Introduction

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Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.

(Maya Angelou)

Following Freire (2005 p. 51) praxis requires “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it”. Or put another way it requires “dialectical unity between thought and action” (Kress & Lake, 2013, p. 30). It could be argued that our efforts with regards to transformation have been too regularly located in the realm of thought, and too little in the realm of action. This special edition of the International Journal of Critical Diversity Studies brings this thought and action together, by those of us who navigate this dialectical space every day. By way of introduction I would like to share two experiences to elucidate the nature of that space and the contestations that rage there.

The first relates to an encounter with a member of senior management. I had been called into an emergency meeting early on a Monday morning. After the discussion, where it was made clear to me that I had (again) said something “inappropriate” in a meeting, he said to me “Claire, you are an employee of the university, not a student activist.” I have spent a lot of time thinking about that. Was there something incommensurate about being an employee and an activist for progressive social change? Isn’t that why we got into transformation in the first place? This was such a strange assertion to me. South Africa has a long history of activism in higher education and the “scholar activist” is a well-known figure in universities across the world. Furthermore, there is a growing international recognition that “employee activism” is not only a phenomenon, but important for all organisations to start taking seriously. What had changed when I became an “employee” to be somehow at odds with being an activist?

The second relates to a series of workshops I co-facilitated. Our institution had just experienced a cruel, racist event in our residences, which was highly publicised and prompted one of the largest student protests our institution had ever seen. Prior to all this our team had planned a series of engagements with staff of a particular faculty to discuss a new Faculty Transformation Charter. The racist incident happened just before the first workshops were due to start. In some cases, the workshops went as originally planned, the issue of the racist
humiliation of a black student being a point of discussion, but seemingly having little emotive effect. However, in other more robust sessions, questions of the relevance and point of a faculty charter of this nature were raised, and a lack of trust in the institution’s capacity to deal meaningfully with this incident was expressed. In one of the final workshops, one of the participants became extremely angry, and called the workshops and related charter a farce. He accused me of participating in a toxic and racist institutional culture which functioned to placate dissident voices. He refused to participate and left the meeting.

I went home after the workshop and, not for the first time, lay on my bed feeling heavy and defeated. Was this what it meant to be an “employee”, a functionary of the university? Was I not only being ineffective, but complicit in containing people’s pain and anger? I was reminded of Kersten’s (2000, p. 240) point about how dialogue “in context of structural inequality will tend to reproduce those relations, unless there is a radical willingness to subject those very relations to critique”. She argues that conversations such as the ones we were running can “present(s) a deceptively simple and cheerful remedy that covers rather than uncovers the problem at hand” (p. 243) which “effectively presents a diversion strategy … to avoid rather than to create dialogue and meaningful organizational change” (246). Was this not the argument made by #RhodesMustFall, when they critiqued the idea of “transformation” and called rather for the decolonisation of the university (Pather, 2015)? That transformation’s “master signifiers” such as diversity and multiculturalism are a form of “ideological pacification” that “can never escape being appropriated by liberal ideology and practice” (Makhubela, 2018, p. 1, after Žižek). Despite everything that #RhodesMustFall had taught us, had we fallen into the same old trap? And if so, why? I started thinking my angry colleague was right about us.

This is not to say that the workshops did not yield some positive results and were, I believe, empowering for the many of the participants. It is also not to say that our efforts are pointless. Rather what these scenarios point to is the complexity of the space inhabited by transformation agents.

As transformation agents we are wedged between our academic training, colleagues’ and students’ experiences of exclusion, pain and dehumanisation, and structures that, although they are attempting to transform and decolonise, are in many ways still dictated by the mores of colonialism and global capital (Badat, 2009; Soudien, 2014; Akala, 2021). Although at the centre of most South African universities’ vision, mission and value statements, policies and plans, transformation has been slow and our universities remain characterised by the violence of racism, sexism, gender-based violence, homophobia, ablism and xenophobia (SAHRC, 2016; DHET, 2020). As transformation practitioners and agents we work inside the tension of this space: between vision and reality, intention and practice, transformation and decolonisation, activism and “employeeness”.

