

## RHODES *IMBIZO* 2011: SOME THOUGHTS ON DIVERSITY AT RHODES UNIVERSITY, IN RELATION TO TEACHING AND UNIVERSITY CULTURE

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I sincerely regret that I will be unable to participate in the Rhodes *imbizo* at the end of June, as I will be at a SANPAD workshop in The Netherlands. However, I would like to take up the VC's offer to members of the Rhodes community to make a written submission. I would like to make some remarks about the issue of diversity within the Rhodes community- and predominantly, the student body. I will address myself to the matter of diversity as it relates to two principal issues : i) teaching ii) the broader university culture.

### A) TEACHING

I here try to spell out the way I see the relationship between an understanding of education and the university, a conceptualisation of diversity in the student body at Rhodes, and an approach to teaching. This is, of course, a personal view, and based on my own experience and discipline.

#### 1) What is Education?

The way one answers this question directly influences the way one sees teaching, and goes about trying to teach, and inescapably has (and should have) a normative aspect to it, as education does not seek to leave either students or things as they were before. What are we, as educators, seeking to lead out from those with whom we are involved in the education process? I believe that we are looking to lead out, to help along the path to fuller development and expression, what is already in a sense in each student, i.e. their human potential, in both a universal and a unique sense. In spite of (in some ways because of) our biogenetic aspects, we are a fundamentally open-ended creature, a social, cultural, dialogical creature, with the capacity for morality. We are dependent upon each other, via our socialisation and our enculturation, for the achievement of our humanity. Vulnerability, dialogue, education and the achievement and expression of our humanity are thus so deeply intertwined as to be inseparable. We have our own individual personalities and sociocultural experiences. Education should seek to nurture these. It is therefore inherently committed to the flowering of diversity, while also struggling towards wider, more inclusive, visions of what we understand by humanity and by knowledge.

#### 2) What is the University?

I see the university as having both a universal and a contextual aspect. Universal, 'universitas', inasmuch as knowledge is a universal project, position, and treasure. ('Epistemology', which concerns itself with the conditions under which we can claim to know something, to hold knowledge, would seem to me to have an inescapably universal dimension, that has to cut across considerations of power or multiple and otherwise potentially unrelated culturally based knowledges, if our humanity is not to fragment). As such, *universitas* takes us out of our more parochial selves and is about growth, wider community and humility, and therefore about more encompassing intellectual and moral perspectives. Knowledge therefore has to be pursued, held, evaluated and shared in an open-ended, universal – but not unlimited - manner. This is both for reasons of rigour, as well as for reasons of promoting a universal respect for all human beings, i.e. not only in, but, critically, across, a diversity of ways of doing and expressing things. Paradoxically, the very act of

respecting diversity (because knowledges, actions, moralities, programmes are specific, and create consequences for other knowledges, actions, moralities, programmes), places limits upon how we can do so. This is a major educational challenge, which is at the heart of the university as an intellectual and moral project.

The university also has a contextual aspect, e.g. the national political context and history of education, as well as the regional, linguistic, cultural setting and the particular history of a specific university, notably its history of, and ways of incorporating, (a lack of) different kinds of diversity. Thus, at one level, all universities in South Africa are seeking to come to terms with/ to transcend the impacts of apartheid, which in the name of (what I call) a *technical* diversity 'racial'/cultural diversity, effectively undermined (what I call) *humanising* diversity. However, universities are not, and should not, all be seeking to do this in the same way. Moving away from one kind of uniformity to another (e.g. quota based diversity in terms of staff and student composition, or percentage of 'indigenous' as opposed to 'colonial' readings in curricula, i.e. what I would call technical diversity) is not the way to achieve humanising diversity.

History, culture, language, economic position, and particularly the value that is generated from the interaction of people from a diversity of such settings, provide the context for a humanising diversity. It is here that the universal and the contextual, as well as the intellectual and the moral aspects, of the university project can be seen to come together. We are now no longer pursuing diversity as something technical, as a means, but as an end in itself, as an expression of our very humanity.

