

Reflective piece

Emerging response-abilities: a reflection on the 2019 SOTL in the South conference

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Abstract

The second biennial 'SOTL in the South' conference was held at the Central University of Technology (CUT) in Bloemfontein, South Africa, in October 2019. Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) is gaining increasing traction in South African universities, and this conference was a collaboration between the Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching at CUT, and SOTL in the South. The theme of this conference was 'Creating space for Southern narratives on Teaching and Learning' and the keynote speakers were Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Joanne Vorster, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Catherine Manathunga. In this piece I reflect on the conference and identify some of the narratives that emerged from it. I share some of the discussions by keynote speakers and presenters which help to expand discourses on the interconnectedness of decolonisation, and economic, social and environmental justice, and I explain why I look to 'Southern SOTL' for guidance in negotiating contradictions in my teaching and learning context. In this piece I consider the response-abilities of higher educators to contribute to these urgent matters.

Introduction

The second SOTL in the South conference was held at the Central University of Technology (CUT) in Bloemfontein from 9 to 11 October 2019. It was hosted by the Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching at CUT. This biennial conference unites delegates from all over the world to discuss the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) in the ‘global South’ – a concept “traditionally conceived of as including countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America” and one that takes “into account issues of power differentials, technological and financial resourcing, and the recognition of indigenous knowledge” (SOTL in the South 2020). This is a conceptual ‘South’ rather than a geographic one, referring to “challenges typical of the post-colonial moment: income inequality, fractured identities, and contestation about knowledges” (SOTL in the South 2020). SOTL in the South “needs to adequately respond to these challenges within the resource constraints present and ... to speak back to dominant economic, social, philosophical and pedagogical frames of reference. The term is, understandably, contested, and seen as homogenising or creating binaries that need further scrutiny” (SOTL in the South 2020). I have used this definition of SOTL in the South as the benchmark against which I have assessed the presentations at the 2019 conference.

The theme of the conference was ‘Creating space for Southern narratives on Teaching and Learning’, and the keynote speakers were Boaventura de Sousa Santos from Portugal, Joanne Vorster and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni from South Africa, and Catherine Manathunga, an academic currently working in Australia. In this piece, I reflect on their speeches, and other presentations at the conference, identifying some of the themes that emerged. I explain why ‘Southern SOTL’ is an important source of guidance in negotiating contradictions in teaching and learning contexts in the ‘global South’, and how it helps to expand educational discourses on the interconnectedness of decolonisation, and economic, social and environmental justice.

My academic field is art and design theory and history, and I have been teaching modules such as Contextual Studies and Design Studies at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) since 2010. These modules require a knowledge of the contexts in which art and design emerges, and of the theory and developments which may influence the trajectory of these fields. It is the core academic writing module for art and design students and it consequently brings into sharp relief some ‘global Southern’ issues such as “income inequality, fractured identities, and contestation about knowledges” (SOTL in the South 2020).

It was my concerns about this that first drew me to the SOTL group at UJ, where I met the late Brenda Leibowitz, the South African Research Chair in Teaching and Learning and first editor-in-chief of the *SOTL in the South* journal. In SOTL I found a much-needed community of practice – a group of passionate education practitioners, curriculum theorists and academic developers, many of whom were deeply conscious of the ways in which coloniality could influence work at an ‘African university’, as well as of the many other contradictions of education in ‘Southern’ contexts. The ‘SOTL in the South’ conference, and the journal of the same name, were a response to this consciousness and to the need to recognise commonalities in educational contexts in Africa, Asia and Latin America and in indigenous and ‘postcolonial’ communities all over the world, as well as those wrestling with occidentalisation and ‘Northern’ cultural imperialism.

I became the managing editor of the *SOTL in the South* journal in 2017 and in the papers submitted, I found solace, support, rigour, critical insight and joy. Although sometimes broken-hearted and exhausted by various challenges, Southern SOTL educators are just as often thrilled by the evidence of hope, vivid beauty, richness of identity and being, and new (and old, or unrecognised) possibilities and ways of life. I have learnt so much from others who are managing to meld their work and their humanity (and in some cases, their posthumanity). Southern SOTL has become intertwined with my ontology, ethics and politics. My disciplinary lens on the world is one that focuses on global and local factors affecting the creation of art and design, but I feel I now have a better understanding of important issues because of the cross-disciplinary nature of SOTL, which lends an additional rigour and perspective to my disciplinary worldview.

