



## Towards a Model of a Critical Pedagogy in Malawian Universities

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**Abstract.** Quality university education is important for achieving national aspirations as stated in higher education policy frameworks in Malawi. The major education policy documents in Malawi: The Policy and Investment Framework and the Malawi National Education Sector Plan recognise the importance of university education for knowledge production and its dissemination and for the facilitation of a culture of peace that is conducive and critical for socio-economic, political and industrial development. In an attempt to align policy to achieving these goals, the policy documents outline the following policy directions: improving access, achieving equity, enhancing quality, improving financial management and improving the management and planning of the university sector. This paper shows that what is lacking however is a philosophical foundation on which to ground university pedagogy so as to train critical citizens able to produce knowledge and advance civic values. Thus, this paper conceptualises a model of critical pedagogy useful in enhancing critical citizenship in Malawi. The paper is conceptual other than empirical in its approach.

**Keywords:** Quality assurance; Critical pedagogy; Critical citizenship.

### 1 Introduction

In Malawi, university education policy direction is enmeshed within two major documents: The Policy and Investment Framework and the National Education Sector Plan. These two documents argue that education is important for knowledge production and the development of the country. The National Education Sector Plan states:

Education is a catalyst for socio-economic development, industrial growth and an instrument for empowering the poor, the weak and the voiceless. Education enhances group solidarity, national consciousness and tolerance

of diversity. It facilitates the development of a culture of peace which is conducive and critical for socio-economic, political and industrial development. Hence education is critical and necessary for the economic and industrial growth and development goal (Malawi Government, 2006: 6).

To achieve the mentioned goals within the university sector, the documents suggest that there is a need to address the following constraints: limited and unequal access to university education, declining educational quality, poor curriculum, poor planning and management and inadequate financing (Malawi Government, 2000). While these policy prescriptions are pertinent, this paper argues that there is lack of a philosophical grounding of pedagogical practices within universities to train critical citizens capable of producing knowledge and enhancing citizenship values as outlined in the documents. The contention is that only critically trained citizens are able to use education for socio-economic and industrial development, as an instrument for empowering the vulnerable and in enhancing group solidarity, national consciousness and tolerance of diversity. The Policy and Investment Framework (Malawi Government, 2000: 34-38) outlines the main policy prescriptions and strategies for achieving them as follows:

**Access:** Access to university education in Malawi is very limited. For a long time, only 0.5% of the population aged 18 to 23 was enrolled in the whole tertiary education sub sector. With the introduction of off-campus students' access mode in the two public universities, access has slightly improved. The key goal has been to increase the number of Malawians in tertiary education generally.

**Equity:** In the tertiary sub-sector, only approximately 28% of students are females. The situation of female under representation in higher education institutions is compounded by their under representation in science and other professional degree programmes. The key goal is to increase the proportion of female students.

**Quality:** The government recognises the dwindling quality of university education. To solve this problem, the key goal is that tertiary institutions shall in collaboration with the government take appropriate measures to improve the motivation of the teaching staff.

**Relevance:** The government argues that in addition to the provision of relevant physical and human resources, the quality of education provided by Malawi's educational institutions should be enhanced by a thoroughly revised curriculum. The key goal is that tertiary institutions shall review their teaching and research programmes to promote institutional responsiveness to the needs of Malawian society.

**Management:** The key policy is that the government shall initiate appropriate legislation to promote the decentralisation of public university administration. In this line, the government proposed amending the University of Malawi Act to enable the University of Malawi's colleges obtain independent status. The government also envisaged that a National Council for Higher Education be established and also that there be an involvement of stakeholders in institutional governance.

**Planning:** The major educational planning challenge relates to the strengthening of relevant capacities for the collection, analysis, storage and use of educational data. The university sector requires an effective information retrieval system that can be used as a planning and policy tool. The key goal is that institutions shall take appropriate measures to strengthen their institutional capacities.

**Finance:** Providing education is expensive as such the key goal is that tertiary institutions shall promote cost-effective use of available resources, diversify their revenue resources and introduce appropriate cost-sharing measures as a way of reducing the government's subvention on higher education.