In this space we are developing responsive strategies (be they formal or informal) and developing practices for doing the everyday work of “transformation” and social justice. This experience is important, as is the knowledge it engenders. It is knowledge rooted in our training in critical intersectional theory and forged and reforged through our daily practice in universities across the country. There is no one who knows the work of “transformation”, in all its complexity, as those of us who do it every day.
However, there is not enough credence given to the complexity and importance of this knowledge and the agents who generate it. Although the extent of this varies across institutions, in general across the sector we know that official “transformation” functions are largely under-resourced, and in terms of their influence in key strategic decision-making, relatively marginal (personal communication, various). “Transformation” functions are often blamed for lack of progress when they have little control over what institutional leaderships, informed by numerous internal and external pressures, prioritise and resource (personal communication, various). For “transformation” agents in academia “transformation” efforts are rarely recognised unless they translate into the currency of the neoliberal university system, i.e. publications and/or funding (personal communication, various). The “invisible” “care work” of teaching is often performed by black people and women, especially black women, academics (Magoqwana et al., 2019). They are also more likely to be burdened with the “race and gender work” of the university (Erasmus and de Wet, 2006; Farmer, 2021). Often they are victimised and silenced (Khoza-Shangase, 2019; Batisai, 2019; Farmer, 2021) because of it. This is true for our students also. In addition to the burdens of criminalisation and academic loss experienced by many students, the post #RhodesMustFall exhibition The Aftermath Exhibition: Violence and wellbeing in the context of the student movement examined the costs associated with student activism in terms of mental health and wellness. In fact, the mental health of student activists is a growing area of academic concern (e.g. Bjornsen-Ramig & Kissinger, 2019; Conner et al., 2021).

This special edition of IJCDS on Developing a Critical Praxis of Transformation in Higher Education emerges from an effort to document and reflect on some of the practices of the higher education “transformation” practitioner/agent community in South Africa. In 2020 the Transformation Managers Forum (TMF), a Universities South Africa (USAF) community of practice, hosted a colloquium for anyone interested in and/or involved with the “transformation” of public universities. The purpose of the colloquium was to provide a reflective scholarly space of engagement regarding the praxis of “transformation” in higher education, and to start the process of critically documenting these emerging practices. In an effort to provide a common point of departure, contributors were asked to respond to the themes provided by the “Transformation Barometer” (Keet & Swartz, 2015), a USAF approved, self-regulating tool for the sector. This was followed by this call for papers from policy makers, legislators, Chapter 9 Institutions, science councils, academics, researchers, practitioners, students, unions, social justice activists, university administrators and civil society, with an interest and/or involved with the “transformation” of public universities to share their experience and learning under any of the areas of governance, leadership and management; social inclusion; staff and student access, support and success; teaching and learning; research; community engagement; the politics of knowledge production; and diversity and “transformation” competencies.

The result is a two-part special edition of IJCDS. It covers a range of practices in a number of different contexts: from monitoring and evaluation, policy implementation, human resource practices to teaching and learning. What all papers have in common is that are all written by “transformation” agents who examine practice, usually their own, through
the lens of critical intersectional theory. This is a deep drilling into the work we do as “transformation” agents, providing important insights into the demanding and complex space we inhabit.

Khan, Barnes and Alves share the complexities of implementing two processes (an Inclusivity Survey and Transformation Benchmarks) to chart and track transformation, inclusion, and diversity at the University of Cape Town. They emphasise the turbulent context of what they refer to as the “conceptual borderlands” (after Anzaldúa) where our work as “transformation” practitioners in higher education takes place, describing it as space between “institutional or state-centric models of “transformation” (relying on policy, benchmarks and barometer tools) and popular activism (relying on protest action, disruption and campaigns)”. Their reflection provides important insight into the extraordinary complexity of translating high-level “transformation” goals, such as decolonising a curriculum, into (measurable) concrete actions for “transformation” agents in this context. They ask “how can we better monitor, evaluate and track progress in an increasingly turbulent world?” whilst keeping a clear focus on “transformation” goals and without reducing efforts to a “tick box exercise”.

