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# **The lost, the least and the last: A South African higher education case study exploring the possibility of defying the barriers to learning**

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**Abstract:** The word ‘transformation’ is frequently used in South Africa today. However, policy documents do not spell out how transformation is to be achieved. The higher education system in South Africa is presently in a stage of transformation and under pressure to provide both access and quality education for all people. But what is actually meant by transformative education? How is this applied in practice?

At present, transformation in most South African tertiary institutions is strongly equated with access and numerical parity. This focus often leads to an abstraction from the concrete conditions that should be transformed so that equity can be achieved (Hoppers, 2000). This also fuels the notion that transformation is fully and immediately attainable once equity numbers have been attained. In order to unravel some broad implications and issues regarding transformation with particular reference to reconfiguring South African tertiary education, I will look at how the Commerce Academic Development Programme (CADP), University of Cape Town, might offer a space to look at some implications and issues of transformation by highlighting some specifics relating to the programme. I will look at a few broad areas that impact upon implementation, interweaving the case study with a theoretical discourse that serves as both a reflector and an imperative.

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## **Introduction**

The word ‘transformation’ is frequently used in South Africa today. However, policy documents do not spell out how multiple barriers to learning can be transformed. The higher education system in South Africa is presently in a stage of transformation and under pressure to provide both access and quality education for all people.

At present, transformation in most South African tertiary institutions is strongly equated with access and numerical parity. This focus often leads to an abstraction from the concrete conditions that should be transformed so that equity can be achieved (Hoppers, 2000). This also fuels the notion that transformation is fully and immediately attainable once equity numbers have been attained.

In order to unravel some of the broad implications and issues regarding defying some barriers to learning with particular reference to reconfiguring South African tertiary education, I would like to contextualize the site of my case-study, the Commerce Academic Development Programme (CADP) at the University of Cape Town and highlight some specifics relating to the programme. I will then look at some broad areas that can be barriers to learning. I will reflect on these barriers, interweaving the case study with a theoretical discourse that serves as both a reflector and an imperative.

## Commerce academic development programme

The trajectory of the Commerce Academic Development Programme (CADP) is part of the broader academic development programme at the university and in South Africa. The CADP is based in the Commerce Faculty and has been a response to varying levels of student preparedness and the well-known inequalities in the school sector. The CADP has been designed to allow students to complete a Bachelor of Commerce degree over a four-year period and offers a range of interventions and value. The focus is on the 'articulation gap' between school and university, and allows for the development of key skills and graduate competencies.

The CADP works diagnostically to address gaps and disparities in students' educational/life experience so that they can be better equipped to manage the B. Com programme. In addition, it provides students with a variety of engagements that enhance a broad and comprehensive range of educational and life skills. Interventions are developmental in nature and intended to have an incremental impact, rather than providing 'support' only. Leadership skills and mentoring opportunities are also included in the programme. A range of meta-cognitive skills (study skills, note taking, examination preparation and writing, report writing, critical thinking, collaborative learning and communication skills) are included in the programme.

The composition of the class is quite diverse. There is an increasingly broad range of social, economic, language, religion, home and school backgrounds represented. While students are mostly in separate small classes in their first year, thereafter they continue their studies and lectures as integral members of the Commerce Faculty. To maintain continuity and assess appropriate interventions, monthly class meetings are held for all cohorts. A variety of workshops and support are organized for the varying cohorts throughout their degree. There are also opportunities for mentoring, tutoring and learning programmes in a variety of corporate contexts.

The notion that 'one size fits all' is clearly inappropriate as students do not arise from positions of social, economic and political equality (Porteus, 2003). In a society that has been scarred by discrimination in multiple ways, treating the 'playing field as equal' can create the potential to reinforce inequality as, implicitly, those who have acquired the linguistic, social and cultural competencies of the discourse are favoured (Bernstein, 1990 cited in Breidlid, 2003).

To meet the needs of a wide, educationally diverse, student intake in a single course involves particularly sophisticated teaching capacity, skills and fairly multifaceted understandings of the relationship between the students and the subject matter. Building this type of institutional culture and the educational skills and training to engage with a wide range of learning needs is therefore an urgent challenge.

The notion of a separate programme contains its own challenges and issues. There are obviously real issues involved in having a separate programme based on 'disadvantage'. What are the criteria for determining 'disadvantage'? Who decides this? A separate programme can deepen lines of race, as well as, entrench existing identities of being on 'the fringe'. It also means that there is the potential for mainstream aspects of the faculty to remain intact without having to embrace all the inherent challenges and issues involved in transformation. There is always the danger that differential programmes may in fact foster new forms of segregation

and consequently new discriminations (Sparkes, 1999 cited in Sayed, 2003) and that students can spend their energy breaking out of a particular 'at risk' stereotype.