While these policy prescriptions and their suggested strategies are important in improving the university sector, it is clear that the policy landscape is largely silent on how pedagogical practices could help train critical citizens capable of knowledge production and its dissemination and the facilitation of a culture of peace that is conducive and critical for socio-economic, political and industrial development. The situation is exacerbated by a lack of university level teaching and learning policies in Malawi. The aim of this paper thus, is to offer a philosophical grounding of pedagogical practices required within Malawian universities. The paper conceptualises and proposes a model of critical pedagogy that might enhance quality university education in Malawi.

The paper has three sections. Section one briefly describes the meaning of pedagogical practices, section two describes proposed constitutive meanings of a critical pedagogy and explains how the constitutive meanings can be utilised by lecturers. Section three offers a conclusion.

## **2 What are Pedagogical Practices?**

In this paper, pedagogical practices are those activities a lecturer employs in the classroom in order to construct knowledge (Banks, Leach & Moon, 1999). The way lecturers view and understand their lecturing commitment, determine the way they construct knowledge in the classroom. For example, if a lecturer sees students as lacking knowledge he/she resorts to the telling method while if

he/she sees students as thinkers and capable of reasoning, he/she engages them in ‘a learning together’ model of teaching and learning (Bruner, 1999). In this paper, the argument is that pedagogic practices at university level in Malawi ought to instil a critical mind in students so as to produce critical citizens able to produce knowledge and appreciate citizenship roles.

### **3 Constitutive Meanings of a Critical Pedagogy**

For a critical pedagogy to be successful in Malawian universities, lecturers ought to adhere to the following constitutive meanings of critical pedagogy proposed in this paper: being able to understand and delineate parameters of the notion of quality, being rational in the classroom, being inclusive in classroom activities, being a granter of freedom in the classroom and being responsive to equal treatment in the classroom. These proposed ‘principles’ are explained in turn.

#### **3.1 Understanding and engaging with the notion of quality as a constitutive meaning of a critical pedagogy**

For a successful critical pedagogy in Malawian universities, lecturers ought to understand and engage with the notion of quality for if they do not, they may lack necessary pedagogical skills to achieve quality teaching. However, the concept of quality is abstract and elusive and requires participants to delineate a common approach (Mayhew, Patrick & Dean, 1990). Mayhew et al., (1990) argue that from several quality considerations, there are three generalisations that one can make: First, that quality is a receding horizon in that there are no static, acceptable norms of performance. Second, that in spite of theoretical considerations, if quality is to be improved, it must be defined with enough specificity so that its attributes are at least suggested if not clearly delineated. Third, that quality improvement is inexorably bound up with assessment and feedback. The authors (Mayhew et al., 1990) posit a working definition of quality in higher education as follows: “Quality undergraduate education consists of preparing learners through the use of words, numbers, and abstract concepts to understand, cope with, and positively influence the environment in which they find themselves” (p. 29). Quality in university education, they argue, must be related to the central purposes of higher education and how these are translated into programmes and activities (Mayhew et al., 1990). Pirsig, on her part, highlights the elusive nature of quality as follows:

Quality...you know what it is, yet you do not know what it is. But that’s self-contradictory. But some things are better than others; that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what quality is, apart from things

that have it, it all goes poof! There's nothing to talk about. But if you can't say what quality is, how do you know what it is or how do you know it even exists? If no one knows what it is then for practical purpose it doesn't exist at all. But for all practical purposes it does really exist. What else are grades based on? Why else would people pay some fortunes for some things and throw others in the trash pile? Obviously some things are better than others...but what's "betterness"? So round and round you go, spinning mental wheels and nowhere finding any place to get traction. What the hell is Quality? What is it? (Pirsig, 1974:163-164).

The difficulty in pin-pointing what the notion of quality means is in itself a call for delineating its parameters if lecturers would like to achieve quality education in Malawian universities. Harvey and Knight (1996) argue that we can no longer take quality for granted in university education and presume we all know what we mean by quality university education. In moulding critical citizens, lecturers ought to have delineated quality parameters that they want to achieve using their pedagogical practices. For the purposes of understanding and engaging with quality university education, this paper utilises five positions advanced by Harvey and Green (1993). Sections 3.1.1 through 3.1.5 produce a slightly edited discussion of these positions by the author published in an earlier study (Shawa, 2008).

