
The knowledge question and the future of education in South Africa: a reply to Michelson's 'On trust, desire and the sacred: a response to Johan Muller's *Reclaiming Knowledge*'

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In her response (Michelson, 2004) to Muller's book *Reclaiming Knowledge* (Muller, 2000), Elana Michelson challenges his ideas about the nature of knowledge and by implication, about the future of South African education.³ It is an important moment for such issues to be raised in South Africa. There is a relatively new Minister, a number of new senior officials, and a newly established Quality Assurance and Qualifications Authority, Umalusi; none are associated with the policies that have been developed around curriculum and qualifications that have had such a chequered and contested history since 1994. Furthermore, there appears to be a new willingness within national government and among many people at other levels, to question such previously taken for granted ideas as an outcomes-based curriculum, an educational policy driven by qualifications and the viability of an integrated approach to education and training.

With the greater distance from the apartheid era, it has become more possible to recognise the evils of apartheid without assuming that all educational provision in that period must be dismissed as irredeemably racist.⁴ Three examples in the recent history of education in South Africa will illustrate this point. First, by 1990, the apprenticeship system, although originally reserved

³ It is important to stress that the issues linking the nature of knowledge to the purposes of schooling are in no way specific to South Africa. In the so called 'knowledge economy' it seems likely that they will become more, not less, important for all countries.

⁴ There are interesting parallels with other societies in transition such as the former communist countries of Eastern Europe (e.g. Romania and Slovenia). In each I have found examples of policy makers assuming without question, at least in the first few years after transition, that they have to get rid of what they assume to be 'communist' policies and replace them with those found in the United Kingdom or other 'western' countries, regardless of how successful they have been in their country of origin.

for white workers, was beginning to be opened up to Africans. Secondly, the 'matric' examination, despite excluding the majority, was a tried and trusted system that was not so different from the examinations found in other countries with far higher rates of participation. Thirdly, there was a tradition of quality provision to build on in some of the (then) technical colleges. In each case a far more equal system does not necessarily mean a completely different system.

In this context the role of educational research and theory take on a new significance, not as perhaps was assumed a decade ago, just in providing prescriptions for new policies, but in providing intellectual spaces within which alternative policies and their possible consequences can be debated. The disagreements between Michelson and Muller provide an important example of a space for such a debate, not the least because the issues on which they differ are fundamental to all societies.

In the post 1990 period in South Africa there was an understandable attempt to establish a *new* and *different* system free from the legacy of apartheid. Not only were words changed – students became learners and teachers became educators – but the most directly punitive elements of the previous system, a narrowly prescribed curriculum and an authoritarian inspection system – were rejected as in principle inescapably racist. At the same time the question for policy makers and researchers was 'what kind of new system was needed that could provide real opportunities for the many and not just the few?' An integrated system, that did away with the 18 racially-based departments and which did not divide and distinguish types of learners but would give credit to all the previously unrecognised learning and skills within the African majority, seemed an obvious and progressive step. So too (at least for some) did an outcomes-based curriculum that, it was hoped, would enable teachers to be free to facilitate learning among their students.

Overseas examples that were not tainted by apartheid were turned to by policy makers; examples were qualification systems from the United Kingdom and New Zealand and an outcomes-based approach to the school curriculum from the USA. The result of such policies, as is now widely accepted, has been confusion among teachers trying to make lesson plans on the basis of outcomes, and a bureaucratic and jargonised system for developing

qualifications, many of which are never used.⁵ What these innovations had in common was (a) a scepticism about any form of educational tradition or authority such as that of school subject specialists,⁶ (b) severe doubts about the idea of disciplined or systematic knowledge that was not located in practice or shown to be directly relevant to practice, (c) an uncritical faith in the capacities of the individual learner when freed from any external constraint, (d) a confidence that it was possible to formulate criteria that could be reliably used to map (and therefore assess) individual performance (processes known as criterion reference testing and standard setting), and (e) that any kind of educational goal could be broken up into units of learning activity and put together again by the learner.

It was largely to challenge this orthodoxy that the essays Muller brought together in *Reclaiming Knowledge* were written. In my view it is a combination of the influence of his (and that of others') theoretical work, some important empirical research and the practical experience of the non-viability of the new curriculum that led to the present re-thinking among policy makers. That is the context, theoretical and practical, in which I would want to locate Michelson's critique and the differences between Michelson and Muller.