One of the ways we refer to Rhodes University is as *indawo yolwazi*, i.e. "a place of knowledge". But this can become rather uncritical. There is the potential danger that teaching the students either blocks of knowledge, or particular ways of thinking or of knowledge production, can lead to what I might call passive diversity in academe. What do we understand by knowledge? – is thus (for me) a different question from, and a preliminary question to, asking Foucauldian or Saidian type questions about the power to decode/decide about what counts as knowledge.

If we are looking for a broad concept in terms of which to think of the university, it would for me rather be in terms of *ukuqonda* (to understand; understanding) than *ulwazi* (knowledge). Without *ukuqonda* there can be no *ulwazi*. Without *ulwazi* there can be no *inkqubela* (progress, development). Let me explain by playing around with some words.

*Indawo yokuqonda* would suggest a place of openness and understanding. But, for me, that is not strong enough. There is a very significant little suffix in Xhosa, the *isa* root, which makes verbs more active. Thus, *ukufunda* means to learn, whereas *ukufundisa* means to teach, i.e. to make to learn.

So, we could think of *indawo yokuqondisa*, i.e. a place of bringing about openness and understanding. But we could go one step further and bring in the element of reason and explanation, a kind of double *isa*.

Thus, *ukuqondisisa* means

- 1) to make someone understand clearly by means of a lucid explanation
  - 2) to look at, examine, study carefully, to investigate thoroughly, with a view to ascertaining/making sure of understanding it thoroughly
- (Greater Dictionary of Xhosa, Vol 3, Page 80).

This, it seems to me, brings together what a university is/should be. Knowledge that is generated on the basis of this kind of clear understanding that is grounded in careful examination and lucid explanation. With this kind of understanding one can open oneself to diversity with confidence.

So, for my money: *Yindawo enjani, iRhodes?* (what kind of place is Rhodes?) *Indawo yokuqondisisa*. The fact that I have outlined what some may see as a rather Greco-Western vision of a university in a potentially Greco-Western style of argument, through a Xhosa semantic and cultural idiom, shows how one can bring together the universal (as opposed to a culture-specific stereotype of it) with the contextual, the diverse.

### 3) Diversity and Teaching at University in the South African Context

There is not only one South African context, but there are certain broad parameters which permeate higher education in South Africa

a) the effects, wide-ranging and cumulative, of the history of political and economic inequality in South Africa, and in particular, of the ways in which these inequalities have manifested themselves in the education system

b) the diversity of the South African student body – the more so in the last two decades; however, diversity is far more than a matter of de ‘racialisation’, or the growing internationalisation of the student body. Diversity offers tremendous opportunities for enriching dialogue and new options for both criticality and construction by introducing new imaginaries. Every time I go to India, I am amazed by how a different perspective puts, well, a different perspective, on things. When the ‘Middle East’ is referred to as ‘West Asia’, i.e. when Greenwich is no longer Longitude Ground Zero, and other certitudes are realigned, one can imagine the world in new ways. Anyone for having South Africa re-imagined by fellow Africans, as a cure for xenophobia?

However, diversity at the same time brings tremendous challenges, for it includes diversity of opportunity or deprivation, diversity of multilingual facility, diversity of experience of/ability to/willingness to accommodate diversity. It is by no means a straightforward matter quite how to accommodate diversity. I have suggested that the very process of adopting certain ways of attempting to accommodate diversity in and of itself, tends to shut down other ways of accommodating diversity. For example: Government is telling us all to diversify the workforce (Read: deracialise at managerial level. But those managers need to be able to be fluent in English. Read: *viva* private and former model C schools and *deviva* linguistic diversity).

c) Increasing economic pressures on universities, particularly in recent years. These call for innovative teaching techniques, which may have a sting in them, inasmuch as they involve less direct contact with students (and which may therefore may only be able to respect diversity in limited ways). This is precisely at a time when direct contact and skilled diversity enhancement and management is called for, and yet when the political and moral pressure is on universities to diversify and to provide the context for diversity to flourish –while also increasing throughput rates. This in turn puts on the pressure for more uniform, tried and trusted, risk –diminishing, diversity unsympathetic, approaches –and for (you guessed it...) ‘realistic’ intake policies.