Overview of the conference: keynote speeches and papers

The first keynote speaker at the conference was Boaventura de Sousa Santos, a sociologist of law and human rights. It is Santos' belief that "the future of education depends on how well it will deal with the new tensions between fear and hope among younger generations" (Conference programme 2019:13). During his speech Santos argued, in a Freirean vein, that "we need to learn from [the younger generation] before we can teach [them]". He explained how the "abyssal line" separates those whom society constructs as human and subhuman, and how some students cross that abyssal line every day.

This is applicable to present-day contexts in South Africa. For example, students from my own university are currently experiencing a delay in the promised funding from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), making it challenging for them to continue their studies. I hope that by the time this paper is published, this funding will have come through, but it has reminded me again of how easily education can be a source of "abyssal exclusion and injustice" in South Africa. This rubs along with other issues such as the geographical 'zoning' of wealth and poverty which Santos called "zones of sacrifice" because "megaprojects create, contaminate and deteriorate areas peopled by 'subhumans'". In Johannesburg, apartheid-era zoning still has an impact on some students' studies because of issues such as safety in low-rent areas, and travel costs for those who live far from university.

De Sousa Santos argued that we need to work on "a sociology of absences" – to plot what is, and who is, invisible in academic contexts, and to work towards a liberation using "a sociology of emergences". He proposed working with "ecologies of knowledge" that "denounce the abyssal exclusion and injustice of current social arrangements (sociology of absences) and propose efficient solutions of liberation emerging in society (sociology of emergences)" (Conference programme 2019:13).

Santos also spoke of the fourth industrial revolution, asking whether its 'fruits' are as easily harvested in the global South. Santos argued that the first, second and third industrial revolutions motivated many of the oppressions of today's so-called 'developing' (previously colonised) countries, which provided the raw material and human labour on which 'Northern' imperialisms were established – and used to fund (and dominate) future industrial revolutions. One only has to look at a world map to remember that many of Africa's numerous countries were only zoned as such when Europeans carved

up the continent during the ‘Scramble for Africa’, without regard for existing sociolinguistic groups – creating ethnic tensions, and competition for resources, that still exist today.

Many South Africans are descended from those who physically mined and brought to the surface the resources that enriched colonial tycoons whose generational wealth was established during this period and provided the capital for many multinational companies still operating today. Santos correlated the history of mining and the extractive industries with big data mining and manipulation. As Santos put it, “we are here decolonising while many people around us are neocolonising”.

Santos’ keynote speech, with its broad scope and impassioned call for rethinking the conditions in which we work, set the bar for the rest of the conference. Sessions ran concurrently and I attended only the four keynote speeches and those within my areas of interest (indigenous and local knowledge, decoloniality, postcoloniality, student voice and co-research, and art and design). However, a superficial review of the abstracts at the conference suggests that there were two main areas of concern – the methodological (the SOTL), and the ontological and epistemological (the South). The latter centred particularly around decoloniality and decolonisation, Southern theory and indigenous knowledges, languages, and philosophies such as Ubuntu – especially in relation to topical social issues and curriculum transformation.

In her keynote speech, Jo-Anne Vorster, head of the Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning (CHERTL) at Rhodes University in Makhanda, South Africa, drew attention to the distinction between scholarly teaching which “models the methods and values of a field” (Shulman cited in Kizito & Clarence-Fincham 2017:14) and scholarship in teaching and learning:

Scholarly teachers read and apply literature about teaching, student learning, assessment, and curriculum design. They reflect on their teaching practices; try out new ideas and discuss their teaching practices with others. Through these processes, they gain knowledge about effective ways of teaching, and ways of making the learning materials accessible and meaningful to students in their prospective disciplines.

However, scholarship in teaching and learning, according to Shulman (cited in Kizito & Clarence-Fincham 2017:14) is “when our work as teachers becomes public, peer-reviewed and critiqued ... it is exchanged with members of our professional communities so they, in turn, can build on our work”.

One of Vorster’s most striking arguments was that it is crucial for more South Africans to engage in SOTL, but it does not make sense for everyone to do so, and it should not be promoted by universities as an ‘easy’ way to achieve research outputs. Vorster also called for serious engagement with education literature, citing the high stakes such as the degree of first-year dropout and the low percentage of students graduating in regulation time.

