

BOOK REVIEW

Leibowitz, Brenda (2012). *Higher Education for the Public Good: Views from the South*.

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This publication, edited by Brenda Leibowitz of Stellenbosch University's Centre for Teaching and Learning, is a compilation of essays by prominent local and international academics, on the theme of higher education and the 'public good'. But who is this 'public', and how is its 'good' defined? In the foreword, the late Stellenbosch University Rector Russel Botman draws on Freire's (1970, 1992) argument that 'education should play a role in changing the world for the better', to posit that "higher education is not neutral [...] It should play a useful role by serving the needs of society" (Botman, xiii). This unequivocal statement sets the tone for the chapters that follow, in which the purposes of higher education 'in the South' are expounded upon, and where aspirations of higher education towards, inter alia, 'social justice', 'democratic citizenship' and 'transformation' are shown to often be confounded by the realities of constraints such as funding and institutional cultures arising out of a history of inequality.

The book has four levels or layers of comment: the systemic/philosophical, the institutional, the pedagogical/curriculum and finally the academic/professional at the heart of the teaching and learning enterprise that is the university.

Section One considers the place of the public good in higher education transformation initiatives. In the opening article, Singh (pp. 1–15) contrasts the discursive intent of socially responsive higher education with measures of accountability shaped by market forces and economic competition, a paradigm that leaves notions of higher education for social or intellectual emancipation, according to her, devoid of meaning and substance. Contestations about the purpose(s) of higher education are familiar in the context of globalisation debates and the role of the university, but it is good to be reminded that universities in the South that compete at the global level do so on playing fields which are far from level in "social and fiscal terms that largely ignore history and circumstance" (p. 5). A critical point made by Singh is the need for state steering in respect of the goals being espoused in its social development agenda, through incentives that locate social justice within higher education responsiveness. Thus the "tussle between private and public good", explored further in Hall's article (pp. 17–23) becomes a moral one in countries like South Africa where the

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inequalities are so stark and where higher education is expected to contribute to educating a socially responsible and active citizenry, a purpose posited later by Lange as “socialisation of critical citizens”, which she says has received scant attention in South Africa. She shows in her timeline of reform in South African higher education the changing focus that has reflected the priorities of government since 1994.

The potential of higher education to impact the achievements of participants and to open opportunities is itself a “good” – albeit a “positional” good for some scholars – since it addresses inequality by providing individuals with the “capability” to effect change (agency) (Hall citing Sen [1999], Nussbaum [2011] and Walker [2006]). Soudien continues in this vein by referring to the university as “an evolving idea” that has “the potential for disrupting social, cultural and economic orthodoxy” (p. 31). He draws attention to the ambiguities around the mission of a modern university and its many contradictions (being exclusive and inclusive at the same time, for instance), compared to the historical origins of a liberal university. He contends that in South Africa, issues of access and quality have become polarised in debates about academic excellence and access for redress, and arguments about whether the latter implies compromising the former.

Section Two moves to the institutional level, situating the debate within higher education institutions and drawing on case studies that illustrate the current dilemmas of universities. Bozalek and Leibowitz (pp. 59–61) hold that the combination of three normative frameworks (capabilities, social justice, and the ethics of care) can work towards achieving the ideal of higher education as a public good, and set out key elements of all three approaches that serve as evaluative tools for measuring how well the institution ‘cares’.

Walker takes a critical look at the curriculum in higher education and associated traditions of power relationships in what counts as “valid knowledge”, how this is selected, and implications of this selection for the future. Adding to the earlier “marketisation of higher education” debates, she argues that a human capital approach need not be at the expense of “human well-being” (p. 78). By focusing on “capabilities” that enable humans to “choose and develop valuable beings and doings” (Sen, 1999), human beings could contribute to both society and themselves as individuals. Curriculum she holds, should be built upon developing desirable capabilities, as expanded by Nussbaum (1997). This conversation forms an appropriate backdrop for what in Chapter 7 is referred to as “graduate attributes” or “qualities that also prepare graduates as agents for social good in an unknown future” (Bowden *et al.*, 2000 cited by Van Schalkwyk, Herman and Muller, p. 87). The writers conclude that education for the public good means also “inculcating these attributes into the teaching and learning ethos of the university”, as well as in its research culture (Van Schalkwyk *et al.*, p. 97).