Both Muller's book and Michelson's critique are engaged primarily in theoretical debates; they are not pitched at the level of specific policies. Muller does discuss important issues such as the NQF and literacy policy, but as examples of his theory. Michelson's target is Muller's defence of the boundaries between formal and informal knowledge as inescapable elements of a curriculum which she sees as precluding more important questions about how they can be overcome. Muller's target is 'social constructivism' – not as Michelson sees it, from her New York university base, as the vast and scholarly literature that “has consistently distinguished itself from the kind of epistemological relativism that holds all accounts of the world as equally valid” (2004, p.10) – but as an ideology with lived material consequences. In a sense therefore, her critique is beside the point and passes his arguments by. It does not matter that many social constructivists may be, as she claims,

⁵ The tragedy is the similarity of these problems to those experienced in New Zealand and then in the United Kingdom a decade earlier.

⁶ The only defensible hierarchy became between those who had learned the new outcomes language and those who had not.

nuanced in how far they will push the constructed nature of knowledge; not all constructivists would agree with Harry Collins that “the natural world has a small or non-existent role in the construction of scientific knowledge” (Collins, 1981). As an ideology, social constructivism may be progressive in its origins but can become deeply conservative in practice, as for example Gramsci showed in his account of the Gentile reforms in post World War 1 Italy (Gramsci, 1971). Donna Haraway may, as quoted by Michelson (2004, p.11), combine in one sentence the “radical historical contingency of all knowledge claims” with a “non-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world”; however, such a combination would be impossible if she was a curriculum developer or a teacher. Furthermore, the laws of gravity as an example of a faithful account of the real world are not historically contingent⁷ except in very specific conditions like being in a space craft and these are conditions that physicists also have knowledge of. My concern in the case of South Africa is that the ideology of social constructivism, partly through its superficial radicalism and partly through its association with progressive political movements, has taken on a kind of political correctness so that, for example, the existing NQF structure is defended as ‘a social construct’ and indigenous knowledge is included in the specifications for school science. In the end the latter is doing no favour to the cultural importance of indigenous knowledge in the new South Africa, let alone to the opportunities for school students to learn what science is about and can do.

Michelson devotes two fifths of her paper to challenging Muller’s use of Valerie Walkerdine’s *Mastery of Reason* (Walkerdine, 1988) to support his case for not using informal knowledge as the basis of the curriculum. Without going into their competing interpretations of Walkerdine’s text in any detail, my view is that Walkerdine and Muller are not as at odds on the role of informal knowledge as Michelson would suppose. Michelson elides curriculum and pedagogy (Walkerdine’s primary concern). The latter must of course start with the learner (and his or her everyday knowledge) as well as the curriculum.⁸ The curriculum, however, which Muller is concerned with, must start with the (formal) knowledge; Walkerdine, as both Muller and Michelson recognise, accepts this when she writes “the existence of exclusive

⁷ This is not to say that they were not discovered in specific historical circumstances. However, that does not affect their non-contingency.

⁸ Although school science may sometimes start with a student’s observations in the laboratory and not with her/his everyday experience of the natural world.

domains of discursive activity (such as mathematics) is a sine qua non (for the curriculum)”. Without such an assumption it is unclear how either teachers or students would know where they were going. This is a big part of the problem with outcomes-based education (OBE) which has tried to do away with the idea of a syllabus as a relic of apartheid and, in effect, does away with any idea of a curriculum.

A further strand of Michelson’s critique of Muller is over his use of the idea of knowledge boundaries – more specifically, Bernstein’s ideas of classification and framing. First she claims that whereas Bernstein uses the idea of boundary for progressive purposes, in Muller’s hands it leads to “far more conservative conclusions”.⁹ Bernstein is a notoriously elusive writer, but I know no textual basis for such a claim. For example, both Bernstein and Muller warn against the seductions of progressive pedagogy as a strategy for promoting greater equality. It is not clear if Michelson has actually read much Bernstein. The most generous conclusion is that she has failed to recognise the *analytical* character of both Bernstein’s and Muller’s distinctions. For example, for Bernstein, vertical and horizontal knowledge structures do not *describe* different types of knowledge; they refer to features found to a different degree in all claims to knowledge; they are in Max Weber’s sense ‘ideal types’. The important point, which Michelson avoids, is the range of empirical enquiries (ironically, several are referenced by her and deal with her own field of RPL) which have used Bernstein’s ideas in innovative and creative ways.

A final strand of Michelson’s critique that I want to consider is her claim that Muller’s work can be seen as an expression of ‘South African exceptionalism’. Her argument is not only that South African history is unique, but, based on an unpublished thesis, that

the attention to epistemological dualisms in the literature of experiential learning and the preoccupation with gate-keeping are a specifically South African phenomenon. They are not present (she states) in the extensive international literature that has come out of the US, Canada, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, . . .(this) attention to gate-keeping and the insistence on the purity of knowledge-domains may also reflect a defensiveness that is a product of the historical moment in which South African academics find themselves, in which the movement for a more just South Africa in which, to their credit, many of them

⁹ In the context of this accusation of conservatism, remarks such as “progressive white academics such as Joe Muller have an honoured place among white South Africans who opposed apartheid” and “I have nothing but respect for the role Muller and others have played” appear as either contradictory or patronising.

participated, has, as it were, moved closer out of the halls of government and into the classroom in ways they are not fully able to control (Michelson, 2004, p.26).