Vorster mentioned students’ sense of alienation in the academy which can manifest in disengagement and low attendance. Conference presenters Mazvita Mollin Thondlana and Phumla Veronica Cekiso also echoed this concern. Mollin Thondlana discussed student alienation in relation to English as an additional language, while Cekiso indicated the need for tourism management curricula to address

the problem of student alienation “from their own environments, culture and knowledge” (Cekiso cited in Conference programme 2019:28).

Language also came up frequently as a concern and was discussed in papers both as an asset that should be fostered and as a source of alienation. This arose not only in relation to teaching but also to academic development. Lynn Coleman’s paper on being a ‘literacy broker’ in academic scholarship indicated the rewards available to lecturers who conform to particular expectations in publishing. Freda van der Walt and Nonzaba Msokoli argued that it was only through the fostering of indigenous languages that students could develop their identities sufficiently to work with the creativity required to tackle the 4IR environment.

It was clear from these discussions that curriculum transformation is deeply intertwined with social justice and decolonising the university in a southern African context. Vorster’s keynote speech furthermore called for a focus on the “knowledge practices [that] can best serve students and enable them to contribute to a more socially just globalised world” (Vorster cited in Conference programme 2019). This emphasis on learning from students, and recognising that the structure of knowledge practices and access is linked to Santos’ “sociology of emergences”, resonated in Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s keynote speech when he asked whom the contemporary university knowledge system serves.

There were a number of presentations that demonstrated disciplinary attempts to grapple with these ideas – particularly with decolonisation and the unevenness of ‘North-South’ knowledge representation, and the underrepresentation of the global South. Environmental scientist Milton Milaras gave an interesting presentation on a study, conducted with Tracey McKay, of a soil science textbook written with a ‘northern’ geographical setting in mind, but claiming global relevance (Milton & McKay 2019). Hellmuth Weich, Sithandazile Ncube (working in the United Kingdom) and Saretjie Musgrave (from South Africa), also looked at the North-South divide in relation to social work, arguing that “knowledges from the South” are absent in the North in international social work, and that developing an African perspective on this is particularly important (cited in Conference programme 2019:26). Visual arts educator Kim Berman presented a paper on an example of North-South exchange between South African and American students and explained some of the intersectional dynamics at play in this participatory community work. Lizelle Els suggested curriculum revision to decrease reliance on “northern narratives” and “recognise southern narratives” (Els cited in Conference programme 2019:64).

Shaun Peens argued that the origins of accounting hark back to an era in which the world was organised in a very different way, and that accounting can therefore be described as ‘indigenous knowledge’. However, Peens ultimately suggested that due to the globalised demands of the subject today, positioning Accounting as ‘colonised’ or ‘decolonised’ is less important than the urgency of its disciplinary aims. Maria Tsakeni argued that calls for decolonisation were not necessarily at odds with other university directives, such as internalisation, since this could be seen as encouraging those in the global South to “contribute to global communities through knowledge generation” (cited in Conference programme 2019:43). However, Tsakeni suggested that prescribed teaching strategies may not work due to the lack of resources in global Southern contexts.

In his keynote speech, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, currently the Acting Executive Director of the Change Management Unit in the University of South Africa (Unisa), rejected the tired cliché that there is not enough African theory on which to base curriculum revision. Ndlovu-Gatsheni is most well-known for his prolific publishing on topics such as coloniality, power, epistemic freedom and memory. His keynote speech entitled 'The politics of knowledge in Africa: the implications for Teaching and Learning' was a critical and important presentation on the theme of decolonisation and African knowledge that called for, amongst other things, relearning African epistemologies.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni asked his audience to consider some straightforward questions such as: Why don't we [in this African, 'global Southern' context] take ourselves seriously? How was I colonised mentally? How did I mentally become the coloniser? What is the relationship between academic and epistemic freedom? And, if we consider Bantu Steve Biko's *I write what I like*, how many people are currently writing what they want? Ndlovu-Gatsheni argued that inserting the self into an academic text is defiant – that it is subjectivising, not generalising.