The CADP students acknowledge and are aware of the rationale for the programme. The particular focus is on the historical and political circumstances that have given rise to the programme, as well as the 'value-added' aspects of participating in the programme. As time passes, students become deeply protective of the camaraderie, support and participation inherent in the programme. Once having been initiated into CADP, students do not want to leave the programme and feel intensely proud and loyal about their membership in this group.

I believe that the challenge and opportunity for the programme is to be in touch with day-to-day realities and the type of issues to be outlined in this paper. These should be used as an impetus to challenge and change broader structural and pedagogical areas, to embrace a different ethos regarding the students and the teaching and learning environment and to address critically the institutional culture.

### **How are CADP students faring?**

A comparison between mainstream and CADP results in compulsory first-year courses, over the past three years, indicates that CADP students are faring very favourably. This is not an attempt to direct attention to course results only (there are obviously a range of qualitative areas that indicate student growth and development), but results do provide crucial benchmarks as to how students are negotiating the present system.

It could be argued that the CADP has smaller classes, but in and of itself, this would not make a real difference if the teaching structure and pedagogy were not fundamentally altered. None of these students have met the required criteria to be accepted into the mainstream of the faculty. The vast majority of the students would be perceived as 'under prepared' for tertiary education and their backgrounds and present experience could be viewed as major obstacles to completing their courses successfully. They would probably be regarded by many as "the lost, the least and the last". However, in many first year courses, the students' pass rate has surpassed that of 'mainstream' students.

There are some that would support the view that cultural, economic and social deficiencies in students' lives are responsible for failure. It is therefore fascinating to track the 2001 cohort results which reveal that students who are supposedly 'deficient' have performed well. Although studies have been conducted (Duhon-Sells, Duhon and Duhon-Jean Louis, 2003) into 'at risk' students who are high achievers, the CADP class reflects more than a few individuals who seemingly fit into this category. The top quarter of the class comes mostly from various types of township schools. Their matriculation entry scores range from 39 – 43 points (46 points were required at that time to gain entry to the three-year programme.) with few students completing Higher Grade Mathematics in their school leaving examination. All these students use multiple languages, but do not speak English as a first language. All of them have experiences of acute poverty at home. Their experiences at school are varied. Some sense both of the school culture as well as the diversity of students' experiences can be gleaned from the graph depicting events at schools (2004 and 2005 cohorts). On the surface, these students could be viewed as being very vulnerable, having a great number of barriers to their learning and holding little prognosis of success.

An articulation gap between school, home and university does exist for many students. While the bridging of this gap is clearly important, it is not the only part of the equation to ensure retention and success of students in their degree path. There are a range of determinants of academic success. Students' background and context are clearly not casting their destinies 'in stone'. I believe that the programme is providing a niche where a variety of things are possible.

The scope of this paper does not allow for an in-depth engagement with any one issue, but is rather an initial exploration of those factors that have the potential to shift barriers to learning and to create a significant shift in the process and outcomes of the educational experience. I will look briefly at the following aspects that should not be viewed in isolation, but which are useful as markers to some of the potential barriers to learning that need to be addressed and negotiated: schooling and home context, learning and social environment, as well as, broad curriculum issues. I believe that the CADP is attempting to engage with these issues in a variety of ways and is therefore beginning to make some in-roads into difficult terrain. The challenge is to develop these further and particularly to increase momentum in mainstream structural levels.

## **Factors relating to individuals**

### ***Social environment***

An examination of student racial composition and pass rates in the whole Commerce Faculty indicates that it is the black students who are at the 'tail-end' of the class, progressing at a slower pace and dropping out at higher rates. These students would represent a range of socio-economic environments, but the fact that they are not performing as well as their white counterparts, begs a thorough examination.

An analysis of the racial composition and previous schooling of mainstream students reveals that a high percentage of the students attended ex-Model C schools. The majority of commerce students have therefore had access to an education with resources providing skills and opportunity. To what extent is the university reproducing structural inequalities and continuing to alienate certain students? Is 'whiteness' operating as the unacknowledged norm against which everyone is measured? It is the unseen capital that underpins certain students' ability to negotiate, decode and 'work the system' through a whole range of informal cultural rules and norms (Apple, 2001). Increasing access can be deceptive insofar as this follows the rhetoric that a space has been opened, so that, 'if you work hard, you can succeed', while blurring whether any structural change has taken place (Bredlid, 2003).

