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A decolonial reading of Bernstein's sociology of education in transforming the university in South Africa

In this paper, I reclaim Bernstein's pedagogic device to think through and theorise higher education transformation and decolonisation in the global South. I am especially persuaded by Bernstein's work on the pedagogic device and the endless possibilities it provides in re-thinking the public university and what it could be. Using South Africa as a case study, I focus on the decolonial calls sparked by the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall protests in 2015/2016 around the need to critique, evaluate and dismantle the neoliberal university in South Africa. I suggest that Bernstein's ideas of the field of production, the field of recontextualisation as well as the field of reproduction offer an intersectional, and dialectically useful, lens in making epistemic, ontological and methodological intervention(s) in transforming the university in South Africa. I end the paper with some concluding remarks on the discursive usefulness of Bernstein's work in transforming the public university in the global South.

Keywords: Bernstein, transformation, pedagogic device, higher education, teaching and learning

Introduction

... Imperialism and colonialism are the specific formations through which the West came to 'see', to 'name' and to 'know' indigenous communities. The cultural archive with its systems of representation, codes for unlocking systems of classification, and fragmented artefacts of knowledge enabled travellers and observers to make sense of what they saw and to represent their new-found knowledge back to the West through the authorship and authority of their representations (Smith 2013: 60).

In the above quotation, the Māori anthropologist and philosopher Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2013) writes about the fallacy of the Western epistemic line in drawing and demarcating for us the 'east' and 'west', in an attempt at carving up the world and colonising it for themselves. These imaginary and fictitious boundaries were designed to achieve a number of imperial and colonial objectives in the social world. Firstly, they were meant to socially construct and justify the introduction of ontological apartheid among indigenous communities, differentiating and dividing us between those who had a soul, who could be converted, and were potentially educable, compared to those heathens and wretched of the Earth who did not have a soul, could not be converted and had to be owned, dominated and possessed as cargo. Secondly, they were meant to make accessible and efficient the looting and plundering of the indigenous communities' minerals and other physical resources. The function of carving up the world is concerned about the classification and categorisation of people between those who belong in the zone of being (that is, the western European subject) and those who belong in the zone of nonbeing (that is, the African and global South sub-humans) (Fanon 1963, Gordon 1995, Rabaka 2010). The third function of carving up the world echoes Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2018) argument, building from Du Bois (2008), that the central organising problem of the 21st century remains not only the colour line (as suggested by Du Bois) but must include the epistemic line, that is, the epistemic/ intellectual/ knowledge struggles in how scholarly systems from the global South continue to be devalued, un-recognised and not seen as useful in the global knowledge economy. I grapple with these ideas later in the paper.

In this paper, I draw on Bernstein's sociology of education in general and his pedagogic device in particular to theorise the emergent struggles for higher education transformation and decolonisation in South Africa.

Bernstein and the pedagogic device

Basil Bernstein was a neo-Marxist scholar committed to thinking through how language, social relationship and inequalities are produced and reproduced in curricula (Apple 1999). For Bernstein, the school was a political and ideological institution that constructed and maintained class inequality. He argued that educational knowledge is largely transmitted through key messaging systems – that is, through curricula, pedagogy and evaluation (Bernstein 1975, 1990, 1999, 2000). Often concerned with how knowledge is produced, legitimated, recontextualised and reproduced in society, Bernstein introduced the pedagogic device to help explain this intrinsic and complex pedagogic process that creates, maintains and reproduces inequality in society (Bernstein 1975). He sought to conceptually define the ordering and dis-ordering of the principles of pedagogising of knowledge as the pedagogic device (see Singh 2002, p. 573). The pedagogic device is made of the hierarchical yet interrelated ‘rules’, or what Maton (2013) would later call ‘logics’. These logics are the distributive logics, the recontextualising logics and finally the reproduction logics. These logics help shape and inform how knowledge is produced, and what happens when knowledge is circulated and produced in the classroom, and through assessment (Hlatshwayo 2018; Singh 2002). These logics are hierarchical in the sense that the recontextualising logics are derived from the distributive logics, and the evaluative logics are derived from the recontextualising logics. The role and function of the distributive logics are to regulate the different power relations between social groups by distributing the different forms of knowledge, orientations, meanings, and pedagogic identities among others. In other words, these logics get to determine who gets to decide what counts as valued and legitimate knowledge in a particular field, and what gets discarded and disregarded. The recontextualising logics regulate the formation of the pedagogic discourse, focusing on “delocating a discourse, for relocating it, for refocusing it” (Bernstein 1996: 47). Through the recontextualising logics, a discourse is moved from its original site of production to a new site. The evaluative logics deal with what counts as valid and legitimate acquisition of knowledge.