### 5) Some Attempts by One Lecturer to Accommodate Diversity

Diversity that flourishes human beings is to be actively promoted as part of our educational approach and practice at university. As I have suggested, this is no simple matter, and the very act of respecting diversity places limitations upon how we can do

so, potentially at the cost of other ways of respecting diversity. (This is because one can only do so in specific, limited ways, in specific times and places, with limited resources, as someone who has, and together with other people who have, specific views about diversity).

At Rhodes University I seek to promote what I regard as humanity flourishing diversity in the following ways in my teaching:

a) in curriculum. Aware of the cultural diversity and particularly the growing percentage of African students at the university and in our Anthropology classes, we build a significant African component into the curriculum, as reflected in our course modules, for lectures, tutorials, essays, in all years. However, Anthropology is NOT to be equated, as it was in some universities under apartheid, with 'bantology'.

Accordingly, I have also taught courses on Amazonia, New Guinea, India. As I will argue below, diversity is for everyone, - not just for the historically advantaged.

Using illustrative materials is one of the conundrums of teaching in a context of a) a diversifying student body, b) that is increasingly turning technologically inward to limited cell phone and Facebook circuits, c) that therefore is not necessarily diversifying in a cross-fertilising way, as we would wish, but in some ways is, paradoxically, re-balkanising itself, d) that is, by its own admission in written class assessments, NOT reading. How does one find a common ground across which to meet and talk with each other? To get practical, where does one go looking for case studies and illustrations that will serve as illustrations? So, I use what I can, by way of well/widely enough known South African examples, (SA) TV examples, case studies we have used in Anthropology courses, examples one can briefly outline, etc.

b) language. I am very aware that English is not the first language of many of the students on campus. So, apart from taking pains to express myself in clear language, accessible to second language speakers, I not infrequently use a Xhosa phrase or two, or less occasionally, an Afrikaans phrase, while lecturing. This is because it is apposite to the case material I am discussing, or because I just get enthusiastic, and am reaching out to the students, wanting them to feel more at home in the class. Moving around with language is particularly good for discussing identity issues. I have used the odd Afrikaans phrase to use my own multilingual situation to make a bilingual joke at my expense, to lighten up the identity 'thing'. Now it becomes tricky: some like diversity- but on their own terms, it seems. While my - at this stage often not even conscious anymore - use of Xhosa always seems to elicit a positive response, murmur, etc, some students in their written evaluations complained about my use of (a few phrases of) Afrikaans in class. "We do not speak Afrikaans". Well, my attitude is that diversity is something that we all have to open ourselves out to, and I am not prepared to facilitate students getting away with the idea that Anthropology - or life, for that matter - can be reduced to 'diversity made to order', i.e. to pander to their wishes to remain comfortable, undiversified and ethnocentric.

c) using/creating question times. I try to move the chance to participate around, also by gender and background (obviously without declaring my tactic). Some first year evaluations suggest unhappiness that they did not get a chance to participate - but with a class of some 250, this is difficult. A second year in 2006 said s/he enjoyed the debate tutorials, because now s/he felt on more equal terms with the first language English speakers, as everybody had a turn.