Harvey and Green (1993) present the following quality positions: quality as *exceptional*, as *perfection* or *consistency*, as *fitness for purpose*, as *value for money* and as *transformation*. Relying on their categorisation, the paper offers different ways of thinking about quality that are necessary for a critical pedagogy in Malawian universities. In delineating quality parameters for a successful critical pedagogy, this paper rejects the notions of quality as *exceptional* and *perfection* and proposes a holistic quality approach that summarises notions of *fitness for purpose*, *value for and [of] money* and *transformation*. The notions are discussed in turn.

### **3.1.1 Quality as exceptional in relation to a critical pedagogy**

In Malawian universities, lecturers ought to understand problems associated with the notion of quality as exceptional if they are to instil a quality critical pedagogy. This notion holds that quality is special and it embodies three variations: first, that quality is distinctive (traditional view), second, that quality embodies excellence (that is exceeding very high standards) and third, that quality means complying with a set of required (minimum) standards (Harvey & Green, 1993). All these three dimensions have their own implications to pedagogical practices and expectations.

The traditional concept of quality as exceptional contends that quality is distinctive or something special and of high class. Within this aspect, quality is not based on assessing what is available but is based on an assumption that something of high standard exists. For example, the limited access to some universities is viewed as an example of quality (Harvey & Knight, 1996). This view becomes useless in assessing quality in education because it lacks definable means of ascertaining quality (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Lecturers who adhere to this thinking often think of making learning difficult and have an idealised marking scheme that tends to mark down students. This view of quality ought to be avoided within a critical pedagogy in Malawian universities.

The other concept pertaining to quality as exceptional is that it embodies excellence (exceeding high standards). Although this is similar to the traditional view, this concept identifies the constituents of excellence while at the same time ensuring that these are difficult to attain (Harvey & Knight, 1996). While the traditional aspect of quality is assumptions, here lecturers set extremely high standards that can only be achieved by very few students (Green, 1994). The excellence view of quality is thus elitist and problematic when it comes to the model of critical pedagogy proposed in this paper.

The third concept pertaining to quality as exceptional is that quality is about passing a set of quality checks to achieve the standards set. If the standards are met, something is of quality. According to Harvey and Knight (1996), with this view, quality is attributed to all items that add up to the minimum standards set by a monitoring authority. Quality is thus the result of scientific quality control. This notion is problematic in achieving a critical pedagogy in Malawian universities since quality education is not about just passing minimum standards in a scientifically controlled environment. Lecturers employing a critical pedagogy ought to avoid making students simply pass quality checks but encourage them to critically engage with the subject matter.

### **3.1.2 Quality as perfection or consistency in relation to a critical pedagogy**

Harvey and Green (1993) argue that quality as perfection sees quality as a consistent or flawless outcome and if consistency can be achieved, quality can be attained by everyone. They argue that this approach demands conformity with specifications and owes its origins to the notions of quality control in the manufacturing industry. It is thus associated with a quest to zero defects and a quality culture (doing things at the right time as in the manufacturing industry). Thus, there is no need to check the final output, for at each stage there are those responsible for quality assurance. This concept is problematic for teaching and learning in a critical pedagogy in Malawian universities since it assumes that learning is about delivering specifications, rigidly. Yet, critical pedagogy ought

to be about encouraging the analytical and critical development of the student as a rational being capable of questioning and re-engaging with the subject matter (Harvey & Green, 1993). Harvey and Knight (1996) argue that although a quality culture is essential for an effective responsive quality improvement process, it is a culture of continuous improvement rather than a culture dedicated to producing a consistent product that is vital. Lecturers employing critical pedagogy ought to encourage students to be able to question their standpoints continuously within a learning culture.

### **3.1.3 Quality as fitness for purpose in relation to a critical pedagogy**

Proponents of the quality as fitness for purpose approach argue that quality has meaning only in relation to the purpose of the service. Quality is judged in terms of how it meets its stated purposes (Green 1994). According to Harvey and Knight (1996), fitness for purpose offers two alternatives for specifying the purpose. The first depends on the customer and takes the customer's specifications as supreme. In this way, a quality product is one that conforms to customer-determined specifications. In the university sector, this would mean that students would determine what it means by quality education and lecturers would provide quality education if it conforms with students' expectations. This may be problematic in that students may be able to identify their short-term needs but may not have enough knowledge and experience to know what they need in the long term (Harvey & Green, 1993). Thus, in a critical pedagogy, students' views ought to be balanced with lecturers' specifications.