The pedagogic device is made up of three different fields of practice, that is, the field of production, the field of recontextualisation, and finally the field of reproduction (Bernstein 1975, 1990, 1999). The below table graphically represents the pedagogic device;

Table 1: The pedagogic device, as adopted from Bernstein (2000)

Field of practice	Form of regulation	Symbolic structure	Typical sites
Production	Distributive rules	Knowledge structure	Research, laboratories, publications, conferences
Recontextualisation	Recontextualising rules	Curriculum	Curriculum policy documents, textbooks, course outlines
Reproduction	Evaluative rules	Pedagogic practices and evaluation	Lecture rooms/seminars, assessment

In the field of production, this is the site of new knowledge (Bertram 2012, Loughland and Sriprakash 2016, Vorster 2011). This includes laboratories, conferences, publications and other scholarly avenues and forums. In decolonial terms, this is the site that students in the global South often struggle to have access to, with mostly academics and researchers fighting to shape and influence the direction of the fields, disciplines and knowledges. The #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall protests in 2015/2016 were largely a contestation over the very legitimacy of the distributive rules themselves, and to what extent they needed to be changed, re-thought or dislodged with both students and academics contesting who gets to produce (legitimate) knowledge in the global South, who they are, and where they are geographically located (Fomunyan and Teferra 2017, Kumalo 2020, Madlingozi 2018). Put differently, the students' call for decolonising the public university could also be seen as a fight over the validity of the distributive logics in the field of production, challenging what counts as valid knowledge in higher education, who gets to be seen as a knower, what the valid and legitimate dispositions and attributes are, and to what extent alternative and counter-hegemonic distributive logics could be enacted.

In the field of recontextualisation, there are mainly two subsets of the field, that is, the official recontextualisation field and the pedagogic recontextualisation field. The official recontextualisation field includes the "specialised departments and sub-agencies of the State and local educational authorities together with their research and system of inspectors" (Bernstein 1990, p. 192). In the South African context, this includes the National Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), among others, who are responsible for

the quality assurance, accreditation and legitimacy (and validity) of the different types of qualifications in the country. The pedagogic recontextualising field is comprised of the university departments, journals, and the academic/ scholarly community. It may also extend to those actors who may not be from specialised communities but who may influence the shape and direction of the field, and its agenda (Bernstein 1990, p. 192). These may be the funding agencies, grant management agencies, private companies and others who through their support of the different types of research in higher education, tend to shape the kinds of discourses that emerge and are legitimated in a field.

It should be noted that within the pedagogic recontextualising field, there are some rules and procedures for constructing pedagogic texts and practices. Bernstein uses the term “pedagogic discourse” to refer to these rules and procedures, and suggests that here as well, there are two types of discourses that we need to contend with. The first one, the instructional discourse, focuses on the “trained capacities and lifestyles”, that is, competencies, that students ought to learn, know and understand in their lives (see also Hunter 1994, p. 95). The regulative discourse focuses on the rules that generate order within the instructional discourse. These rules are often ideological, political and carry with them broader reflections of the agent’s (or teacher’s) ideology or philosophical orientation.

The final field in the pedagogic device is the field of reproduction, that is, the site of teaching and learning (Bernstein 2000), where we see the curriculum being enacted and implemented through teaching and learning, assessment practices, module evaluations and other processes (Hlatshwayo 2019, Sefton-Green 2022, Singh 2002). It should be noted that although the pedagogic device appears analytically ‘clean’ and ‘coherent’, knowledge, curricula and pedagogy in practice are not. This is seen in how curriculum knowledge does not always move from the field of production (conferences, books, publications, etc.) to the field of reproduction (seminars, classes, assessment, etc.). Knowledge could similarly and dialectically move from the field of reproduction (that is, seminar debates, etc.) back to the field of production through the publication of a research article or a conference presentation. I will expand on these ideas and their transformative potential later in the paper.