Providing some response to the problematic 'North-South' binary often discussed uncritically at the conference, Ndlovu-Gatsheni argued that we are in a global economy of knowledge which is complex and multidirectional, not binary. He also argued that projects presented as 'North-South' co-production of knowledge are sometimes inequitable, because without political will and research funding, the benefit to the 'co-producers' – those in the global South, or indigenous peoples – is not realised, but is (literally or digitally) 'shelved' in academic institutions. He argued therefore that these projects should only be undertaken under the same conditions as those of mining companies who must commit to being responsible for the sustainability of the land and the context they use for many years after their profits have been drawn from the project.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni likened decolonisation to being thirsty and not getting enough water. Despite the constant requests for water, we are still thirsty. He asked to push towards unlearning Eurocentricism, by making the effort to drink in the wealth of African literature that can be used as the epistemological and ontological starting points for decolonisation and curriculum transformation. Those conference attendees who took note of Ndlovu-Gatsheni's review of the available literature will be reading for two or three years!

One potential issue Ndlovu-Gatsheni's literature review pointed to was that curricular attempts at decolonisation emphasise building new 'decolonised' curricula for students, but do not make much provision for staff relearning and unlearning. The need for this became apparent in presentations such as the one by Naiefa Rashied, who investigated student perceptions of decolonisation, and another by academics from the University of Pretoria – Helen Inglis, Tumelo Mungwa, F Ruric Vogel, Adriana Botha and Lelanie Smith – who shared insights on curriculum transformation from a student survey on this topic. In these sessions, it became apparent that racist and prejudiced attitudes still arise in teaching contexts. Some staff have unacknowledged or unperceived racism or ignorance in their discussion of students and/or their understandings of decoloniality and privilege – suggesting that the pain of colonialism (both post-and neo-) is inadequately dealt with at universities. Amanda Naidoo's presentation also pointed to the implications of xenophobia for legal and policy protections offered to non-nationals in higher education institutions.

Another thing that was striking in many of the presentations was the poignant call for Cartesian knowledge to be troubled – for the balancing of mind and body, and a more nuanced and pluralistic definition or understanding of knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is one of the important focuses of Southern SOTL, but this conference was not particularly well represented in this area – with the exception of papers by Genevieve Jorolan-Quintero of the University of the Philippines and Connie Makgabo of the University of Pretoria; Motlatsi Khosi; Bridget Mangwegape; and keynote speaker Catherine Manathunga, Professor of Education Research in the School of Education at the University of the Sunshine Coast in Australia.

Jorolan-Quintero and Makgabo looked at the precolonial knowledges represented in indigenous stories, which they suggested could be used as “significant and essential reference and pedagogical materials” (cited in Conference programme 2019:33). The two papers by Khosi and Mangwegape represented a push to understand how southern African philosophies, in particular, the ontology of *Ubuntu*, might be used as a theoretical lens in scholarship and could become more foundational in school and university curricula. The philosophy of *Ubuntu/Batho* is an African concept pertaining to the relational nature of human society in which ‘people are people through other people’. Khosi discussed the shack-dwellers’ movement called the *Abahlali BaseMjondolo* as a living philosophy of *Ubuntu*. She argued that a type of university has evolved from this movement due to the knowledge generation, production, dissemination and social justice that occurs organically within it and is decentred from the academy – possibly representing an example of Santos’ “sociology of emergences”. Bridget Mangwegape also referred to *Ubuntu* in the context of the study of drama, explaining how “Setswana drama texts appear to demonstrate principles and values of Ubuntu” (cited in Conference programme 2019:16).

In her keynote speech Catherine Manathunga drew on indigenous symbols such as the Celtic knot representing her white Irish-Australian transnational heritage; on the word *Yäri* or “speak” (which she uses with permission from the Turrbal people, one of the Murri (Indigenous) clan groups of the area of Brisbane, Australia; and also drew on “the Māori metaphor of the knowledge stones which we each collect from people we meet on our life’s journey to think about how in our intellectual and social work as academics we give and receive knowledge and ideas” (Manathunga 2018:97).

Manathunga offered a list of priorities for decolonising higher education which she continually revises as her understanding of this discourse develops. The list includes the need to acknowledge black pain and anger, avoid cultural essentialism, decolonise the curriculum, engage in critical whiteness studies and rethink centre-periphery discourses of south-north and south-south collaborations. Manathunga also shared Francis Nyamnjoh’s (2015) suggestions to adopt conviviality over collegiality (and conversation over conversion); and to consider ourselves *makwerekwere* – a derogatory word for a foreigner often heard in the context of South African xenophobia – in order to de-nationalise or de-nativise our thinking (Nyamnjoh 2016).