There is a fairly pervasive mindset that black students arrive at university with certain deficits and there is a need to get them 'up to speed' as quickly as possible so as to 'bridge the gap' to meet the required standards. The trend is toward 'assimilation' where there is a 'guest' approach to 'others' (Lazarus, 2004). Mainstream thinking is still fairly far removed from regarding it as essential to access the greater variety of the linguistic resources and cultural capital that currently reside in the university.

In Apple's (2001:410) words, no education enterprise can be "serious without placing at its very core a sensitivity to the ongoing struggles that constantly shape the terrain on which education operates". Amongst others, the terrain of racial dynamics is still particularly pertinent. Dolby (2001:114) emphasises that race "is not a necessary category of identity, but one that is created within and becomes salient because of particular historical, economic, and political forms". "Racial divides of apartheid are both absent and fiercely present" (ibid : 61).

There is the assumption that by changing the racial composition of the student population, transformation has been achieved. Ironically, increased access has in many respects intensified inequalities. Milner (2003 : 199) argues that race is “too complex and significant in teaching and learning to skim the surface of its potency”.

In many respects, South Africa has assumed a deracialised discourse since 1994. At a macro-level (at both government and university policy level) there is much discussion related particularly to policy and equity and certainly there is a consciousness of and reference to race in all university statistics. Structural initiatives at the macro-level may desegregate educational institutions but they do not necessarily deracialise them unless the complexities and specifics of race at the micro level, in the classroom and faculty are addressed. (Rosaen, 2003). At the day-to-day level there is minimum overt reference to race. In terms of the classroom, lecturers will attest: ‘we do not see race, simply students’, ‘everyone is treated the same’ and so on. Rather than take this at face value, we need to ask about the hidden (and not always hidden) effects that are often invisible in the rhetoric and overt practices. “Nonracialism in these cases translates into a denial of race and becomes part of the larger trend towards assimilation and stasis, instead of change and transformation” (Dolby 2001:28). Often ‘equal treatment for all’ involves unequal opportunities for learning when there is no acknowledgment of the varying experiences and assumptions in the class. An assumption of assimilation into the dominant white, middle-class norms underpins this discourse of non-racism (Kruss, 2001).

The university has registered a student body with multiple experiences and backgrounds. With this change, it is important to ask to what extent these new interactions and varying interests have challenged or changed the underlying ideologies and philosophies. To quote Sayed (2003:5):

All too often, social inclusion occurs in an effort to appear responsive to the need for change, without introducing any fundamental changes, and on the contrary, every effort to maintain the status quo.

Dolby (2001:18) emphasises that “race and difference must be engaged, analyzed, and challenged through ways that expose how and why they matter, as part of the work of defusing their power”.

Steele’s (1999) work with stereotype threat is particularly interesting and pertinent to our context. To what extent is the general ethos in the university, the faculty and the classroom contributing to an overriding anxiety amongst black students that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy? This is an area of research that needs careful attention and further development.

There needs to be recognition that while racial issues are no longer part of policy, there are multiple ways in which race is sanctioned and remains part of people’s day-to-day life experiences. These experiences and issues need to be acknowledged and engaged with. This does not simply mean cultivating tolerance, respect and harmony amongst students but requires an explicit unraveling of the dynamics that play themselves out in the students’ world and their context. This will mean a recognition of and response to those barriers that permeate the teaching and learning environment and impact upon curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, role models and the general ethos (Tator and Henry 1991).

Although the CADP does not stand in isolation and works within the context of the pervasive ethos, I believe that the CADP is attempting to provide a niche where stereotypes are mainly

not felt to apply and there is a spirit of trust and camaraderie that sustains students. Interviews with students elicit the following responses: “We have made genuine friendships across race and class in the programme. This wouldn’t have happened if we were not in the programme” (Student evaluations, June 2005).

Interestingly, class consciousness is an increasing phenomenon. There are very clear distinctions amongst students based on previous schooling, rural-urban context, language use and economic status that are emerging as a divide. Friendship and residence patterns at the university reveal these patterns. It seems that race barriers, more than class barriers, have been broken down in the programme.

## **The curriculum**

### ***Language***

In the CADP we are interested in understanding language in a variety of ways: acquisition of academic and language literacies, acknowledgment of and engagement with the wealth of linguistic capital in the class, varying conceptual frameworks that impact on writing and presentation styles, and ways in which students articulate their understandings and interpret various discourses and an acknowledgement of the privileging and pedagogical advantage of students who have English as their mother-tongue (Waghid, 2001).

