

The Values of Diversity

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In January 2002, the Spier Festival offered an open-air production of Purcell's opera Dido and Aeneas to enchanted audiences. Purcell wrote Dido and Aeneas in 1689 at the same time that Arnoud Janssen was turning his first fields at the opposite end of the world. The Spier production showcased the work and talent of the University of Cape Town's School of Opera in a fusion of early modern and Western concepts of witchcraft, magic and courtly love with African rhythms and traditions of oral poetry and music. Avoiding the assumption of primordialisms that beset so many attempts to weave African strands into the cosmopolitan cultural forms of our contemporary culture, Angelo Gobbato's Dido and Aeneas used the juxtaposition of Purcell's music and Baroque ensemble with African instruments, voices and dance to mirror each back to the other, lifting out opera's theme of love and betrayal. In interpreting an early English opera in this way, the production reclaimed its authenticity, as it was common seventeenth-century practice to include contemporary dance and musical interludes.

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In January 2002, the Spier Festival offered an open-air production of Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas* to enchanted audiences. Purcell wrote *Dido and Aeneas* in 1689 at the same time that Arnoud Janssen was turning his first fields at the opposite end of the world. The Spier production showcased the work and talent of the University of Cape Town's School of Opera in a fusion of early modern and Western concepts of witchcraft, magic and courtly love with African rhythms and traditions of oral poetry and music. Avoiding the assumption of primordialisms that beset so many attempts to weave African strands into the cosmopolitan cultural forms of our contemporary culture, Angelo Gobbato's *Dido and Aeneas* used the juxtaposition of Purcell's music and Baroque ensemble with African instruments, voices and dance to mirror each back to the other, lifting out opera's theme of love and betrayal. In interpreting an early English opera in this way, the production reclaimed its authenticity, as it was common seventeenth-century practice to include contemporary dance and musical interludes.²

¹ For the architecture and archaeology of colonialism, see Martin Hall, *Archaeology and the Modern World: Colonial Transcripts in South Africa and the Chesapeake*. London and New York, Routledge, 2000.

² Programme Notes, *Dido and Aeneas*, Spier Festival, 2002; Angelo Gobbato, personal communication.

UCT's Opera School is an appropriate introduction to my theme today. The case that I will make for diversity in higher education is that it is a multidimensional set of values. One dimension is the strong claim of social justice – the right of all, irrespective of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and physical ability, to be given the opportunity to succeed in higher education to the best of individual ability. And of course, given South Africa's ever-present history of racial segregation, this is an ever-urgent imperative. Hendrik Verwoerd, the notorious ideologue of apartheid, argued that Africans should only be educated to a level at which they could function effectively as manual labourers and servants. UCT's Opera School has turned the ghost of Verwoerd, perhaps also wandering in Spier's gardens, on its head, and thoroughly shaken it for good measure. Most of the opera students are black, and graduate with a thorough classical training that enables them to sing Mozart in German, Verdi in Italian and to acquit themselves well on the stage in New York, Paris or London. In the university generally – and in all universities in South Africa previously reserved for racial minorities – the demographic profile of the student body is changing. This is not straightforward, and there are severe challenges from factors such as the very uneven quality of secondary education, particularly in key subjects such as science and mathematics, the complexities of language, and the effective exclusion of intellectually-able students from universities through financial factors. Changing the staff profile is equally complex, and everywhere slower than we would like. But it would be a fair generalization that all public higher education institutions in South Africa understand and accept the imperatives of social justice that require them to give urgent and continuing attention to increasing the diversity of their staff and students so that the stain of apartheid is eventually erased from higher education.

But social justice – however important – is only one value of diversity in higher education. To fail to look at other dimensions is both dangerous and limiting.

