflexive about the way they nurture the next generation of academics and themselves engage in the knowledge-generation project. Research team members’ places of birth in international research project collaborations is a good start, but cannot summarily and necessarily be regarded as sufficiently responding to the decolonisation of knowledges project. In this regard, for all of us operating at the professoriate level and are

committed to contributing meaningfully to the transformation and decolonisation of higher education, we may need to take Santos' (2014: 157) advice very seriously:

> In order to identify what is missing and why, we must rely on a form of knowledge that does not reduce reality to what exists. I mean a form of knowledge that aspires to an expanded conception of realism that includes suppressed, silenced, or marginalised realities, as well as emergent and imagined realities.

Author Biography

Prof. Emmanuel Mfanafuthi Mgqwashu 's latest project in which he was one of the lead researchers in South Africa is called *Southern African Rurality in Higher Education* (SARiHE). It involved 5 institutions: Universities of Johannesburg, Bristol, Fort-Hare, Brighton, and Rhodes University.



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