Scholars such as Katartzis and Hayward (2020), Daniels and Tse (2020) and Stavrou (2022) have shown how Bernstein’s sociology of education and his philosophical contributions continue to be useful in helping us see the different types of knowledges that are valued, legitimated and recontextualised in higher education. Largely under-emphasised in the literature is the use of Bernstein’s sociology of education in general and his pedagogic device in particular to

theorise higher education transformation in the global South. I now turn to conceptualising what I mean by decolonisation in higher education, building on the work of Shay (2015), Carver (2017), Hoadley and Galant (2019) and Luckett and Blackie (2022) to think through what an inclusive, transformative and decolonial university could look like in South Africa.

Conceptualising decolonisation

In *Epistemic freedom in Africa: Deprovincialisation and Decolonisation*, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) suggests that if the 'colour line' was the racial/ social/ economic/ political struggle of the 20th century as suggested by WEB Du Bois (2008), then the 21st century contestations will centre on the 'epistemic line' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018: 3). This epistemic line is best articulated by Fanon (1963), Gordon (2005) and Santos (2007), who have argued that the European colonisation of the world has socially constructed the stark line that divides humanity between the 'zone of being' and the 'zone of nonbeing'. As mentioned earlier, in the zone of being, we have white heterosexual beings whose humanity, knowledge(s), spiritualities, cultures, modes of being and seeing are all valid and recognised, and which are mediated and governed through respect, recognition of civil liberties, and regulation with the relevant authorities. In the zone of nonbeing, we have *subjects* whose relationship is mediated and governed through violence, brutality and structural oppression. What Fanon called the 'Wretched of the Earth', the subjects in this zone and their humanity, cultures, spiritualities, knowledges and ways of being, seeing and becoming are all disregarded, and treated as epistemologically unworthy, or intellectually invalid. The Martinique philosopher Aimé Césaire (1955) called colonisation the 'thingi-fication' of black people, with Mudimbe (1988) arguing that colonisation is ultimately the reorganising and re-inventing of Africa into a European social construct (Mudimbe 1988: 11). In Bernsteinian terms, the distributive logics of the field of production were historically rooted in the imperial and colonial logics, designed to see black and indigenous communities as precious cargos who needed to be owned, occupied and controlled. Thus, reason, or access to reason and rationality, was exclusively reserved for Europeans who were seen as "valid" human beings who could produce knowledge and discourse purely on the basis of their racial and gender classifications. Put differently, black and indigenous scholars were excluded from the field of production, and thus were seen as incapable and unable of producing valid knowledge.

In *The Invention of Africa*, the Congolese philosopher Mudimbe (1988) suggests that African scholars and those from the global South have to contend with what he calls the 'horizons of knowledge' that are deformed, inaccurate, and designed

to present Africans as cognitively deficient primitives. In what he would later call the 'colonial archive' (Mudimbe 1988: 194), he reminds us that global South scholars have to critique, challenge, dismantle and question the white supremacy embedded in Eurocentric thinking that continues to see, read and conceptualise African epistemic traditions as illegitimate, and Other (Matthews 2018). It is based on the above epistemic and ontological struggles that decolonisation, or what Latin Americans scholars would term 'decoloniality' (Maldonado-Torres 2016), becomes a dialectical and existential process of re-discovering, re-claiming, re-centring and re-placing African epistemic traditions and seeing them as valid, legitimate and worthy. The end of formal colonisation in Africa, and the end of formal apartheid in South Africa, has not materially reconfigured and changed the economic/ social/ epistemic superstructures of oppression and marginality is still firmly rooted in society. Thus, the economy, power, political arrangements, the university, curricula, pedagogy, among others, all need to be re-thought and re-developed so they can serve the needs of the historically conquered subaltern groups. It should be noted that my call for the decolonisation of higher education in the global South is not a contradictory call for an epistemic erasure of non-global South epistemic traditions. Rather, I am calling for what Santos (2007) refers to as the "ecologies of knowledges", that is, bringing in different kinds of intellectual traditions, knowledge(s) and systems of thought that are all meant to co-exist in the university, exemplified in the following South African case study.