d) I comment extensively on, and try to be upbuilding of, essays where it is clear that students are from a cultural or linguistic background where they are struggling at Rhodes. (I do however, make it clear to them that they do also need to address the problems they have in English). In a number of cases, I have given students the

opportunity to rewrite their essays after having given them advice on how to do so. I have also done this on occasion with students who have clearly put in the effort, but have run into problems in terms of their faith with the evolution essay in the first term of Anthropology 1. In Lectures and tutorials, I make it clear that I am available to discuss the issues privately and confidentially, as a believer who is able to handle evolution –and some do come in for counselling. I have also allowed students in more senior years, coming from different universities, with different ways of doing things, or who have been in psychological trouble, to rework essays. On each of these occasions, I have had to read and comment on the essay twice. When students ask me to comment on a draft of their essay to assist them in their preparation, I do so. Some students with personal/cultural problems have also come in for extensions or rewrites, and I have always accommodated them. As I keep saying, diversity means many things.

e) In the third term of 2010, I taught a three week course on Spirit Possession for my colleague Penny Bernard This kind of material brings a range of diversity issues in teaching to the fore. I have frequently taught courses on religion. Spirit possession is about the experience (and this is the problem: it could be about the claimed experience) of the embodiment of possession, i.e. that your body is actually possessed by the spirit of another (usually) deceased person – or even an animal. Cultural knowledges are importantly about the embodiment of knowledge. i.e. the internalizing, holding, and acting upon knowledge in a social context. However, in an important sense, this precludes/hinders one from being reflexive, ironic, about the knowledge one holds. This has obvious implications for how one attempts to deal with, to analyse, cultural and religious diversity in an academic context. Does the spirit refuse to manifest beneath the academic microscope? Does the believing student feel culturally violated by sceptical “theory”? Students from different cultural and religious and non religious backgrounds were deeply stimulated , and in some ways, disturbed, by the issues in the readings, and the questions I raised. I was careful to sensitize them to the plausibility of various perspectives. Initially, some did not want to go analytically further than the most preliminary line of respect, simply saying that “if its OK for them, it’s OK”; or : “who is to say it is not true?” Or to blame it all on Anthropology, and cop out: “Anthropology is all about diversity, isn’t it?” But, to teach diversity in a way that respected people’s positions and was academically responsible, I made it clear to the students that:

While it is not our business to question the ontological truthfulness or otherwise of the claims being made, simply describing other people’s (claimed) experiences at face value would not advance our understanding of spirit possession significantly. We had to move beyond making first level diversity assumptions, and incorporate such assumptions and claims within a more encompassing generalising level of analysis, and possibly of explanation. This is a more demanding, and universal, approach to diversity, as it potentially enables us to take account of the similarities and differences across diverse manifestations/accounts of spirit possession across humanity. (This is the vexed problem of epistemology and of knowledges that I raised earlier).

To give the students something to hang onto, I spelled out to them how I (and other social scientists ) have developed a theoretical position which enables me to keep open the ‘ontological option’ of a belief being true, (including my own), while yet submitting it to the most rigorous social scientific analysis. I.e. one can respect diversity of belief as well as rigour of analysis. One can be free.

f) Different students have different skills, experience, confidence in writing exams. I discuss the major fears students have about exams and how appropriate use can be made of the time in the exam venue to deal with and overcome these fears

So, these are some of the ways in which I have attempted to respect and flourish diversity. But respecting diversity is demanding - for us all. And we are also attempting to open out our students to the challenges and opportunities - and, God Help us all, the uncertainties – of diversity.

#### 6) What Can One Realistically Expect of a University Student?

This, to me, is one of the most difficult, and most important, ways in which diversity imposes itself – in ways for which one often cannot plan.

What does one expect in terms of a wide range of variables, such as: i) relevant non schooling background, such as command of various languages, including English, previous immersion in what kinds of reading - which relates to capacity to abstract from data and to formulate independently ii) schooling background

iii) financial capabilities at university; iv) self and group image at university?

What is significant about these variables is that they might be seen as “de-agentising” variables, i.e. factors that are largely beyond the control of individual students, and that, particularly in the case of previously discriminated against and currently financially struggling students, would serve to lessen their agency and ability to perform at university

Then there are the important, more directly “self-agentising” variables:

v) ability to work independently, consistently

vi) willingness to work, particularly to read for classes, tutorials and essays.

vii) wish to better oneself

viii) some intellectual curiosity

ix) some intellectual integrity

x) some robustness in the face of setbacks, adversity.