Manathunga’s keynote included two audio-visual components. Firstly, she played Tracy Chapman’s ‘Talkin’ bout a revolution’ (released in 1988) and invited the conference delegates to substitute the word “revolution” for “decolonisation”. As Chapman’s song rolled around the wood-panelled auditorium, I felt awkwardly emotional, suddenly very aware of being a human with other humans. My arms prickled with ‘gooseflesh’ and I realised that I had a body, and it had been sitting on a chair,

behind a table, listening intently to others for three days while my brain burned, measuring and weighing their every word.

Listening to this song reminded me of a seminar I attended in Johannesburg on ‘the possibilities of multimodality in a decolonised art/s education’ (Andrew, Hlasane & Gray 2016). The seminar was inspired by the wave of student ‘Fallist’¹ protests that occurred in South Africa in 2015 and 2016. Mpapho Rangoate Hlasane, the co-founder of Keleketla! Library, showed a video of students singing together in Nguni languages at Wits University in Johannesburg, filmed at one of the student protest meetings. This singing was a prevalent part of the protests – a gesture of unification that was as important as the terms presented to the university regarding the demands of different Fallist student groups. Before and after this presentation, Hlasane said little to theorise or codify this singing in academic terms, simply presenting it as decoloniality, just as the students had.

The second video Manathunga showed was by the Miriam-Rose Foundation, a non-profit organisation empowering youth from Nauiyu Nambiyu (Daly River) in the Northern Territory, Australia (Miriam Rose Foundation 2020). In the video, Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann (an Aboriginal elder, artist, activist and retired school principal) walks through the lush river environment, breathing slowly and explaining the “word, concept and spiritual practice” of *Dadirri*, which means “inner deep listening and quiet still awareness” in the Ngan'gikurunggurr and Ngen'giwumirri languages of the Aboriginal peoples of the Daly River region.² As I watched the video the greenery and water, and the meditative quality of Ungunmerr-Baumann’s slow breath and peaceful voice, made me feel serene and very aware of my body and breath and changed the atmosphere in the staid academic space (*Dadirri* film 2017).



Figure 1. the lawn of the Central University of Technology, Bloemfontein, 2019 (photograph by author)

Cartesian academia prioritises the mind over the body in very obvious ways, and often denies the body-as-mind. I realised how little awareness I had had of my body, my breathing, my aliveness, during the conference. I had just been a thinking machine. Later, as I sat outside of the lecture venue after Manathunga’s presentation, I felt a greater awareness of the living things around me. I enjoyed the tiny subversive little flowers growing in the manicured lawns of the university and realised just how important it is to acknowledge the warmth of the sun after hours spent in airless or air-conditioned rooms. Given the climate

¹ The ‘Fallist’ movements were student protest movements in South Africa that started on 9 March 2015 with #Rhodesmustfall focusing on the statue of colonial tycoon Cecil John Rhodes that was then still standing on the campus of the University of Cape Town. Subsequent Fallist movements include #feesmustfall, which focused on the high cost of university fees, and #outsourcingmustfall, decrying the outsourcing of support staff which left them without the benefits associated with insourced employment.

² I refer to the *Dadirri* film (2017) in this reflective piece with the permission of the Miriam Rose Foundation.

crisis on our planet, this awareness of the living world around us seems an absolutely essential part of social and environmental justice at this point in time, and should be a much more integral part of work-life.

Scholarly educators often employ videos and music to engage students in teaching and learning, but are perhaps shy to do so with one another in professional academic contexts, yet Manathunga's presentation was effective because it called to the whole person, not just to a disembodied intellect.

Time and again at the SOTL in the South conferences, this formality is broken, discourse is opened, humanity is welcomed. This was encapsulated by the Master of Ceremonies at the conference dinner, CUT's Rosaline Sebolao, whose gorgeous husky singing was reminiscent of the late Miriam Makeba. In these ways, I catch a glimpse of how, slowly but surely, Southern SOTLers enter together, with dignity and respect for one another, into the practice of a kind of decolonial unlearning and relearning. It certainly lights up different parts of one's brain than is usually used in academic conference settings.

