

Moving beyond the safe bet.

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I would like to start off with a disclaimer. I have purposefully decided that I will not be making overt the theoretical frames that I'm drawing on nor will I be quoting influential authors. Because this audience is largely made of academics I'm sure you'll be able to pick up the theoretical frame/s, ideas, and influential articles I'm drawing on, but for now I'm choosing to go against the rules of engagement set up for this Imbizo. Besides which, I feel my fellow panellists have provided us with vivid and thought provoking considerations about Rhodes University's Institutional Culture and how we can begin to engage with what we can and ought to change.

For the next 20 minutes what I aim to do is illustrate what we achieve when we intentionally open spaces for some of us to enter and participate as members of this university and to consider what happens when we neglect to open such spaces.

I'm going to brave the personal and ask that you come along with me. I've woven my experience and that of those similar to me; I'm referring to young, black women in this university. When I was asked to be part of this panel, I knew that it would not be sufficient for my experience to be voiced here. Voices of others are important, so I spoke to young black women academic on campus and those who I consider at the cusp of joining the academy after their Masters and PhD. I didn't interview everyone who falls into this category, this is a representation of those I could reach and who were available.

I want to focus on just three points: Learning Culture, Courting a Career and Safe Bet.

Learning Culture

The learning culture at Rhodes University is steeped in a particular tradition, quality, prestige and status that we've chosen to be part of. Yes, we've chosen Rhodes University yet it's only when we are on the inside that we realize how much it will cost us to be here and settle here; the costs I'm referring to are not about Rands and cents.

If you are a young black woman like me, what I'll call a 'Mandy' then you're walking around with what Sally referred to earlier as the invisible knapsack with the wind on your back, helping you move forward without the resistance of a gale-force wind in your face. Similar to the knapsack idea I see myself as having access cards, I've been given some and others I've earned, this is largely due the structured Mellon Accelerated Academic programme.

So my access cards work in this way: I don't teach undergraduate or postgrad courses unless folks like Martin invite me to co-teach on a course with them. But I do have an alternative access to the 'student experience' in that I'm a warden

and so I do stand in front of a student population at our house meetings. My students listen and we exchange thoughts, opinions and experiences of residential life and I don't experience any problems. Why? Well, my private school accent grants me access, so they listen. My middle class status grants me shared cultural capital which means my speech is peppered with the appropriate analogies and I draw on experiences that I suspect make my students feel like coming along with me, because I know the covert rules and thus I have an access pass that grants me their attention and respect.

On the other hand I have colleagues who don't have the same experience. Their students perceive them as 'little brown girls'. The 'little' is not only referring to their physical stature, but rather signals that my colleagues are not taken seriously or given the respect due to them as lecturers. Instead they have to prove they have expertise in their field, that they are knowledgeable and that the students in their class can learn from them. My colleagues experience their capacity as lecturers questioned at every turn, students are prone to offering comments and suggestions that thinly veil their displeasure at been taught by a 'little brown girl'. If one reads these comments/suggestions on paper they seem harmless enough and perhaps we might congratulate them for exercising student agency, however the tone and the context in which these comments are made paints a different picture. The effect of these comments is that one is left with a very strong sense that students wouldn't dream of communicating in that fashion with white colleagues.

"Do you want me to show you my notes so you can see how X taught this course?"

"Clearly you're struggling sorting out administration, I'll show you a system"

These 'suggestions' have the effect of being 'put in your place'. If one is even more junior than lecturer, and you have tutor status then the displeasure is far less veiled.

Nevertheless my colleagues work really hard to prove their worth and finally win that cohort over and the students finally see that they *can* learn from a little brown girl and the module ends and they move on. A fresh new group comes through and my colleagues have to go through the *same* process and treatment all over again.

What are some of the things that perpetuate this phenomenon? Well, in the first instance, students arrive with certain expectations of being taught at Rhodes University and that picture typically does not include little brown girls. It's because students still arrive in 2011 having only seen someone like me in three contexts: the kitchen, the garden and the till at Pick 'n Pay. Added to that is the fact that some colleagues who teach within the same discipline will actively perpetuate the dismissing of young black women academic, by the shaping the curriculum in ways that illustrate that black (people, experience, art, culture) can and should be continually dismissed because they don't count in real ways, in fact they don't count as knowledge.