On the South African experience

The South African state is in trouble. Through a combination of crippling electrical power outages, protracted and endemic corruption both in the public and in the private sector, un/under-employment, ever increasing rates of gender-based violence and violent crimes, an education system that does not support upward social mobility and others, the African National Congress (ANC)-led government has been exposed as weak and unable to deal decisively with the country's structural challenges (see Sarkodie and Adams 2020, Spaull 2015, Institute for Security Studies 2018). In a paper titled, 'Key Challenges Facing the African National Congress-led Government in South Africa: An Afrocentric Perspective', Rapanyane (2022) attempts to cast "out the demonic spirits of ignorance and arrogance" in the current party leadership, revealing to us the disastrous economic mismanagement of the South African state under the then Jacob Zuma government, resulting in a loss of at least R1 trillion to the fiscus. The South African higher education sector is not immune from these crippling and debilitating challenges.

Since the early 1990s, the ANC government has done very little to tackle the imperial/ colonial/ apartheid logics in South African higher education, with black students and black academics still lamenting the alienation, abuse, marginality and colonising institutional culture(s) that we are forced to encounter, particularly in historically white universities (Badat 2016, Gredley 2020, Heleta 2018). At a policy and practice level, there appears a social mismatch and disconnection between the higher education policy climate in South Africa that articulates an attractive vision and direction of where the sector should be, compared to the lived experiences on the ground that reveal the brutalities of coloniality in our lives.

In the *Programme for the Transformation on Higher Education: Education White Paper 3* (hereafter the White Paper 3), the democratic government sought to promote “equity of access and fair chances of success to all who are seeking to realise their potential through higher education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities” (Department of Education 1997: 6). This twin focus of this policy document, quite correctly, is the need to challenge and dismantle the racist logics of the apartheid regime in the higher education system while also simultaneously promoting access and success for all, especially the historically marginalised racial groups (Badat 1994, 2007, 2009). This is similarly articulated in the *Draft National Plan For Higher Education In South Africa* (2001) (hereafter the National Plan) in proposing three key priority areas in conceptualising the purposes of higher education in a developing country: the need for human resource development, for high level skills training and for the production, acquisition, and application of the new knowledge in line with the needs of the then depressed post-apartheid economy (Department of Education 2001: 4-5). At a policy and report level, it is arguably the *Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions* (hereafter the Soudien Report),¹ that has been the most extensive in detailing, narrating and documenting the structural challenges that continue to plague the higher education sector, with issues of curriculum reform, institutional culture, space/ spatiality justice, knowledge, traditions, all remaining unresolved, and

1 The Soudien report was sparked by the national outrage in the country when a video surfaced online depicting a group of Afrikaner students “initiating” five black cleaners at the University of Free State. In what appears to be a series of activities, the cleaners are seen taking part in races, and downing drinks laced with urine (Cloete and Sapa 2008; Department of Education 2008). As a result of this incident, the Minister of Education at the time, Dr Naledi Pandor, established a national committee led by Crain Soudien to “investigate discrimination in public higher education institutions, with a particular focus on racism and to make appropriate recommendations to combat discrimination and to promote social cohesion” (Department of Education 2008: 9).

largely uninterrupted (CHE 2008). Collectively, these policies tend to reflect a sharp turn towards the needs of the neoliberal marketplace with South Africa being expected to compete in what is broadly agreed to be the “knowledge economy” (Boughey and McKenna 2021).

In *Being at Home: Race, Institutional Culture and Transformation at South African Higher Education Institutions*, Tabensky and Matthews (2015) grapple with the complexities of transforming an institutional culture at Rhodes University, a historically white university with English colonial/ imperial foundations, and prevailing influences, and the colonialities. They rightly focus on the troubling dangers of the historically white university in South Africa, and the need to re-centre spatial justice in the calls for transformation and decolonisation in the higher education sector. Drawing on Bernstein’s pedagogic device, these ideas are explored more closely below.

Transformation struggles in the university in South Africa

The struggles over curricula and the kind of knowledge selected for students to learn ought to be central to higher education in South Africa and were arguably at the heart of the #RhodesMustFall protests during the 2015-2026 moment. Coloniser and arch imperialist Cecil John Rhodes, and the prominent statue of him overlooking the University of Cape Town, became an epistemic symbol of the institutional racism and whiteness in South African higher education especially in terms of knowledge and curriculum decision-making. As argued earlier, curriculum construction, particularly in the Humanities and Social Sciences, is largely the domain of academics, with academics often relying on academic freedom and institutional autonomy to design their modules, readings, assessment practices among others in a way that suits their intellectual, ideological and scholarly orientations, with some conforming to their respective disciplinary boundaries and requirements. In Bernsteinian terms, students have often been deprived of and excluded from the field of production and recontextualisation, with both distributive and recontextualisation logics privileging and valuing academic freedom and institutional autonomy at the expense of students’ well-being. Furthermore, this exclusion has often taken a racial and classist turn, with black and working-class students often deprived of access to the field of production due largely to their racial classification as well as structural poverty in their lives.