However, the conference did leave me with a sense that while SOTL in the South is an immensely exciting force for potential change, SOTL in South Africa is still quite docile. Despite the 'Fallist' movements that so dramatically rattled the cage of higher education institutions, the majority of the presentations were more representative of SOTL than 'SOTL in the South', which, as earlier mentioned "needs ... to speak back to dominant economic, social, philosophical and pedagogical frames of reference". In addition, while the abstracts in the conference programme were written to address the Southern scope of the conference, I was often struck by the differences between the abstracts and the presentations. Some presenters did not adequately cover their stated topic, suggesting that they were unprepared, or more comfortable relating statistical or methodological information and findings than talking about this in relation to the 'Southern' metanarrative. So, while some abstracts were situated within decolonial, postcolonial or global Southern frameworks, others did not relate their disciplinary or pedagogical aims to larger critical contexts. In addition, most of the presenters at the conference were South African, so the broader 'global South' was not very well represented.

In the final section of this reflection, I share some thoughts prompted by discussions at the conference.

'Teach the student in front of you'

SOTL literature is often characterised by a close and attentive focus on the classroom, assessment methods and student success. Educators may see social and political dynamics playing out in these contexts, but their agency to affect positive change often occurs predominantly within institutional walls, rather than having resounding effects at the level of national policy. This is exemplified by the recent phrase echoing in the halls of South African higher education to 'teach the student in front of you'.

'Teaching the student in front of you' asks that educators honour the individuality and needs of a student without too many preconceived notions about how to teach and what students should be prepared to learn. This phrase may be a response to the frequent refrain that students are "underprepared" for study in higher education, and perhaps asks educators to go beyond deficit thinking and simply teach what needs to be taught.

In some ways, however, this phrase can be seen as strangely depoliticised – suggesting that educators must acknowledge that the system is imperfect and should bear on *their* shoulders the weight of previous systemic failures. For many within the SOTL context in South Africa, it seems that education is a calling, and they would probably be happy to ‘teach the students in front of them’ if it were not for the fact that (staff and university) performance indicators are increasingly assessed according to global ‘best practice’ metrics representing access into global (dominantly ‘Northern’) ranking systems, rather than what ‘global Southern’ communities currently need.

Santos’ keynote left me with the sense that instead of creating space for more narratives, as was the theme of the conference, Southern universities may be prohibiting the growth of what he calls “ecologies of knowledge” (“for different purposes – different knowledges”) by assessing staff and students using ‘globally’ competitive metrics and increasing research and teaching deliverables. This occurs, however, in the context of less funding and little academic relief, thus ‘squeezing’ staff and students financially and in terms of the time and quality of their work. Here the presentation by Hester Friedrich-Nel, Lynn Biggs, Hanlie Dippenaar, Rubby Dhunpath, Deidre Joubert, Ian Nell and Jacqueline Yeats comes to mind, since they described situations in which this kind of pressure occurs as “toxic”.

This reminds me of the way in which workers all over South Africa have simply adapted to loadshedding (planned two- to four-hour electricity outages due to the mismanagement of Eskom, the national electricity provider). These disruptions are often accommodated by the populace without changes to work delivery deadlines. They are simply ‘absorbed’ into the everyday, along with whatever other challenges one encounters. Those who can afford to buy enormously expensive inverters and generators may continue to ‘produce’ at their own cost, losing as little productivity as possible despite the adverse conditions. But what is the purpose of government if citizens are increasingly asked to look after themselves? It is a bit like a feudal system in which the peasants own their own land and still feed the bloated gentry with their labour and taxes.

This is made even more problematic when one considers that the push towards 4IR, and the mandating of blended learning and online systems of assessment, occurs in the context of the news that loadshedding is undoubtedly set to continue in South Africa for at least two years, which is faintly ridiculous. It means that any firm commitment to online learning can be taken only if access to alternative private power sources are available, and this makes it seem like South African universities are not acting in sight of the full picture, but simply treating the classroom as a perfect white box in which conditions are optimal for the rollout of 4IR.

It would be pointless to be reactionary about 4IR, as it is here whether we like it or not, and some of the solutions needed to address the effects of the climate crisis will only be achieved through the development of technological improvements in cleaner energy and means of production. Universities, as innovators and researchers of best practice, must maintain a very close focus on advancing the development of renewable energies.