The second aspect of quality as fitness for purpose approach puts the onus on the provider. In this way, a quality product is one that conforms to providers' determined specifications. In the university education sector, this would mean that lecturers would determine what it means by quality education. The notion is important as it allows the lecturer to adhere to delineated quality parameters to be enhanced with pedagogical practices. This notion is useful as it allows re-evaluation of purposes and a continuous process of their examination. Consequently, the notion is appropriate to teaching in Malawian universities in that it encourages analysis of purposes of learning and allows for re-evaluation of purposes to respond to current issues. As such, the notion allows lecturers to evaluate whether a particular course provides the intended knowledge, skills and understanding (Harvey & Green, 1993). By re-evaluating purposes of education, lecturers adhering to a critical pedagogy avoid positing subject matter dogmatically. This notion is in tandem with quality assurance in universities as it assists universities to see how quality is achieved as set out in the mission statements. However, to achieve a critical pedagogy the notion of fitness for purpose needs to be complemented by fitness *of* purpose (Coetzee & Roux, 2001). Lategan (1997) argues that in the notion of fitness for purpose, the

issue is whether the objectives are met whilst in the notion of fitness *of* purpose, the issue is whether lecturers have chosen the right objectives. Fitness *for* and *of* purpose demand balancing students' concerns with lecturers' objectives and allowing lecturers to continue questioning their objectives and pedagogical practices in a process of learning and re-learning.

#### **3.1.4 Quality as value for money in relation to a critical pedagogy**

Harvey and Green (1993) hold that quality as value for money defines quality in terms of return on investment. If the same outcome can be achieved at a lower cost or a better outcome can be achieved at the same cost, the customer has a quality product or service. In the education sector, it means that students begin to opt for courses that will in turn provide them with jobs. While this market view is problematic in that education ought not only to focus on training for the job market, lecturers ought to consider inculcating skills that could be used for the job market. Thus, while this notion of quality has merit when one looks at accountability, it fails when the system over-emphasises measurable indicators that in most cases do not hinge on quality learning. Lecturers ought to balance this view so as not to side-line critical aspects of learning at the expense of producing learners for the job market.

#### **3.1.5 Quality as transformation in relation to a critical pedagogy**

The concept of quality as transformation entails that there must be qualitative changes in the student. In which case, education is seen as doing something to the student as opposed to something for the consumer. Education becomes a participative process and students are not products, customers, service users or clients but participants in an on-going process of learning and re-learning (Harvey & Knight, 1995). Education as transformation includes the concepts of enhancing and empowering. Lecturers ought to realise four ways of empowering students: "via student evaluation, guaranteeing students minimum standards of provision, giving students more control over their own learning and developing students' critical ability" (Harvey & Knight, 1995:8-9). This notion captures the core business of the university and is core in understanding critical pedagogy in Malawian universities. This notion entails professional relationship between the academic and students.

As advanced in this paper thus, for a critical pedagogy to be successful in Malawi in relation to understanding the notion of quality as a constitutive meaning of a critical pedagogy, the following parameters could be helpful: fitness *for* and *of* purpose, value for money and transformation. Fitness *for* and *of* purpose will guide lecturers to plan considering both their specifications and students', value for money will encourage lecturers to balance critical aspects

with students' requirements to get jobs and transformation will encourage lecturers to see their students as participants in an on-going learning process.

### **3.2 Being rational as a constitutive meaning of a critical pedagogy**

In order to facilitate a critical pedagogy, lecturers require not only delineated quality parameters but ought to be rational in their classroom approach. Lipman (2009: 11) contends that rationality in institutions is about producing students as educated persons or "persons who are as knowledgeable as they need to be and as reasonable as they can be helped to be". Like Burbules (1993), Lipman (2009:11) views rationality as meaningful if connected to the notion of reasonableness. He argues as follows: "reasonableness is not pure rationality; it is rationality tempered by judgement. The schools, like the courts are under a mandate of rationality, but in a democratic society we need reasonable citizens above all". Burbules (1993) on the other hand posits that rationality entails four aspects: *reasonableness, accepting fallibility, embracing pragmatism, and employing rational judgement*. In advancing rationality as a constitutive meaning of a critical pedagogy in Malawi, this paper utilises these aspects. They are discussed in turn:

To enhance a critical pedagogy, lecturers require being reasonable. Reasonableness requires lecturers to be objective in the classroom. As such, they ought to embody an attitude of tolerance (the capacity to regard alternative positions without a rush to judgement) and to be pluralistic (having a regard for other views) (Burbules, 1993). In so doing, they will better understand the 'situatedness' of their students and facilitate learning objectively.

