Book review

Standing Items: critical pedagogies in South African art, design and architecture, edited by Brenden Gray, Shashi Cullinan Cook, Tariq Toffa and Amie Soudien

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Abstract

In this review of Standing Items: critical pedagogies in South African art, design and architecture, edited by Brenden Gray, Shashi Cullinan Cook, Tariq Toffa and Amie Soudien, book reviewer Bridget Horner observes that for the scholarship of teaching and learning this book could serve as a source of possible teaching methods within the arts; however, this would negate policymakers, management of institutions, educators, discipline professionals and artists from viewing this book's real potential, which is identifying and explaining the challenges faced within higher education, as well as opportunities for change – through critical pedagogy– in a country that still holds unaddressed 'standing items' related to its colonial and apartheid past within the present neoliberal agenda.

Standing Items: Critical pedagogies in South African art, design, and architecture demands that we address the long-overdue item of 'critical pedagogy' that keeps slipping off the epistemic agenda of higher education. The e-publication confronts this issue within the fields of art, design, interior design and architecture, giving voice to a southern and predominately South African perspective. Eight different authors respond to the various challenges they face within their disciplines. They do so by reflecting on either their teaching practice to provide pedagogical solutions for change, or through suggesting where opportunities for transformation may lie. The challenges the educators are responding to may have long been barking at the gate of higher education [inequality and social injustice] or have more recently rattled the chains and scaled the fence during the #feesmustfall and #rhodesmustfall protests, yet now loom ominously above [decolonial and neoliberal agendas], or lastly stand for attention, confronting lecturers starkly in their classrooms and studios on a daily basis [deficit agenda and meaningful transformation].

The change these authors propose lies in the knowing how [pedagogy], in knowing what [curriculum] and in the knowing of that [students]. Entwined as they all are, each author chooses to take their stab at one or more of these aspects to suggest how their pedagogy facilitates change across different sites. By sites, I am referring to where the impact of the change is felt – or should be felt – such as in policy, practice or theory which could have implications both within and outside the 'walls' of higher education. The site of practice is the re-framing of how we come to know of students, through working with the skills, knowledge and language [Chapters 4, 5, 6] students already have acquired prior to entering into higher education. The site of policy links the doing of professional practice and community engagement on the outside of higher education, with the theoretical knowing and curriculum reformation on the inside toward professional legitimation, accreditation of courses and ethical practice [Chapters 1-3]. Located in-between are theoretical sites of alternate knowledge sources for curriculum and pedagogical change [Chapters 7 and 8]. I applaud the confidence and faith the authors have shown in their teaching practice. The change they have demonstrated emanates from persistent dialogic teaching, to raise not only their consciousness as educators, but also that of their students to other forms of knowing or coming to know.

My critique raises two items, and a note to action, that I believe remain as 'standing items' on the critical pedagogy agenda. These items are the introduction of failed critical pedagogical moments and allowing room for critical reflection on students' voices. The reason for speaking openly about failure would enable educators to reflect on their pedagogy critically and resist the temptation to blindly celebrate a singular approach as the only solution for critical pedagogy. The second item is to accommodate a space for students' voices and student agency, which is in keeping with the principle of dialogue as a practice (Freire, 1970) where the educator works with students as co-participants in a problem-posing process. In revealing students' critical reflections on the process, in tandem with the educator, a more in-depth and holistic insight could be gained of the process.

The last 'note to action' on the agenda is a concern for the underlying power hierarchies between educator and students that lurk beneath the surface, especially within 'signature pedagogies' and even within a dialogical process. To elaborate upon these 'standing items', I reflect upon my teaching practice in architecture in a three-year interdisciplinary project with the drama programme. In this project, critical pedagogy as already well established within the Applied Theatre stream of the drama programme was utilised as a model for architecture students. The project was initiated in response to

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a concern that the architectural pedagogy existed in a 'detached' studio environment creating solutions for 'others' whose realities were very different from those of the architecture students. We argued that the form, rather than the content, is implicated in how learners understand and replicate relationships between power and knowledge (Young-Jahangeer & Horner, 2020). The project was then conceptualised as a series of engagements over three months between the two disciplines (drama and architecture) and regular engagement with people on-site to culminate in a one-day event on a triangular piece of land along the freeway leading into Durban. The intervention, 'Masihambisane' [Let's walk] was designed to expose social, political and economic contradictions through creative embedded action. We also drew upon Freire, as most of the authors in *Standing Items* have done, in a project geared toward consciousness-raising of learners, educators and an outside community through dialogical interaction.

Our failure in this project was; firstly, to not comprehend how deeply entrenched the 'signature pedagogy' lay within the architecture student-body, and secondly, to naïvely expect the class to engage with the applied theatre students without any resistance. As this was the second year of the project, the postgraduate class were well aware of the project involving the drama department. The majority of architecture students refused to engage with the applied theatre students seeing their methods of pedagogy as a foreign form of teaching and learning, a waste of time, and a distraction from the real work of their discipline. Most of the architecture students opted to stay true to their discipline form, and what they knew, which was to engage in studio and workshop discussion to prepare site-specific installations as opposed to 'perform'. Nevertheless some architecture students did rise to the challenge and worked with the applied theatre students to prepare an in-situ performance.

However, on the day of the event, something shifted for the architecture students – the moment captured them. They began to realise that hiding behind their 'installations' was their proverbial "blind spot" (English, 2016:161) and that to find out about the world [in this instance the community of walkers] they had to become vulnerable and participate in the world [the performance]. Thus, through the process, the architecture students were able to make important realisations around learning as a praxis that must be "with the world" (Freire, 1970:63), as exampled by one participant's response: "the more time you spend on site, the more you observe and talk to people, the more knowledge you gain….masihambisane… forced me to step out of my comfort zone and do something I would not ordinarily do".

Relating this experience of mine, to what resonated with me from reading the e-book, is that a critical pedagogical approach is necessary for change [however fleeting this may be] and begins with ourselves as educators. *Standing Items: Critical pedagogies in South African art, design and architecture* demands then that we not only critically reflect on our practice as educators, but that we become advocates for change through our practice.

For the scholarship of teaching and learning, this book could serve as a source of possible teaching methods within the arts; however, this would negate policymakers, management of institutions, educators, discipline professionals and artists from viewing this book's real potential, which is identifying and explaining the challenges faced within higher education, as well as opportunities for change – through critical pedagogy – in a country that still holds unaddressed 'standing items' related

to its colonial and apartheid past within the present neoliberal agenda. Lastly, it would be remiss not to mention the relevance of the book to educators wrestling with the consequences of the emergency, remote online learning during COVID-19. In this time of uncertainty and emotional turmoil, educational approaches such as 'flux pedagogy' (Ravitch, 2020) surface as pedagogies of the moment; yet, at their heart, they embody critical pedagogy and the humanising pedagogy of hope, love, as well as care and compassion (Searles, 2020).

References

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