While students come from a range of very widely differing backgrounds in terms of socio-economic, linguistic, cultural, etc diversity, they all

a) are in the very top percentile intellectually of the population

b) are significantly subsidised by the tax payer- no matter who else is paying.

One assumes that they are here out of interest and a desire to grow and to better themselves.

But it is usually only a handful who have been genuinely transformed and who have become agents in their own transformation by the time they graduate – at least in terms of the kinds of *ukuqonda* educational vision I hold. A considerable number seem to enjoy some stimulation, but as long as it is done for them, and when they can get away with some, but limited work – and no serious challenges to their way of seeing things. By their own admission in course assessments, many third year students do not read in preparation for lectures, but only for tutorials (and then not infrequently, only when they have to do presentations). Some Honours students regard five articles a week as heavy reading, and turn in 2000 word essays, with only three or four articles in their bibliographies. This is a kind of diversity that does not make the policy documents - but it permeates the university system –perniciously. Such diversity in terms of what I have called ‘de-agentising’ and ‘self-agentising’ variables, and the maturity and commitment of students, significantly impacts upon the way a lecturer can think about, and go about, ‘educating’ his/her students, what

we think we can assume as any kind of common ground or frame of what it is we attempt to induce into and deduce from our students, what kinds of balances or indeed, compromises, we strike between content, criticality, reflexivity, dialogue, participation, formal transmission by the lecturer, student self study, etc. In short, what we think we can get away with (upwards) or have to compromise on (downwards) in order to be continue functioning relatively smoothly as a ‘university’.

## B) DIVERSITY AND UNIVERSITY CULTURE

At the beginning of this year there was heated correspondence in the Grocott’s Mail. A specific set of events resulted in people arguing, not only about what had specifically happened at Rhodes, but more widely, about the criteria in terms of which we should see the relationship between the university as a centre of rational inquiry, and its accommodation of expressions of different kinds of diversity – in that case, matters of religion.

For the purposes of the *imbizo*, this raises the question of what may broadly be called ‘university culture’. In the context of both post democratic South Africa and of the cultural dimensions of globalization, the interface between the culture of rational inquiry (which is not the same thing as ‘rationality’) and the culture of not only plurality, but more importantly, the culture of diversity, (which is not the same thing as the diversity of cultures) cuts to the heart of the contemporary university. If we at Rhodes are to negotiate this interface in a constructive way, we need to keep a number of considerations in mind.

1) To repeat the point I made earlier: the very act of respecting diversity places limits upon how we can do so

2) In the contemporary Rhodes university culture, there are inbuilt historical ‘inertias’ which have contributed to the status quo. This is not to discredit the value of much of that culture, or its importance to constituencies in the university. Or to argue for a change for change’s sake position. It is to draw attention to the taken for granted nature of much of the institutional culture of Rhodes University, and that its role/impact in our changing context may not always be consciously considered.

3) There is some discussion as to whether a university should be a ‘secular’ institution. If we wish to uphold the nature of the university as a centre of rational inquiry, and as a hub of humanising diversity – where we see the two as enriching each other - then we may wish to discuss what institutional cultural metaphorical ‘key’, or focus, is best suited to achieve that. I would be inclined to suggest that: in the same way as the critical separation between church and state was made, which has enabled religion and politics to co-exist in the constitutional democracy, together with the non-interference of the church in matters of state and with freedom of worship or non-worship – So, in the university, there needs to be a process of non-interference between the processes of intellectual inquiry and argument, and the expressions of diversity (which are much wider than ‘religion’) by those involved in pursuing such inquiry. Particular expressions of diversity should not seek to colonise the theatre, or idiom, of rational intellectual inquiry. But neither should some particular image of the rational university seek to straightjacket expressions of human diversity (other than those which seek to limit it) or the culture of diversity, within the university.