Being rational also entails accepting fallibility (Burbules, 1993). This means that lecturers realise that as human beings, they are prone to and make mistakes. With such a realisation, lecturers have the opportunity to continuously re-engage with their teaching and general pedagogic practices to enhance critical pedagogy.

More so, lecturers need to embrace a pragmatic approach in the classroom (Burbules, 1993). This means being open and willing to face failure as a learning process on the part of lecturers. A pragmatic approach then shall help lecturers to accept their limitations with an open mind so as to be able to learn even if it means learning from their students.

In employing rational judgement as a way of advancing critical pedagogy, lecturers in Malawian universities shall require to understand the context in which learning takes place. For example, the prevailing situation is most important in the choice of particular pedagogic practices in the classroom. In employing rational judgement, lecturers are called upon to be prudent and sensitive to the environment so as to enhance learning at all times in the classroom. Being rational thus entails that lecturers realise that the classroom

situation reflects open discussion. In this way, they assume a role that facilitates learning by being ready to share the subject matter in an environment that allows students to question and be ready to be questioned (Miller, 2000).

### **3.3 Being inclusive as a constitutive meaning of a critical pedagogy**

A lecturer ought to be inclusive in his pedagogical practices. Inclusivity means involving all students by giving them chances to exercise their intellectual capabilities. In such an environment, students ought to be free to participate in their learning. In this way, the classroom becomes a place in which both students and lecturers advance relevant arguments that facilitate the learning process in an inter-subjective manner. This process is pertinent in assisting students to develop abilities to make reasoned arguments, work in teams and appreciate and tolerate diversity of viewpoints (Enslin, Pendlebury & Tjiattas, 2001). These abilities are important for critical citizens who are expected to use their knowledge to enhance group solidarity, national consciousness and tolerance of diversity as stipulated in the higher education frameworks in Malawi.

### **3.4 Being a granter of freedom as a constitutive meaning of a critical pedagogy**

To achieve a critical pedagogy, lecturers ought not to impose their own ways of thinking but give learners a chance or freedom to learn together (Waghid, 2006). In this way, learners are given a chance to participate in their learning without any interference (Habermas, 1984; 1987). Granting freedom to learners to participate in their learning together with peers and the lecturer helps to avoid instrumental reasoning in the classroom. Instrumental reasoning means using knowledge for social control (Habermas, 1984; 1987). Classrooms ought to be liberating places and not environments for social control.

### **3.5 Being responsible to equal treatment as a constitutive meaning of a critical pedagogy**

In advancing a critical pedagogy in Malawi, lecturers need to treat learners in the classroom equally. No student should be seen as better than others or given more learning opportunities than others in the classroom. Treating learners equally, allows all students a chance to work hard and be involved in their learning process. In this regard, all learners ought to be respected and be given a chance to develop their critical reasoning capabilities that are required for citizens to enhance group solidarity, national consciousness and tolerance of diversity as stipulated in the higher education frameworks in Malawi.

#### 4 Conclusion

This paper presents the argument that while university education policy prescriptions and their strategies in Malawi are pertinent, there lacks a philosophical grounding of pedagogical practices within universities to train critical citizens capable of producing knowledge and enhancing citizenship values as outlined in the documents. The lack of a philosophical grounding of pedagogical practices is also due to a lack of learning and teaching policies within the universities. The paper thus conceptualises and proposes a model of critical pedagogy for Malawian universities. The proposed model of critical pedagogy has the following constitutive meanings required by lecturers in the classroom: being able to understand and delineate parameters of the notion of quality, being rational in the classroom, being inclusive in classroom activities, being a granter of freedom in the classroom and being responsive to equal treatment in the classroom.

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