What is meant by the last sentence is far from clear. It strikes me that it would be easier to find evidence for a quite different explanation of why a number of South African researchers have turned to realist critiques of social constructivism. They make sense, as Muller demonstrates in his book, of the confusion among teachers that has been generated by an OBE curriculum that leaves them bereft of the resources of a syllabus.

An additional observation on Michelson's argument about South African exceptionalism relates to the substance of Muller's theory itself. She claims that there is no debate about the epistemological basis of experiential learning outside South Africa. This is just plain wrong or at best an incredibly narrow reading of the literature that says more about her own insularity in the world of North American adult education than about the issues concerning boundaries and epistemology. Martin Jay may offer an explanation of this narrowness when he argues that America has always been a 'culture of experience' (Eagleton, 2005).

What then are we to make of her response to Muller and where does it leave us? Clearly his book irritated her and caused her problems. Not only did his arguments somehow not fit with her idea of being a radical intellectual in South Africa but his strong case for knowledge boundaries casts serious doubts about seeing RPL as offering any sort of long term strategy for promoting greater equality in South Africa. On a broader policy level, she offers little beyond a weakly substantiated critique. Does it matter whether she or Muller are right, or is her paper just another incident in the largely North American 'Culture Wars' that happens to be published in a South African Journal? It may be that for Michelson her paper is best seen as such an incident. Perhaps she feels that the same old 'culture wars' need to be fought in South Africa as well. At no point does one get any sense that her critique implies any alternative to Muller's knowledge-based model of the curriculum.

The last part of this paper is an attempt to say why the differences between Michelson and Muller are more than another battle in the culture wars initiated by Alan Sokal (Sokal, 1996). They matter, I want to argue, not only theoretically for those involved in debates about educational policy but practically in their implications for education policy both in South Africa and elsewhere.

From the perspective of someone working in the United Kingdom universities at least, Michelson's combination of political radicalism and a social constructivist epistemology is a familiar one and has led to both political and scientific (in the broad sense of the term) cul-de-sacs in the social sciences; however, from the point of view of influencing educational policy it has been irrelevant in any direct sense. This, however, is far from situation in South Africa where academics and administrators are in much closer contact and it is far more likely that simplistic ideas dreamed up by academics will be implemented as policy.

Michelson mentions but does not discuss South African policy developments such as SAQA, OBET, and RPL at the beginning of her paper. One could easily add the idea of literacies (as opposed to literacy), learner-centred pedagogies and indigenous knowledge referred to earlier.¹⁰ None of these developments have their origins in South Africa. All are informed by the well intentioned but misguided view that if education is to be emancipatory and available to all it must be learner-centred; learning, on this view, becomes the 'construction of meanings', regardless of what these meanings are and whether they give learners any reliable understanding of the world or power over it. One unfortunate legacy of apartheid is that curriculum developers imbued with social constructivist ideas dismissing any notion of a syllabus as representing knowledge prescribed by specialists; they see syllabuses as inherently authoritarian rather than as necessary frameworks within which intellectual development can take place.

However 'nuanced' Michelson's vast school of social constructivism may be in their academic writings, it is as slogans that such ideas are interpreted by curriculum developers, especially but not only in such a potentially fluid and open context such as post apartheid South Africa. Boundaries between formal and informal knowledge are important in the sense argued for by Muller, not because they are rigid distinctions that describe the world, but because reference to local, particular and situated knowledge is presented as addressing the specific problems of the majority who have historically been excluded

¹⁰ My point is not to be against indigenous knowledge which would be absurd, but to distinguish it from the knowledge on which the curriculum needs to be based and relates to the Michelson/Walkerline/Muller debate referred to earlier. I once had a discussion with a Fijian academic at the University of the South Pacific on this issue; she said that when she mentioned including local knowledge in a certificate, a Fijian tribesman's reply was: 'I want to learn something; I don't need a certificate to tell me that I know how to be a Fijian tribesman!'

from education by apartheid. As a result the informal side of the formal/informal dualism has taken on a disproportionate (albeit largely rhetorical) role in education policy in South Africa and is legitimated as arising from a social constructivist view of the curriculum and knowledge. The truth is that despite the good intentions of the policy developers, there is growing evidence, both statistical and anecdotal, that the new policies are not working; attainment rates are not improving and often teachers are confused and do not know what to teach. Furthermore this failure is not just because the new curriculum is poorly implemented or under-resourced; it is because it is based on fundamentally misguided assumptions about knowledge and education. It is these assumptions about the constructedness of knowledge and the mutability of boundaries which divide Muller and Michelson. The merit of her response, however much I disagree with it, is that it brings these epistemological issues and their implications for policy into the arena of public debate.