Depriving students from access to the field of production has resulted in at least three challenges for us in education. Firstly, some academics present curricula as *a priori*, that is, curricula as already given, as a finished product for students. Secondly, and perhaps more damaging and dangerous for us in the global South, students continue to be seen as empty vessels who cannot offer anything

meaningful and productive to the curriculum experience and its imaginations. Their complex lifeworld, lived experiences, modes of being and becoming, are silenced. In what Bernstein would call the horizontal discourse, students are given limited opportunities to tap into their lifeworlds and to enrich the curriculum experience. They are seen, as Freire (2018) would put it, “empty vessels” needing to be filled with the curriculum knowledge. And finally, curricula and curriculum design remain relegated and confined to the field of recontextualisation were often there is no accountability for some of the knowledge decisions that are made in a module or programme. Thus, the emergence of #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall needs to be read in that light, as a struggle occurring largely in the fields of production and recontextualisation, over who has legitimacy and control over the arena, and who is excluded and pushed to the periphery. Furthermore, there has been limited interrogation post #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall of the challenges posed by the instructional discourse in academics’ ability to facilitate and enable transformation of curriculum in their pedagogic practices. This is especially seen in the Humanities and Social Sciences where one’s ideology, politics, values and beliefs have a direct effect on how one selects from the field of production and reconfigures one’s own curriculum to one’s own intellectual orientation. This can be challenging as contesting someone’s curriculum could be seen as contesting the person.

Teaching and learning were also central to the national protests of #RhodesMustFall (Alasow 2015, Chaudhuri 2016, Nyamnjoh 2017). Black students and progressive black academics argued that post the 1994 political dispensation, little to no significant change had occurred in the South African higher education system regarding the kinds of knowledge(s) that are still being valued, legitimated, taught and institutionalised in the academy (see Heleta 2016, Kamanzi 2019, Mbembe 2016). In other words, coloniality is still firmly rooted and consolidated in the academy with outdated academic literacies, and African epistemic traditions and knowledges from the global South are still dis-located and marginalised to the periphery in teaching and learning. For Heleta (2016), Kumalo (2020) and Adesina (2020), decolonial work requires a commitment to an excavationist, anthropological project in pursuing black epistemic traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, the black archive and other marginalised global South knowledges as an attempt to dislodge the curriculum powers of Euro-American thought. For those of us who work in the Humanities and Social Sciences, scholars such as Bernard Magubane, Steve Biko, Archie Mafeje, Percy Mabogo More, Mabogo Ramose, VY Mudimbe, and others, continue to be overlooked, unseen and disregarded in disciplines such as Sociology, Philosophy, Anthropology and Political Science. Thus, the fallist contestation over outdated teaching and learning practices was reflective of the struggles over the recontextualisation

logics regarding what counts as valid and appropriate pedagogic strategies in an African (and postcolonial) context, and what counts as a colonising and abusive pedagogy.