A line from Adrienne Rich’s poem, ‘The Burning of Paper instead of Children’ (cited in Hooks 1994:167) provides a poignant framework for the CADP approach to language : “This is the oppressor’s language, yet I need it to talk to you”. There is an acknowledgement of the need to acquire the skills and use of English and academic discourse, but not at the expense of silencing or marginalizing diverse voices that speak in a variety of languages.

Students bring a wealth of linguistic capital with them. It is not uncommon for students to be competent and conversant in five to seven languages. In lectures and tutorials, we actively encourage students to discuss case studies, problem solve and engage in experiential learning, using the vernacular. There are many moments when concepts are more manageable when engaged with in the mother-tongue. Students will report back in English, but do not hesitate to use any language to enhance meaning or understanding. There are sufficient linguistic resources available in any class to interpret and explain. In this process, students’ identity is validated and they are empowered, knowing that they have a resource that the lecturer usually does not have.

### ***The teaching and learning environment***

Commerce teaching is particularly vulnerable to technical, positivistic orientations both in its reflection on and response to the need for vocational skills and the economic and instrumental power structures within society. The concentration on the relationship of education to economic development tends to accord to education a purely instrumental role (Badat, 1995). Pervasive ways of thinking about knowledge as a commodity works against an intuitive, reflective epistemology. It is easier for students’ poor performance to be attributed to varying socio-economic and educational deficiencies, rather than being viewed as a reflection of the teaching and learning environment. The large class sizes, the fact that the majority of the faculty staff are specialists in their field rather than educationalists and often lack teaching development and support, have all contributed to this culture.

Without promoting difference, it seems crucial that the teaching structure, the curriculum and the teaching and learning pedagogy and environment have both to accommodate and embrace the wide range of students.

In the CADP at first year level, lecturers in the programme are attempting to engage with a pedagogy where students are active participants and not passive consumers. What does this mean? At a pedagogical level, it means engaging students as “critical thinkers, participatory and active learners and envisioners of alternative possibilities of social reality” (Nagda, Gurin and Lopez 2003:67). In the learning environment this would involve understanding and responding to specific learning styles with the use of case studies, problem-solving scenarios, problem-based learning, simulations, experiential situations, group and collaborative work, scaffolding within and between courses, mediated texts providing support and direction, the use of various languages, fairly strong personal relationships, working diagnostically with knowledge and skills, formative evaluation, cross-disciplinary work, role play to engage varying perspectives, clear and explicit assessment criteria, honing the skills of task and question analysis, links with prior learning and context, the use of a variety of materials and texts and developing reflective capacity on learning. The permeable boundaries between the classroom and the broader context are continually shifted to enable students to reflect on their learning in relation to meaning and relevance.

Students in the CADP have a wealth of life and linguistic skills, often having negotiated insecure and hazardous environments. This has required an immense amount of skill, courage, and a whole variety of social and cultural resources to survive in difficult material conditions (Apple, 2001). There is extensive research showing that when students’ differences are viewed as resources to be respected and utilized, student achievement is enhanced. Teachers’ perceptions of students as potential achievers or failures will also impact on achievement. The CADP engages with the wealth of students’ linguistic and life experiences converting this into acknowledged cultural capital. Without romanticizing this notion, students’ varied experiences are viewed as a resource and there is a serious attempt to draw on students’ varying prior experiences, frames of reference, discourse patterns and skills in order to make the teaching and learning environment more meaningful and relevant (Rosaen, 2003). The programme is attempting to understand the varying conceptual ‘lenses’ that students bring with them to the classroom; how these schemata are formed and influence students’ understanding of new material and styles of learning. Moletsane (1999 : 38) places emphasis on “developing and validating different ways of seeing, thinking, speaking and creating knowledge and meaning”. Students arrive with a variety of differing worldviews and life experiences and they need to be taught with this in mind. Students use their existing knowledge, experiences and understandings to make sense of what is going on in their learning (Floden, 1991). What is important about diverse learners is what they perceive, and fail to perceive, to be relevant about a subject (Kennedy, 1991). This means that lecturers need to concern themselves not only with the subject matter, but with the students’ relationship to knowledge, the understandings and values they have constructed from their wide range of experiences (McDiarmid, 1991). This requires taking into account the experiences and perspectives that students bring with them from their environment so as to make links with and offer challenges to what they are likely to know and understand, and to confront ‘taken-for-granted’ assumptions (Floden, Buchmann and Schwillie, 1987 cited in McDiarmid, 1991). Apart from the pedagogical strengths of this, this engagement helps students feel that they are respected, that their own ideas and experiences may be of value to others and that they are capable of understanding new ideas and interrogating past notions (McDiarmid, 1991). Their own sense of identity is enriched by knowing that they are genuine

contributors in their learning environment. I believe that this is a key aspect that contributes to those learners who are seemingly from the most 'at risk' environments, coping with their academic demands and generally developing a range of their own potentials.