To regard diversity as a uni-dimensional matter is dangerous because understanding diversity only as access to learning through the identities of race and gender invites political simplification and counter arguments that reduce the university to a turnstile, at which the right to enter is argued out with the gatekeeper. To the outsider – perhaps with the advantage of a vantage point shorn of complex details – this is evident in George W Bush's January 2003 manifesto engaging the US Administration in the Supreme Court case of the University of Michigan's admissions policy. Thus the President rejected Michigan's policies as "a quota system", "based solely on race": "quota systems that use race to include or exclude people from higher education and the opportunities it offers are divisive, unfair and impossible to square with the Constitution." To the outsider, this is an odd statement, because it seems clear that the University of Michigan's admissions system is not a quota system – it is a system designed to achieve diversity across a entering cohort of students using a range of factors that include, race ethnicity, area of residence and a family's historical links with the university. And because only those applicants with the highest SAT scores can hope to gain admission under any combination of criteria, the overriding basis of admission to Michigan, irrespective of race, gender or ethnicity, must surely be intellectual aptitude (assuming, of course, that this is what the SAT measures). To the outsider interested in the theory and practice of higher education, these facts have long been well-known and on the public record. But the fact that the President of the United States, or perhaps more to the point his political advisors, can

reason that they will reach a significant group of American voters by disregarding common cause and evoking the spectre of racial quotas suggests to the outsider that the public discourse about higher education is vulnerable to popular manipulation. An affinity for manipulation of this nature is invariably a symptom of over-simplification. If the public discourse about diversity in higher education is only about race, then universities risk becoming political footballs in which the educational imperatives become lost.

In South Africa, the case for social justice in admission to higher education is still compelling, and it seems unlikely that a comparable challenge to admissions policies will come to the South African Constitutional Court in the near future. But it is not difficult to model a case similar to that facing the University of Michigan. South Africa's Employment Equity Act, and equity policies in university admissions, are predicated on the need to correct past injustices based on racial discrimination. Meeting these requirements at universities such as UCT in the 1980s and 1990s was comparatively straightforward. Because apartheid's discriminatory mechanisms were totalitarian, applicants' secondary schools were an accurate proxy for racial discrimination. This was because there was a separate education department for each "race group": the Department of National Education for "whites", the Department of Education and Training (or DET) for "Africans", and so on. Thus at UCT in the 1980s and 1990s, if an applicant's school record identified was designated "DET" or "former-DET", the admissions officer could be sure that the applicant was African, and had been systematically disadvantaged on the basis of race. But today, significant numbers of black students have had most of their education at formerly-white schools and are financially privileged, and the old contours of the education system do not work nearly as well as proxies in admissions policies. In considering two applicants for a place in a competitive programme at a university, both with the same schooling and financial circumstances, would it be fair to exclude the minority student – the white student in South Africa's case – in favour of the majority applicant – the black student? Given that South Africa's constitution espouses the principles of a non-racial society, one could well anticipate a constitutional challenge analogous to that which the US Supreme Court will shortly hear. Lawyers may be able to look forward to lucrative opportunities.

As well as being dangerous, regarding diversity as a uni-dimensional matter of race in this way is also limiting. This, of course, is because universities such as Michigan and Cape Town understand diversity and its values to mean much more than the set of biological characteristics of race. The University of Michigan's defence will include research that shows the value that diversity brings to the classroom, making for a better education for all students.³ Similarly, a defence of my imagined constitutional challenge in South Africa would include the argument that admissions policies that take race into account look beyond the necessities of social justice – the reversal of decades of racial segregation – to the educational values of diversity. These are the values so well demonstrated by production of an early English opera under an African sky, with a counterpoint of African rhythms and oral poetry, and in a three-hundred year old vineyard built around the sweat of slaves and the whip of the

³ See, for example, G.Orfield and D.Whitla, *Diversity and legal education: student experiences in leading law schools*. Cambridge, Harvard University Civil Rights Project, 1999.

overseer. For a university, rich experiences such as these have the potential of transforming perceptions of the world.

The logic of this argument takes me to the hub of the matter – the value of diversity in the curriculum, and in the university community. UCT's participation in the Mellon Minority Undergraduate Programme contributes significantly to building such diversity, as do a number of similar programmes that will contribute to building our academic staff. First, though, I have to ask a question: "what is a university"?