It is also understandable that South Africans – especially those whose ancestors were disenfranchised by its colonial and apartheid history – would want to be leaders in the world’s newest industrial revolution, and build on the country’s existing successes (such as mobile banking and animation).

There is no doubt that the South African government intends to optimise this potential as robotics and coding subjects are currently being piloted in schools across the country (Academy of Science of South Africa 2019).

There are different perspectives on this. Producing a skilled labour force to ‘future-proof’ South African jobs is a necessary concern given the sky-high unemployment in the country, and yet increasing automation puts the lifespan of many jobs in doubt. For example, in the South African banking sector, there have been “thousands of retrenchments and the closure of branches ... after various banks announced that software robots would automate different work processes, which would substitute the work of humans” (Marwala 2019).

Another concern is which multinational companies this labour force will work for, and therefore whether the economic harvest of this work will be reaped in the ‘North’ or ‘South’. South African miners currently toil in the extractive sector to bring raw materials to the surface which are refined outside of the country and sold back to its retailers at a high cost, exemplifying a trend in which “in developing countries where these extractions occur, the majority of the people still remain in poverty” (Sigam & Garcia 2012:1). This “tendency of the advantaged accumulating further benefits, while poverty tends to reproduce further poverty” has been called “the Matthew effect” and “is widely acknowledged among economists and sociologists” (Ndzendze & Marwala 2020).

In the context of 4IR, the South African government is preparing a generation of students to be a human labour force – subject, as with most labour forces, to whoever owns the means of production, except with digital work the threads of power are so diffused across so many networks that it is currently difficult to trace the lines of accountability. This makes the circulation of information highly suspect, as already seen with the data mining and political machinations of Cambridge Analytica, and the local hate-mongering of PR firm Bell Pottinger. These corporations have conflated social media, news, politics and propaganda to a degree that elides any expectation of journalistic research and integrity. Overall, a healthy scepticism should be sprinkled over every bite of 4IR, and there is no doubt that universities have a huge responsibility, and (hopefully) the academic freedom and research capacity, to map these potential trajectories and effects. A ‘global Southern’ wariness of 4IR rhetoric is sensible lest Southern contexts once again become the source of raw materials, labour, markets, playgrounds or dumping grounds for neocolonial products and processes. The possibility remains that if countries “are not able to close the critical gap (through the combination of technology transfer and various technology-related improvements in education, research and development), they may find themselves in the similar placement in the 4IR as they do in the third” (Ndzendze & Marwala 2020).

In addition, much of the 4IR rhetoric seems to be Cartesian and even transhumanist in tone – as with previous ‘machine ages’, while worldviews and ways that differ to this are under threat. There are reports the world over of contemporary colonialism: indigenous people are being driven away from their land (Jordan 2019; Schweimler 2019), and environmental campaigners are being mysteriously murdered in South Africa (Schneider 2016; Sole 2019) and South America (BBC News - Latin America 2020) in the name of economic development. As Jane Goodall has explained, there is no caring for the environment while poverty, elite overconsumption and overpopulation persist (BBC The Selfish Gene 2014). Social and environmental justice are therefore inextricably interlinked. It is impossible to justify some of the measures in place to boost economic development in light of this neocolonialist activity

and its contribution to warming oceans (Carrington 2020), pollution (Vidal 2020), overfishing, and land being submerged under rising waves, which directly affects many indigenous communities (Bennet 2017, Ramos Castillo 2009; Climate Justice Resilience Fund 2019).

Digital access and reach increasingly affects the representation of knowledge today, symbolising what Walter Mignolo (2009:2) calls the “geography of reason” and the “geo-politics of knowledge”, and what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017:xii-xiii) calls the ‘bio’ or the “biography of knowledge” which “speaks to the identity and consciousness of the producer of knowledge”. Local and indigenous knowledges have been provincialised by the West, and are still not well understood, recorded or digitally well represented, potentially leading in the long term to eclipse by dominant cultural imperialisms. For example, in 2018, only 1.3% of edits on Wikipedia were from the African continent, despite the billion people living here (Carew 2018). In response, Wikipedia launched the ‘Wiki loves Africa’ campaign to encourage knowledge sharing from African editors, although this set up a dynamic in which those editors were encouraged to contribute for free to a ‘Northern’ knowledge base (Dittus & Graham 2018).