Engagement with students' particular contexts also contributes toward meaning and motivation. "If students do not perceive particular content, processes, or concepts to be relevant or meaningful to their own lives, they are not likely to strive to understand that material, let alone to master it" (Kennedy, 1991:280). If one draws on analogies, metaphors and examples that are understandable and meaningful to students, they are better able to engage with material.

The implications of this wide variety of understandings and experiences means that lecturers need to generate a wide repertoire of representations for any given idea, need to plan to take a broad range of experiences into account, be aware of ways in which learning might be difficult for students, never to make assumptions and to use a variety of methods to probe for understanding. It also means that lecturers need to be clear and specific regarding the framing of tasks or students will employ a variety of 'sense-making' strategies which could be inappropriate or distorted (Anderson, 1991).

This is not about 'celebrating diversity', but about using diversity to create learning opportunities; talking together in different voices; a real acknowledgement of engaging with multiple frames of reference, perspectives and understandings, as well as, an awareness of ways in which the hegemonic culture and dominant ethos 'silences'.

Providing feedback to students is a pedagogical activity which focuses on students being active participants in their learning process. Active learning, as well as, an emphasis on relevance to context and various courses, helps motivation so that learning begins to hold meaning, rather than being disconnected, boring subject matter. Regular reflection on knowledge and the learning process fosters a critical consciousness regarding students' learning. The regular evaluation and monitoring of courses and teaching styles gives students a voice in their learning process, as well as providing an opportunity for lecturers to engage with students' responses to the teaching and learning environment.

Any attempts at working respectfully with varying worldviews demands good relationships (Lazarus, 2004). There is a strong focus on nurturing relationships with the students, guiding learning experiences and making the classroom a space for critical thinking. Building on students' strengths and a variety of non-cognitive factors seems to play a critical role in being determinants of success. Students feel recognized, cared for and valued.

### ***Collaborative learning***

The programme reflects a Vygotskian influence insofar as acknowledging the primacy of the social and interactive aspects of learning and the importance of student experience. The Xhosa phrase: *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person because of his (sic) relationship with other people) encapsulates this sentiment. Nagda, Gurin and Lopez (2003:168) emphasise that "the processes of reflection and dialogue are central to the educational endeavour". While the lecturers will always retain more responsibility, they present the learning environment as one in which they and their students both generate and consume knowledge, with students becoming more active in their own learning and development. In the learning environment maximum use is made of working collaboratively with a wide range of experiences, viewpoints and backgrounds, so that these contributions

influence the classroom and become genuine resources. In this type of learning environment, the lecturer has a range of opportunities to learn about and engage with students' participation in and responses to various aspects of the course, as well as, rearticulating what students are not saying and making this more visible.

### ***Reflective teaching practice***

CADP lecturers have a rigorous and conscious engagement with examining teaching practice, engaging with students' formative evaluation, peer teaching and reflection and looking critically at the focus and direction of the programme. There is an acknowledgment of the need to develop a critical action research approach to practice, as well as, reflect on and analyse what is hidden behind appearances (Pym, 2002).

Structural change to promote critical, collaborative teacher reflection was initiated by the CADP with a forum known as the Commerce Education Group (CEG). This is now a faculty structure, which meets every two weeks. At this forum lecturers from the various departments in the faculty meet to present and discuss issues pertinent to the teaching and learning environment.

### **Conclusion**

The programme, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility and a reference point from which to move from the periphery to the centre and take transforming the barriers to learning to a deeper and more structural level in the faculty.

The programme is already moving into and working within the broader faculty in a variety of ways, including the training of tutors and lecturers and acting as a general 'watchdog' and providing student feedback to course convenors regarding mainstream courses. As CADP students actually spend more of their degree time in mainstream classes, the ethos and pedagogy of the mainstream will clearly have a fundamental influence on students' learning experience.

Teaching is often the least valued of an academics' professional tasks. The university needs to search for ways to facilitate continuing development; for incentive systems that encourage teachers to experiment in their own classrooms to extend their own teaching repertoires and for structures that enable teachers to learn more from their peers (Kennedy, 1991).

Finally, we need to ask how we can find more illuminating ways of talking and thinking about teaching and the learning environment and not being caught by short term visible outcomes, rather than the often invisible, deeper transformation processes. This means calling for a deep shift in the way we understand and respond to students, teaching, learning and development. This is a complex process that requires various simultaneous strategies at different levels that are aimed at people moving into new and often challenging terrain.

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