At first pass, the answer to this may seem self-evident. But in some key respects the nature of the university and its purposes has never been more in question. This was best demonstrated by the argument, often expressed at the height of enthusiasm for the new digital world, that all learning would imminently be on-line, that all students would study in the comfort of their own homes, and that each learner would construct a customized curriculum built from transferable credits for courses that were digitally available and marketed in competition as educational products. Of course, the dot.com bubble has now burst, and such consumer utopianism is now food only for parody. However, the new realism that is the turbulent wake of the good ship Internet has hardly resulted in a consensus of what the university is, or should be. This is particularly evident in South Africa, still in the throes of a government-driven restructuring of public higher education. Many institutions will soon be merged, sometimes willingly, often reluctantly and sometimes – perhaps – only after protracted legal battles. A new formula for the allocation of state subsidy will seek to direct higher education in institutions towards higher levels of efficiency, and towards the goals of national development. And higher education receives a poor press, with leader-writers and letter-writers invariably slating university administrators as ineffectual and trapped in a world of irrelevance and arcane privilege.

And yet, at many universities in South Africa, demand for a place has never been higher. February sees the beginning of the academic year, and there has been more demand from better qualified school graduates for places at our top universities than ever before. At the same time, South Africa's burgeoning private education sector reports strong demands for places. While the University of Cape Town and some other public universities offer substantial amounts of financial aid to students from poorer backgrounds, as well as the enticement of entrance scholarships for academic stars, most students and their families will contribute financially to their university education, and many will incur substantial debts in order to study and graduate. Equally, there is nothing quite like a South African graduation ceremony to illustrate the value that both graduates and their families attribute to the achievement of a qualification.

The demise of the university, then – so confidently predicted five years ago – seems to be a fiction. Why? The answer will be obvious to anyone who has made their life working in higher education, and to many prospective students and their families. An education is far more than the sum of its learning materials – the fiction that was traded for a while so successfully by the "edu-coms". A university education has the potential to be transformative.

Transformative in terms of personal wealth. As Alison Wolf has shown, in an important book that is otherwise skeptical about many of the claims made for

education, higher education offers a favourable rate of return for the individual, particularly when a fair proportion of the costs of an individual education are defrayed across the tax-paying population as a whole by means of state subsidies.⁴ And, in a more specialized study of higher education and affirmative action in the United States, Bill Bowen and Derek Bok have demonstrated that access to higher education brings equity in earning power that is an important corrective to the legacies of racial discrimination.⁵

Transformative, also, in terms of social capital. As Dalton Conley has argued persuasively, achievement in higher education can be indexed to the accumulation of a broad range of benefits in the family – disposable income, assets that can be used to acquire more assets, and the social capital of a supportive environment for learning.⁶ These benefits are particularly evident in a country such as South Africa, where there is marked inequality and a broad base of poverty and hardship. A university education offers the potential of social and economic transformation in a single generation.⁷ This can perhaps best be captured in the personal testimonies that convey more of the “education effect” than to bald economic statistics. Here is one such story:

“I was born and grew up in Blue-Gums Location, Sterkspruit, in Transkei/Eastern Cape. I am the last-born in a family of six. I did my primary education at Magumbu Primary School from 1984-1989, in Blue Gums. Between 1990 and 1992, I was at Kwa-Nduku Junior Secondary School. In 1993, I attended at Mehlomakulu Senior Secondary School, where I completed my matric in 1995. My mother supported me all the way, from Grade 1 up until I passed my matric. She worked as a domestic worker in Johannesburg with STD 6 Certificate. My father was not working and he only passed Grade 2/Sub B. As my mother was the only breadwinner at home, there was no money for me to further my studies. I really wanted to go to university after I passed my matric in 1995. I stayed at home in 1996 doing nothing. In 1997, I decided to join SANDF as a volunteer. We went for a three-weeks Basic Military Training Course in Kieskammahoek, Eastern Cape. In September 1997, my friend from Cape Town brought me the application forms and encouraged me to apply to UCT. I even struggled to get the application fee, which was R80 at that time. However, I applied and I was accepted at UCT and started my studies in 1998. I completed BA (in Public Affairs and Administration) in 2000. In 2001, I did Honours degree in the same field of study and I graduated in December 2001. My parents are very proud of me. I am the only one in the family who got the opportunity to study at a university”.⁸

⁴ Alison Wolf, *Does Education Matter: myths about education and economic growth*. London, Penguin Books, 2002.