Bopape also examines the complexity of advancing “transformation” in higher education in terms of tangible actions and measurables, specifically in the area of institutional culture. He provides a detailed examination of this widely used, but largely perplexing, concept and its meaning, applicability and implications for organisational theory, management and behaviour in higher education. He introduces systems thinking as an important lens into the complexity of institutional culture. He introduces eight different dimensions of an “institutional culture change architecture” which he argues must be addressed through a “social inclusion framework”, providing a detailed and practical guide for institutional culture change work.

Practice also comes explicitly into focus in the paper by anti-gender-based violence (GBV) practitioners from Stellenbosch University’s (SU) Equality Unit, who examine the limitations of the current policy, structures and practices to eliminate GBV on Stellenbosch University Campus. Based on their observed experiences, they share what an ideal governance and implementation framework should look like, not only at SU but all institutions of higher learning in South Africa.

Staying on the theme of gender and discrimination, Brightness Mangolothi’s paper examines the intersectional nature of workplace bullying in higher education. Drawing on interviews with woman academics at universities in South Africa, she sketches out how, although all women are more likely to be bullied than men, the added violence of racism exacerbates and increases the experience of bullying for black women. She makes tangible recommendations on how we can address this issue in a truly substantive way.

The final two papers bring practice in the teaching and learning space into focus. Both papers add another layer of complexity over the “transformation” project as it pertains to teaching and learning. Jess Auerbach explores the role of technology and developing “technological capacities” as imperative for transformation. She recounts experiences of curriculum design and student learning across two different institutions in southern Africa, and examines how the capacity to read technological texts as ideological and political and to
the capacity to speak back to these, to be producers, not consumers of knowledge, is a crucial aspect of the “transformation” project in higher education.

Finally, drawing on Maldonado-Torres’s (2016) triad of power, being and knowledge, Margaret Blackie provides wonderfully illustrative examples from the field of chemistry to illustrate the social and political construction of scientific knowledge. She argues that scientific insight and therefore progress can only emerge from diversity of thought (and therefore social, political and economic origin) and hence all universities should “actively seek to increase diversity for the sake of the enhancement of the science”, and by extension, the way we teach it.

I opened this introduction with the words of Maya Angelou. I have them up on the wall in my office. When I’ve a particularly challenging day, I look up at them and remind myself that what I do is hard, I’m doing the best I can, and next time I will do better. There is no clear path, formula or magic bullet to transform or decolonise a society, community or institution, still deeply entrenched in a context of brutal inequality and violence. Those of us who do are a remarkable and stubborn community of eternal optimists, activists and trouble-makers, who in spite of everything keep getting up in the morning and doing the “work”. This special edition is both for and by these optimists, activists and troublemakers. It is our effort to know ourselves, our challenges and our work better, so that in future, our best may be better.

NOTES
1. One could speculate as to why this was, but it is beyond the scope of this introduction.
2. I use transformation agents as a catch-all for members of the university including academics, leaders, professional and support staff and students, doing the work of transformation. Also included are transformation practitioners who hold official portfolios in transformation, for example, transformation managers and their teams. I make this distinction to acknowledge the growing professionalisation of transformation work.
3. From this point I use “transformation” in quotation marks. This is to honour and be present to the question of whether transformation work is actually decolonial in nature, or whether we are falling into the neoliberal traps described by Makhubela (2018).
4. Although the focus was on higher education we only received submissions from universities. As such both issues will focus on the university sector, not the whole higher education sector as the title suggests.

REFERENCES


Erasmus, Z., & de Wet, J. (2006). *Not naming “race”: Some medical students’ experiences and perceptions of “race” and racism at the Health Sciences Faculty of the University of Cape Town.* Widening circles: Case studies in transformation, 4. Cape Town: INCUDISA.


