

BOOK REVIEW

Course Syllabi in Faculties of Education: Bodies of Knowledge and their Discontents, International and Comparative Perspectives. By: André Elias Mazawi, Michelle Stack (Eds) (2020), 288 pages. ISBN: 9781350094253. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

This is a complex volume where the contributors express divergent and sometimes contradictory views. That makes it difficult to give a simple and comprehensive review. At the most elementary level, one author claims that critical thinking is crucial to the project of teacher preparation, while another argues that the term “critical thinking” is a prime candidate for inclusion in the game of bullshit bingo.

The title of the volume gives no hint that this is really a work of polemic. In fact, it is uniformly (and this is one of the few things that the contributors seem to agree on) a critical review of the syllabi of teacher preparation programmes with a view to decolonising the curriculum and introducing an anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-ableist, alternative perspective. And rather than dealing with syllabi, as documents, it attempts to describe syllabi as performed, or “embodied” in the classroom, a rather more slippery concept.

The position of the book in the series, Bloomsbury Critical Education, perhaps gives a better view of the authorial (or editorial) stance than the title. The introduction to the series states that,

The series will comprise books wherein authors contend forthrightly with the inextricability of power/knowledge relations.

One might have wished that they had been a little less forthright and had done more to extricate and analyse some of those power/knowledge relations.

Each chapter addresses a serious issue that is crucially important to the preparation of professional teachers, and to education more generally. But each chapter does it inadequately, and in such a way that it is hard to describe the content of the chapters. For example, Opini and Neeganagwedgin (p.214) say, “We are educators with global Indigenous ancestral roots”. I do not know what to make of that; it is either a claim that anybody can make truthfully, or it is code and a euphemism for something that is not explained. The sense that the book is preaching to the converted, and that claims can be asserted, but do not need to be analysed or supported, is very strong throughout.

Lack of analysis, and willingness to assume that a case has been made without considering alternative explanations, comes with a sense of invulnerability and self-protection. It is probably very colonial, white, and male of me to impose a normativity of universalising logic onto a text that is supposed to be multifaceted and self-contradictory. And frankly, I would be inclined to accept that argument, if I thought that suspension of disbelief would allow me to learn anything about decolonising the curriculum.

To take an example, a chapter titled “The Geopolitics of Knowledge and ‘the Abyssal Line’: Mapping Teacher Education Syllabi in Canada” explores how much of the “canon” represented in the reading lists of those syllabi is indigenous. Under-representation of indigenous knowledge is described as “cognitive injustice”, a position that is not clarified, but looks a little like a claim for equal time in the curriculum, which has proved so troublesome in other circumstances.

However, the method of the study is fairly clear. A list of 545 articles, chapters and websites was compiled from the reading lists of 19 teacher education courses, of which only 16 are related

to indigenous knowledge. The authors conclude that, “Note that even collectively, these are a small percentage of the total 545 readings for the teacher education program, making up only 0.03 (sic) percent of the full list”. The actual figure is 3 per cent, and is misreported by a factor of 100. It is certainly a small fraction, though not as small as claimed, but there is no explanation of what we should expect it to be, or why.

But to continue with the mapping project, the authors note that they faced a methodological challenge, in that “it is often impossible to identify a geographical location of the major academic publishers such as Routledge and Taylor and Francis” (p. 55). As their account makes clear, these are actually two brands of a single company which has its roots and headquarters in the UK, as well as a strong presence in the US. Perhaps this could be a chance for a discussion of the role of international capital in the selection of knowledge that is deemed to be of value. Or alternatively, they might be wanting to look at the role and location of knowledge gatekeepers, the editors and reviewers used by international publishers. But the answer is much simpler than that: “We have solved this problem by choosing ‘United States’ as the location for Routledge, and ‘United Kingdom’ as the location for Taylor and Francis” (p.55). I am sure it will surprise nobody that the chapter concludes that the bulk of material used in these programmes was published in the US, and to a lesser extent the UK.

I do not mean to imply that the question of who has access to publishing, and how submissions to publications are evaluated, is unimportant. But it is time that we could move beyond this kind of circular argument to do something concrete about opening up the academic world to multiple voices and include, and critically examine, perspectives that have previously been under-represented. Similarly, it is important for everybody to learn history in a way that makes clear what injustices have been imposed by majorities on minorities, but understanding how that is best done requires something more than this assertion.

What is absent from this volume is a discussion of, or even a clear statement of, what makes a specific approach “indigenous”, or why some aspects of international knowledge are condemned for universalising, and colonising indigenous spaces, while others are seen as an appropriate corrective to parochialism and patriarchy.

The crux of the problem can be found in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone has the right to education... Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms... Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children”. This Article in fact defines two rights: the right of the child to an education that fully develops his or her personality, and a right of the parent to choose an education that ensures cultural continuity. Although not necessarily in conflict, there is always the possibility that the parents and their children have different needs. Where such dissonance occurs, simply labelling one “indigenous” and the other “western” or “universal” does nothing to help untangle the “inextricable power / knowledge relationships”.

In setting out their stall in the introductory chapter, the editors refer to “understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences” (p.28). Yet that is precisely what this volume fails to do. Having disparate chapters offering partial pictures and contradictory claims may present the complexity, but it adds little to the analysis or understanding.

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