⁵ W.G.Bowen and D.Bok, *The Shape of the River: Long-term consequences of considering race in college and university admissions*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998.

⁶ Dalton Conley, *Being Black, Living in the Red: Race, Wealth and Social Policy in America*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999.

⁷ See Martin Hall, “Access to Higher Education: Race, Resources and Social Exclusion”. *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Comparative Studies* 3(2), 2001. <http://www.safundi.com>

⁸ Vakele Nobongoza, personal communication, February 2003. Nobongoza is an intern in the Office of the Vice Chancellor, University of Cape Town.

But how is higher education transformative? Here, we enter more uncertain territory. In one argument, particularly related to the benefits of a university qualification for subsequent earning power, graduates earn more simply because higher education institutions exercise a filtering function, creating a scarcity factor that is rewarded by greater earning power. There is some evidence for this in the apparent correlation between the price of an education and subsequent earnings – you get what you pay for. Educationalists, of course, don't like this argument very much, and another case is made for advanced education as the primary driver of economic growth, producing a highly skilled graduate work force that is rewarded by higher earning power. Given the costs of higher education, and the extent of higher education policy debates, these arguments are surprisingly unresolved. It is testimony to the theoretical uncertainty of educational economics that the World Bank can have switched, in less than a decade, from a policy that saw investment in higher education in Africa as an indulgence to an approach that emphasizes higher education as holding the key to economic and social recovery in the continent. The effects on individual institutions of such switchback policies by international agencies have been traumatic.

Here, though, I am interested in another aspect of transformation – what a university education can do for an individual in changing his or her perception of the world. My proposition is that the most valuable aspect of higher education – and the definitive quality of the best university education – is the play between an abstracted view of the world, and the experience of living *in* the world. The “abstracted view” can take many forms: a computer simulation of an engineering problem, a case argued in the Moot Court of a Law School, a theoretical construct in the social sciences, an Anatomy practical, a problem in logic. And the “lived experience” can be equally varied: the previous life of a student, a fieldtrip, a practical project, community voluntary service, the application of analytical logic to everyday life. The point is that, when education really works, there is so often an interplay between theory and application, between reflection and experience. And this, of course, is to restate Kolb's experiential learning, John Dewey's educational philosophy and Paolo Freire's radical pedagogy and, to go back to the source, to reassert Aristotle's *phronesis*, or practical knowledge, as the essential corollary of *episteme* and *techné*.⁹

This approach is well illustrated by Ira Shor's case for the hamburger as educational technology. Teaching in New York, and building on Freire's critical pedagogy, Shor shows how the teacher is facilitator, advocate, adversary, lecturer, recorder, mediator, librarian, learning as much from students as giving knowledge. This allows for a “transcendent appreciation” of the ordinary:

“I bought a hamburger and took it to class. What better way to extraordinarily re-experience the ordinary? The burger is the nexus of so many daily realities. It is not only the king of fast foods, the

⁹ D.Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1984; J.Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. Simon and Schuster, 1997; P.Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Continuum Publishing Group, 2000. On Aristotle and *phronesis*, see Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why social enquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001. I have developed these ideas further in “Education and the margins of the network society”. 224-243 in Johan Muller, Nico Cloete and Shireen Badat (eds) *Challenges of Globalisation: South African Debates with Manuel Castells*. Cape Town, Maskew Miller Longman. 2001.

lunch/snack/dinner quickie meal, but it's also the source of wages for many students who work in the burger chains. In addition, the spread of fast food franchises is tied into the suburban dispersal of the American city. This dispersal is further connected to the automobilization of American life. The car, the suburbs, and the burger thus connect central themes of everyday life. So, I was able to hold in my hand a weighty interstice of mass experience. My students have eaten, cooked and sold countless numbers of hamburgers, but they have never reflected on all this activity. I brought a burger to class and interfered with a major uncritical flow of mass culture. It was a lucky break, played out on a hunch".¹⁰