What Michelson is contesting is, in the broadest terms, not unlike the target of the post modernists, the legacy of the enlightenment – that set of ideas from Newton to the French philosophers of the eighteenth century that have underpinned the processes of industrialisation and modernisation, the growth of science and technology and the expansion of schooling in Europe, North America and more recently South East Asia. The issue is, with whatever variations that reflect its specific history, this is also the future for South Africa? Of course, as Michelson points out, the Enlightenment took place in a historical context in which a new ruling class, white, middle class and largely male, was emerging. It is equally true that the Enlightenment identification with reason led in different circumstances to some of the horrors of the twentieth century in Europe. However, what is distinct about the formal knowledge that can be acquired through schooling and that therefore needs to be the basis of the curriculum *in any country* is (a) the conceptual capacities it offers to those who acquire it, (b) its autonomy from the contexts in which it is developed (the Chinese are interested in Boyle's Law but not in the gentry culture of which Boyle was a part), (c) its conception and organisation that contrasts starkly with the everyday knowledge learners bring to school. These differences between the knowledge that needs to be the basis of the curriculum and the everyday, local and practical knowledge that people acquire in the course of their lives do not imply that the former is superior in any absolute way. It is superior for certain purposes – for such curriculum goals as rigorous criticism, explaining, exploring alternatives, hypothesising futures. Equally there are many things that formal knowledge cannot do.

Knowledge is social and in a trivial sense we are all social constructivists. It is also true that most but not all theoretical knowledge that transcends everyday experience has been produced by white, middle class males (with the rise of China and other South East Asian countries this distribution of knowledge producers will of course change). Insofar as a curriculum is based on such knowledge it will inevitably prioritise a certain kind of citizen, certain sets of power relations and not just a certain kind of knowledge. One of the tasks of social theory is to make these links between knowledge and citizenship explicit and to explore how far one constrains the other.

It is not so much a matter of which side I am on in the debate between Michelson and Muller, although the answer to that question is no doubt clear. There are problems with a realist approach to the curriculum which research has only just begun to explore. The point of making explicit their differences is that the issues raised are fundamental to the future of education, not only in South Africa but more generally. Michelson is right to remind us (Muller also does so) that all our knowledge is social and that it does not come free of its context. We cannot avoid questions about the origins of theoretical knowledge and the significance of recognising that it is neither ‘in the head’ nor ‘in the world’ but inescapably a product of human beings acting on the world in history. At the same time theoretical knowledge is a kind of ‘third world’ in Popper’s sense that is neither tied to specific contexts nor context-free as many claim. Being social, knowledge is always ‘in a context’; what distinguishes theoretical from everyday knowledge is (a) the nature of the context and (b) the extent to which any context is transcendable, and (c) its locatedness in specialised communities with their codes and rules for guaranteeing its reliability. The importance of boundaries and the dualisms that an emphasis on boundaries gives rise to is that they are starting points for educationalists, not an end point. As Bernstein expressed it, “enhancement has to do with boundaries and experiencing boundaries as the tension points between the past and possible futures” (Bernstein, 2000). The difficult road from informal to formal always has to be travelled. The problem I have with the dualisms of Bernstein and Muller is that they can focus too much on the distinctiveness of knowledge categories and not enough on their embeddedness in each other. If they were not embedded we would never be able to escape from the everyday and think conceptually. On the other hand the combination of embeddedness and separateness poses extremely difficult questions for both educational research and policy. How they are resolved will massively determine the educational opportunities that are available to the majority in South Africa and other developing countries.

In a final point I want to return to the issue of exceptionalism . Earlier in this paper I criticised Michelson's formulation of this issue. My own position is that South Africa is 'exceptional' but not in the sense Michelson claims. In the context of educational policy, South Africa is 'exceptional' in having a small number of researchers who are raising basic questions about the links between knowledge and educational policy in ways that are barely recognised by researchers in developed countries like the United Kingdom. We have philosophers and some sociologists of education who explore epistemological issues. Quite separately, most educationalists are hell bent on delivering or evaluating the newest government policy, whether it is personalised learning, work based learning or widening participation, but with no regard for epistemological issues at all. Unlike in South Africa, the two hardly meet. I suspect this difference at least partly reflects the urgency of the situation in South Africa and the collective will in that country to make democracy succeed for everyone. That is one of the positive legacies of the struggle against apartheid; we in the ex-colonial countries have a lot to learn from them.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Dr Judy Harris for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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