I'm going to pause here because it needs to be noted that this can all change. We can make the decision that indeed the curriculum can be a vehicle for our students to learn more than just what we usually offer.

One response could be that we send students to a 'Louise' type course, and they'll transform there. But how many students can actually be in Louise's class? The other response can be 'Well my discipline doesn't deal with stuff like that'. But can we afford this view, given that we have certain ideas of the kind of graduate we want to produce at Rhodes University?

Courting a Career

I have been on the Mellon Accelerated Programme (MAP) and the structure of that programme is another access card. I received and still continue to receive mentoring from colleagues in my department and my faculty and many other areas of the university community. My mentors have focused attention on my career, where I am now and where I aim to be and discuss the various alternative paths I can take to achieve my career aims. I have always had the sense that when my mentors, colleagues and friends converse with me about my career, they want me to succeed here at Rhodes University and are interested in helping me to navigate an academic career at Rhodes University. I feel like my best interests are a priority to them and that the contribution I can make to Rhodes University matters.

This is not the experience of others who are similar to me. The Higher Education sector is confronted by the reality of an ageing professoriate, we've heard a lot about that here at Rhodes University because we seem to 'feel' the urgency more because of our size. The reality is that young academics are not coming in their droves to join the academy. Young black academics are even scarcer.

An obvious place to begin our search for young academics, and young black academics in particular is in our departments. We have Masters and PhD candidates whom I believe can be courted into the academy. It's clear to me that some Masters and PhD scholars are not 'sold' on working in 'industry' and they could be persuaded into academia. They could be part of the 'growing our own timber' strategy we talk about so much. However we generally undervalue these students. We limit their contribution to 'cheap labour' and miss the opportunity to induct them into an academic career. The focus seems to be on getting them to produce a quality thesis, if they have teaching experience it remains largely at tutor status or at best glorified tutor status. We don't have the time nor the inclination of including them in curriculum decisions that impact and determine the approaches and pedagogic tools used in the modules they tutor or the sections of workshops they are asked to guest facilitate. Rarely are they encouraged and supported to publish from their thesis and in the few cases where students do publish it is quite obvious that the main beneficiary is not the students, largely because the financial returns are awarded to the university without a credit towards an research account or by some other means of recognising the financial gain the university receives from this output. Masters and PhD candidates are often expected to participate in departmental or faculty

seminars, however they are rarely encouraged to participate in institutional forums which would give them insights into the university structure and culture. Perhaps the most important aspect of my access card is the mentoring conversations I regularly enjoy, which can be slotted as part of the face-to-face supervision sessions. In this way these potential academics can see that the thesis is but one of the important parts of an academic career. In short we miss the opportunity to treat these scholars as potential colleagues.

Safe bet

I'm going to conclude with the aspect that concerns me the most about our institutional culture.

It's my observation that Rhodes University makes safe bets when hiring and retaining black academics. I'm a classic example of a 'safe bet'. In the four years I've been here I've often been told 'how well I fit in'. Close examination of what makes such statements possible is the following: My junior and secondary schooling experience afforded me access to cultural practices which are closely aligned to those valued and practiced here at Rhodes University. In addition my middle class ***cultural*** status (I stress cultural to indicate that my 'lower' economic status is trumped by middle-class cultural practices) earns me access cards into spaces in this university in a manner that allows the university culture to go largely uncontested. On the surface this is a winning formula, a 'Mandy' counts as black on the university equity statistics and because she 'fits' she is happy and comfortable in the current institutional culture. We have no reason to believe she will rock the boat and start suggesting or demanding that we pay attention to how our institutional culture excludes and destroys black academics.

But if we start scratching below the surface we'll discover that a safe bet 'Mandy' is a cost to the institution and to the 'Mandy'. We will patiently wait for a 'Mandy' to apply here at Rhodes University and that may take a while if we haven't had the foresight to identify, groom and court from our Masters and PhD cohorts. In the meantime our equity profile shifts at the excruciating pace it's going. We can pretty much forget about any real change and transformation in our institution if we keep bringing more of the same and continue to window dress in a black skin.