Section Three hones in on the classroom level at the university, its programmes and pedagogies. Waghid offers the lens of Nussbaum’s “politics of humanity” to examine teacher education programmes in the light of government ‘norms and standards’ for teachers. While the ‘norms and standards’ fall short in their vague articulation, a “politics of humanity” ought to be accompanied by a “radicalised democratic citizenship agenda” in order to develop teachers for a post-apartheid society (p. 110). Chapter 9 looks at a

project in university social and health sciences premised on a “pedagogy of hope”, in which student groups were intentionally diverse so that interactions involved “learning about the other” (p.120). Taking the concept of self and other further, Subreenduth, a South African living in the USA, explores “decolonising pedagogies” through her study of undergraduate pre-service teacher education courses. An “engaged pedagogy”, she argues, allows students to “live in the world more fully by reaching critical awareness and engagement” (p. 133).

From an international perspective, Boni, Macdonald and Peris, (p. 139) explain the concept of global citizenship and how this was fostered in a group of engineering students at the Polytechnic University (UPV) in Spain. In addition to the technical content, they focus on the methodology employed in the classroom to introduce students to the “contextual, multicultural and non-Eurocentric sense of human development”. In this case study, the technique of “moral dilemma” was used, whereby a controversial issue was introduced in order to trigger argument and dialogue. Koopman’s article on a “pedagogy of hybridity, reconciliation and justice” looks at teaching a diverse group of university students and how they perceive the “past” which is always present. He explores too, how the notion of “hybridity” might challenge “essentialisms” and “certainties” about who we are, and allow us to wear the “lenses” of the “other”, concluding that the concept of hybridity offers hope for a “liberating future”.

In the fourth and final section, “the academic” is viewed through the lens of “critical professionalism”, a concept underpinning a project that has attempted to inform professional development towards “teaching for the public good” in the face of a “rise of control over academics’ working lives” (p. 165). The encroachment of managerialism and performativity on all aspects of higher education is a common theme in global higher education literature as the writers show, manifested in South Africa through a growing “audit culture”. Critical professionalism (Walker, 2001), it is argued, creates the possibility of agency for the university lecturer who wishes to teach for the public good and encourages critical and reflexive scholarship. A research project in this regard is described (p. 169) in which the lessons learned are shared (pp. 173–176). Ultimately, it is the academic who has to take responsibility (agency) for her/his development, which might lead in turn to a more supportive culture for such development being fostered. Gierdien (pp. 179–190) demonstrates this sense of “agency” in his self-study of mathematics teaching to pre-service teachers, and illustrates what he learns through the process of becoming a critical professional, as does Constandius (p. 191) in her very personal reflections that arose out of teaching a citizenship module. To close this section, Wisker (pp. 203–214) provides the perspective of an academic developer in the UK, and suggests that an aspiration to teach towards the public good might be nurtured through a curriculum based on civic values and social justice. However, she argues that such values need to be “embedded within curriculum development and embraced throughout the institution” (p. 208), and that engagement with colleagues in this regard is vital.

This book is an important and timely addition to the evolving landscape within which higher education is being shaped and steered. In effect it ‘walks the talk’ of the themes that have been covered by the various writers, particularly that of ‘agency’: academics

being critical professionals and taking responsibility for the kind of university that they would want to see. Rather than the ‘public good’ being an esoteric notion, the book has served to concretise the concept, through its combination of philosophical and empirical contributions. The reader will indeed appreciate that: “teaching for the public good can entail long and difficult work, and requires individuals to be prepared to experience moments of extreme vulnerability” (Leibowitz, p. 218).