Let me match this with a South African example. District Six, once the heart of immigrant Cape Town and, like New York, noted for its diversity of cultures, races, languages and traditions, was declared "white" in 1966 in terms of the Group Areas Act. Over the next decade, more than 60 000 people were forcibly removed and all but churches and mosques were leveled. An unfinished apartheid project, District Six is a scar on the landscape of contemporary Cape Town, the memories of a community destroyed kept alive by the daily reminder of the bulldozers and demolition teams.

In the mid-1990s, and in partnership with the District Six Museum, the University of Cape Town carried out archaeological excavations at the site of terraced houses in Horstley Street; despite the wealth of documentary sources about District Six, little is known about the architecture of the houses or the material culture of everyday life in the early years of the last century. In the kitchen of one house we found multiple layers of linoleum – fifteen or twenty in all – each brightly coloured and patterned and a model of archaeological stratigraphy. People passing by the site, previously silent, told us that this must have been a Muslim household, because each year there had been a custom of buying a square of linoleum from the corner store to celebrate Eid. Later, one visitor identified herself as a former resident in Horstley Street, and confirmed the interpretation. Moreover, she identified the store, which had been owned and run by Jewish immigrants, the family of one of South Africa's senior archaeologists. In this way, the Horstley Street site became, for a few days, an open air classroom, where an informal gathering stood back for a short while from the routines of the everyday, using the squares of recovered linoleum as an organizing point for story-telling that became, in its turn, an interpretation of history.

Apart from this specific example, District Six and its history is an apt metaphor for the general point that I am making about the value of diversity in the curricula of higher education. Apartheid was one of modernism's more grandiose exercises in social engineering.¹¹ Apartheid planners envisaged a complete landscape segregated by race, in which "whites" would interact with "whites", "coloureds" with "coloureds", "Indians" with "Indians" and "Africans" with "Africans". In this ideology, diversity was the enemy, and the flow of history, which had created places like District Six, had to be reversed through the authority and resources of the state. The outcome was to be the celebration of sameness and conformity, in which everyone in their Group Area had a common history and a similar future. Anyone

¹⁰ Ira Shor, *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987 (1980): 162.

¹¹ For modernism and social engineering, see James Scott, *Seeing Like a State*. While apartheid is not one of Scott's case studies, it could have been.

who walked the “white” main street of a small South African town in the 1970s or early 1980s will recall how terribly mundane this proposition was. And controlling legislation sought to extend this vision to higher education, with different universities and technical colleges for English-speaking “whites”, Afrikaans-speaking “whites”, “coloureds” and “Indians”, as well as “homeland universities” for Africans. The purpose of such an educational model was not transformative – to change the individual’s perception of the world. Indeed, it was the opposite – an attempt to secure conformity. Such a denial of the values of diversity is the antithesis of what a university stands for.

Let me draw together my argument so far. Diversity in higher education is a multidimensional concept, comprising both social justice – access policies that recognize the consequences of discrimination against those with the ability to succeed – and also key aspects of learning. If learning is to be transformative, changing the perception that a person has of the world, it is likely to draw on the experience of learners and to comprise a play between abstraction and lived experience. And because experience is central to the vibrancy of the university, the diversity of a group of learners coming together in a classroom will be enhanced if they come from a range of backgrounds and contribute a span of perspectives. A good curriculum is an “engaged curriculum”, relating what happens in the reflective spaces of the campus with the flows of everyday life. This is a model for the university as a whole. And, I would suggest, it is also a suitable model for our Mellon Minority Undergraduate Programme which, as an exemplar programme, has the potential of serving as a paradigm that can have an effect well beyond the lives of the small number of fellows who participate directly in it.