The Covid-19 pandemic emerged in an already deeply political and contested terrain in the South African academy. This contestation over the field of reproduction, regarding the appropriate, inclusive and context specific pedagogic approaches, is real. Teaching during the pandemic lacked coherence and gave birth to a series of crises. Rather than taking stock of Indian activist and novelist Arundhati Roy's (2020) advice on using the pandemic as a epistemic and ontological portal to reflect, re-evaluate, and re-imagine our way of life and potentially to change and reform it – I saw the pandemic in the academy as *reinforcing* normalcy through the “business as usual” and salvaging/saving the academic year discourses. Further to this, I also saw two other teaching and learning crises. The emergent teaching and learning through the emergency remote teaching reduced and collapsed pedagogy to merely the uploading of curriculum material online without critically reflecting on and understanding what online learning entails, and how potentially exclusionary it could be. Secondly, it forfeited and undermined the social justice agenda of ensuring that no student is left behind. We have widespread and well-documented evidence of systemic inequality in South Africa, with millions still living in structural and abject poverty (see Stats SA 2020). How does moving the curriculum material online help mitigate or potentially exacerbate those inequalities in our society? I am not suggesting that virtual and online forms of teaching and learning should not be pursued as global communities continue to face Covid-19 and its aftermath. I am arguing that the emergency remote teaching, virtual forms of teaching and learning and online pedagogies all need to be underpinned by and influenced by the values of social justice, democratic access and inclusivity. This could be done through a complex understanding of teaching and learning that includes and takes account of access to virtual platforms, food, safety, shelter, conducive environment and others that all ultimately influence and affect's one ability to engage with curricula. In Bernsteinian terms, the evaluating logics in the field of reproduction are shaped by the colonial and neoliberal forces in how rather than seeing the pandemic as a portal, institutions of higher learning in South Africa (and the global South) were conservative, alienating and valued completing the academic calendar often at the expense of human lives. Thus the online assessments and virtual exams reinforced the structural marginality and exclusion of students.

Discussion and conclusion

Institutions of higher learning in the global South are trapped in this existential struggle to transform and to decolonise. Largely driven by the need to dislodge the imperial, colonial, and apartheid legacies in higher education, academics have been forced to re-think thinking itself, and the different possibilities for transformation and decolonisation in the academy (Ndlovu 2018, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, 2018). While the South African state is struggling to navigate endemic corruption, un/under-employment, and stagnant economic growth, among others, the country offers fascinating insights in understanding the emergent complex transformation struggles, with black students and black academics being at the forefront of the protests in higher education. It should be noted that the calls for institutional reform, transformation and Africanisation of the sector predate the emergence of the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall in 2015, with scholars such as Badat (1994), Morrow (1994) and Hoadley and Jansen (2009) raising curricula, institutional culture(s) and knowledge questions as early as the 1990s/2000s. The findings of this paper were presented mainly in three ways, that is, 1) engaging with the curricula questions, 2) engaging with the teaching and learning questions, and finally engaging with the 3) assessment concerns.

Bernstein's philosophical contributions on the sociology of education in general and the pedagogic device in particular offer illuminating tools in *seeing* the different contestations and struggles over knowledge, curricula and teaching and learning practices. Through the field of production, we see the emergent complex struggles over the legitimacy of the distributive logics on the need to challenge the hegemony and dominance of the Eurocentric thought in higher education curricula, and the epistemic and ontological marginality that African and global South knowledge(s) continue to encounter. Furthermore, contestation over the distributive logics is also seen in the diversity and differences in the decolonial scholarship itself, with some Africanisation scholars calling for the Afrocentric, anthropological focus on knowledge and curriculum design, premised on the rejection of Euro-American epistemic traditions, as being unhelpful in pursuing intellectual global South liberation (see Kumalo 2020, Madlingozi 2018, Makgoba 1998). Counter to that, we have decolonial scholars who believe in a broader "ecosystem of knowledges" in bringing together diverse epistemic traditions to make sense of the postcolonial condition in the global South (Heleta 2016, Hlatshwayo 2020, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). These differences are rooted in contestations over the very basis and foundations of the distributive logics regarding who gets to enunciate, articulate and propose epistemic liberation and who is excluded and silenced.

The field of recontextualisation, often influenced by the ideologies external to the education system, and disciplinary orientations within, which in liberal institutions is influenced by the logics of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, often makes it hard for students to have access to and to play a significant role in this field. It is on this basis that 1) curriculum is presented (and delivered) as *a priori*, 2) students are largely excluded from this field, and 3) students are presented as empty vessels who have no role to play in curriculum design, planning or its assessment practices.

This also manifest itself in the field of reproduction through teaching and learning especially assessment where students were calling for an end to the dominance of the “dead white man”, and a curriculum that talks to their lived experiences. The Covid 19 pandemic made worse what was already a volatile situation in the South African academy, with a large number of students (and academics) being left behind as a result of the emergency remote teaching. Bernstein’s sociology of education and his concept of the pedagogic device has been helpful in giving me a language of description (Maton 2013) so as to analyse and make sense of the complex and contradictory struggles for transforming and decolonising the public university in South Africa.

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