I believe it is important to create space for the development of indigenous languages to survive and take a stand apart from what bell hooks (1997:7) famously referred to as “white supremacist capitalist [cisgender] patriarchy”. It is therefore exciting to hear the recent reports in global Southern contexts of academic dissertations in indigenous languages such as the PhD dissertation in Setswana by Eileen Elizabeth Poe (Santana 2019) and Roxana Quispe Collante’s defence of her PhD in the language Quecha (Simón 2018). Publishing research in indigenous languages makes it ontologically more accessible to the communities who speak those languages, and also has the power to serve a wider populace and circulate capital in different orbits. As Farieda Nazier (2020) points out, writing in indigenous languages “provides access to different peoples and different publics”, and is very important in cases where students are generating new knowledge by conducting research in their own indigenous communities. Nazier (2020) also points out that there are things that get lost in translation to English.

People in communities sharing their knowledge should also have the research outcomes and findings made accessible to them in their own language, rather than these only being legible to the English-dominated academy (Nazier 2020). Research should also have relevance and value to the communities from whom it is drawn and who are also often underserved by academia. This is Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s argument against the academic ‘shelving’ of knowledge. However, it only becomes really accessible if the research is available at low cost (not only in open-access journals, but also in terms of low-cost data and Wi-Fi). It would be nice to see future SOTL in the South speaking more to these opportunities for epistemological pluralism and equity.

Conclusion

The 2019 SOTL in the South conference showed the many faces of current southern SOTL, and it sometimes seems that these are incompatible. For example, if we look to African literature to inform new curricula, and encourage the recognition and building of local and indigenous knowledge which prioritises the relationship between place and belonging, how does this rub along with Nyamnjoh’s suggestion (cited by Manathunga) that we detach ourselves from nativist/nationalist identities and

adopt the title of *Makwerekwere*? Manathunga suggests that we see our options as “both/and” rather than “either/or”, that we avoid essentialism and (citing Nyamnjoh again) that we work through conversation, rather than conversion.

SOTL in the South is a scholarship that allows the opportunity for an academic to choose body, mind, planet, humanity, senses, animals, plants, justice, water and reason through a conversation between all these non-binary things. The fact that I saw flowers in the grass or enjoyed the coverage of the beautiful indigenous trees on the CUT campus is now enmeshed in my mind with what was said at the conference. This awareness calls me to respond more carefully and actively to the needs of my time. While teaching has brought me to activism and helped me locate my politics, I feel that I too, may still be too docile in my responses to world events. The 30-year-olds of 2050 will be born this year, in 2020, and the students I am now teaching will be 50 when we reach the 2050 deadline for carbon neutrality. Many believe this 2050 target is too late. How do I respond to this?

Edwin Ng and Zach Walsh (2019:13) argue that

the injustices and harms perpetuated by white supremacy, racism, cultural erasure, and rape culture are systemic problems distributed across institutional operations and everyday conduct. They need to be addressed at both the macro level of structural change and micro level of interpersonal encounters. Restorative justice and transformative healing require an ethos of response-ability from all parties, on multiple scales, regardless of whether one is a direct perpetrator of those harms or not.

...

Do we speak up and intervene, or do we look away and keep silent? Do we give space for the anger of oppressed people and listen deeply, or do we dismiss their feelings and police their tone of speech? When we become responsive to the un/intended effects of harm engendered by un/intentional actions, we begin to heal damaged lives and repair broken worlds; we hold the door open for justice. An ethos of response-ability builds the conditions of trust and safety necessary for living and dying well together as co-inhabitants of diverse communities and habitats.

The SOTL in the South conference and community is generating a welcome space for response-ability to emerge by helping educators to discern a clearer interdisciplinary picture of the context and the relationships we require to effect positive change in the future. It does this while instilling a deep awareness of how the notions of humanity and sub-humanity are politically and epistemically engineered, how decolonisation is not a metaphor, and that the legacy of Cartesian dualism involves acute pain, injustice and disconnection for all bound up in it. Despite its binary title, SOTL in the South, in its acknowledgment and honouring of relationality and indigenous knowledges, chimes with critical posthumanist discourses that ask us to look beyond dualisms towards interconnection and interdependence. For me it is a space in which I can breathe, work, laugh, sing, dance, relate, plant and tend my way through scholarship, led by teaching and learning, just as much as I read, think and write my way through it.

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