This takes me to the final point that I wish to make – the connection between the personal benefits of higher education – whether financial or transformative – and the “public good”. Again, this is an area of controversy. For some, the notion of the “public good” has little place in contemporary economic policies. Others argue that there is little evidence that investment by the state in higher education yields a reasonable return: Alison Wolf, for instance, believes that economic growth drives educational expansion, rather than the opposite. If this is the case, then there is a critical flaw in both general models for higher education in the developed and developing worlds (such as the World Bank’s current position) and, more specifically, in South Africa’s policy for public higher education, which explicitly sets the goals of public higher education as contributing to social and economic development.¹²

But – again – my interest here is different. For if it is accepted that good learning is experiential learning, leading to an engagement between the reflective sanctum of the university and the everyday world, then in what ways can the “work of learning” of the individual be of wider benefit to society? Thinking in terms of an “engaged curriculum” makes the answer to this question fairly obvious. I’ve argued here that the wider the diversity of experience that students encounter in the “outside world”, the better will be their educational experience. Consequently, a commitment to experiential learning on the part of the university will bring real value to the wider community. Rather than being an isolated community of scholars, the contemporary university has the opportunity of protecting and advancing all the “old values” of

¹² White Paper on Higher Education, 1997.

excellence and scholarship, while at the same time connecting with the world and all its complexities.

Contributing to the public good in ways such as these is particularly important for the University of Cape Town. Those of you who know our campus will remember that it perches on the lower slopes of Table Mountain, and is arguably one of the most beautiful campuses in the world. UCT's architecture is inspired by a combination of Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia and the old seats of learning in northern Italy, and our reputation for world class scholarship and teaching is jealously guarded. But you will also remember the freeway to Cape Town International Airport, and the densely packed makeshift housing of the hundreds of thousands of people who have flocked to the city in search of work. You will know that these townships face all the problems of poverty – the lack of educational opportunities, malnutrition, unemployment, crime and disease, and the scourge of AIDS. It sometimes seems difficult to justify the more esoteric branches of learning when faced with such demands.

And yet all is not quite what it seems. While UCT's public profile is directed to the international community, to our standing in global research and teaching, UCT is making significant contributions in key areas of public health, education, the quality of the environment, housing and other areas of local and regional importance. It's not that we are not doing anything (although we could, of course, do a great deal more). It's rather that we seem embarrassed about being engaged with local issues, as if such local engagement and aspiring to be world standard in teaching and research are mutually exclusive. This was summed up for me by a comment made by a student leader at a recent workshop. He had come to UCT, he told the group, for a first rate education. While he understood the pressing needs of economic development, he felt that these should be addressed by other universities that are of a "lower standard".

My argument, as I'm sure is clear, is the opposite: that standards in teaching and research are enhanced by experiential learning in which there is an iteration between the detached space of the campus and the pressing needs of the community. Getting the best out of such opportunities depends on the diversity of those who come together in the classroom, whose varied experiences and backgrounds offer a rich reserve of raw material in which innovation and new ideas prosper. And this diversity is multiplied again through the connections with the community that an engaged curriculum brings. In this way, the individual benefits of learning contribute tangibly to the public good.

I have used UCT for most of the examples in my argument. But the qualities of the engaged curriculum are to be found at many other universities and technical colleges in South Africa, and at other universities in Africa. Such qualities repudiate the lazy opinion-makers in the West and North, represented by the notorious caricature by *The Economist* in its cover-story of "Africa – the Hopeless Continent".

Purcell set Dido and Aeneas in Africa, and the Spier Festival's production gave full emphasis to Dido as an African queen, betrayed by a foreign adventurer. At the opera's climax the queen dies to the chants of a vengeful chorus: "destruction's our delight, delight our greatest sorrow". The destruction that I've emphasized today has been the terrible mediocrity of self-referential cultural traditions that valorize only

themselves – whether the dream of an Empire converted to British values, apartheid's racial and ethnic monotones, or the values of CNN broadcast to every household. The delight is what Dido and Aeneas could have been if the Trojan prince had not allowed himself to be manipulated by the witches – a world in which diversity is marked and celebrated as a value, and as a fountainhead of continuing creativity.