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Culturally responsive differentiated instruction: What lessons for economics lecturers in South Africa?

LOISE JEANNIN and EMMANUEL OJO

Introduction

“Africans in particular do not come to university to escape or erase their Africanness, but to confirm and articulate their roots.” Malegapuru W Makgoba (1997:77)

South Africa is a culturally rich, diverse country with 11 official languages and a history marked by the scars of an apartheid regime. Partly as a challenge to the past and its residue in the present, the #FeesMustFall movement which started in 2015 has evolved into a decolonisation debate. This debate about rethinking how university curriculums are taught, has continued within South African universities since then. There has been a strong call for Africanisation of knowledge, and various authors believe that this offers an opportunity to regenerate the content and the pedagogical approaches used in higher education (Maringe & Ojo, 2017; Steyn & Reygan, 2017). This chapter aligns with the decolonisation debate and aims to contribute to the regeneration and critical rebalancing of higher education teaching (Pitsoe & Dichaba, 2014; Ramoupi, 2011). Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) and differentiated instruction (DI) applied to the teaching of economics in South African universities are examined in this chapter. While CRT aims to accommodate diverse learners in a class, drawing on their cultural, linguistic, and academic diversity (Gay, 2002, 2010), DI enables students' access to different contents, learning activities, or assessments in the classroom (Heacox, 2012; Tomlinson, 2014). The chapter conceptually investigates how these two pedagogical approaches can be relevant for teaching economics and how they could contribute to making tertiary education more connected to the realities of life in South Africa.

Drawing on insights from relevant literature, the core question this chapter explores is: *How can CRT and DI be used to teach economics in a context-relevant manner in the South African higher education environment?* The question draws on the current debates concerning the Africanisation of what is taught at universities (Le Grange, 2016) and the reform of economics teaching (Peterson & McGoldrick, 2009). We voluntarily adopt a practical stance in addressing this question to meet economics lecturers' needs.

Literature review: Culturally relevant teaching (CRT) and differentiated instruction (DI)

This section presents insights from the literature focusing on the value of CRT and DI in the current South African context, especially in economics classes. It echoes the theoretical and conceptual presentation of CRT in Chapter 6 of this book. Focusing on a South African online university, Pitsoe and Dichaba (2014) advocate for the use of CRT to accommodate three generations of students (baby boomers, X- and Y-generations). Acknowledging the digital revolution, these authors recommended CRT as relevant in meeting the learning needs of diverse students across generational and cultural divides. CRT is presented as an emancipatory and transformative pedagogy to the extent that students' values and cultures are not only praised, but also used to teach students effectively (Bamber, Lewin & White, 2018; Pitsoe & Dichaba, 2014; Rector-Aranda, 2018).

Pedagogical responsive learning

Pitsoe and Dichaba (2014:1358) argue for “a pedagogy responsive to the learning, emotional and social needs of ethnically and linguistically diverse students with and without disabilities”. The authors encouraged lecturers to embrace students' diversity in co-constructing knowledge by applying CRT principles and drawing on the funds of knowledge as described by Moll et al. (1992). Culturally sensitive teachers are expected to embrace students' different perspectives and connect them with a wide spectrum of philosophies, theories, and methodologies used across different cultures (Pitsoe & Dichaba, 2014). Doing this, according to the authors, enables students to feel proud of their cultural heritage and value their own perspectives while developing their critical thinking skills, which are deemed crucial in economics classes. Invariably, the argument for CRT aims at cultural inclusion and academic excellence. This approach has been advocated in mathematics teaching and other disciplines (Aceves

& Orosco, 2014; Williams, Edwards, Kuhel & Lim, 2016) and we extend these recommendations to economics teaching in South Africa.

The way university economics has been taught, using a mainstream orthodox paradigm, has been strongly criticised – especially following the 2008 financial and economic crisis leading to changes in the economics curriculum (Abito et al., 2011; Shiller, 2010). In a qualitative study of university economics lecturers in large undergraduate classes in South Africa, Ojo (2016) reports that the majority lecturers wished to make their teaching more relevant to the socio-economic realities of students. Ojo (2016) recommends scaffolding students' learning by using real-life examples and textbooks that feature South African examples. In the same vein, Ojo and Jeannin (2016) argue for a revision of the economics curriculum to include a broader perspective of socio-economic relationships and to depart from the dominant use of mathematical models and neoclassical dogma.

As the socio-economic, environmental, and political contexts are entwined, Peterson and McGoldrick (2009) support the adoption of pluralism in teaching economics. By using multiple paradigms, lecturers can help students extract and critically analyse the complexity of socio-economic relationships and construct relevant meanings within the economic context of South Africa.

Relevance of CRT and DI in the South African context

CRT can be useful to economics teaching in South Africa as it draws on students' prior knowledge and initial understanding and experience of economic relationships. This is demonstrated in empirical South African research by Ojo (2016). The pedagogical approach encourages lecturers to use examples and case studies anchored in an African context or featuring African companies, as recommended by researchers in other parts of the world (Aceves & Orosco, 2014; Pimpa, 2009). CRT proposes that learning must be connected to students' socio-economic realities and business experiences, without totally dismissing Western or Anglo-Saxon world views. CRT rebalances the curriculum content to provide learning experiences and activities that develop students' skill sets and autonomy, while respecting and even nurturing their diverse perspectives and skills. For example, the experiences of university undergraduate economics students can be broadened by site visits to companies and by discussions with guest speakers from diverse socio-economic communities and backgrounds.

CRT encourages lecturers to be open to students' diverse ways of knowing and learning, and to consider their diversity of age, gender, experiences, and socio-economic as well as cultural backgrounds. It reflects the arguments of other scholars for respecting different epistemologies and learning preferences (see Crose, 2011; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007; Merriam et al., 2007; Ntseane, 2011). As such, DI can be beneficial as it offers students learning opportunities through a menu of activities, contents, and assessments. Economics lecturers can, for instance, allow students to choose between participating in a problem-solving group (with a final oral presentation) or writing an individual essay. In this case, students must know in advance that both activities will be fairly assessed on the basis of equivalent grading rubrics. Lecturers can present this menu of activities as an opportunity for students to develop their strengths, or alternatively, to start building new skills. As observed by Ojo (2016), lecturers pursue different objectives when teaching economics, and these objectives can be met through differentiated exercises.

By recognising everyone's connectedness as well as offering care and respect to individuals in the class environment, CRT abides by the South African principles of *ubuntu* (Waghid & Shanyanana, 2016). It encourages students and lecturers to learn from each other, value the richness of their diverse perspectives, and contribute to students' holistic development of the mind, the spirit, and the body (Merriam & Kim, 2011). When teachers make the classroom inclusive by inviting community members and diverse ethnic experiences, they contribute to positive social change and support authentic learning beyond fears, stereotypes, and misunderstandings.

CRT and DI for tertiary economics education: The theoretical nexus

CRT is a pedagogical approach that aims to truly accommodate students' diversity of learning needs and perspectives by welcoming different conceptions and ways of learning in the shared space of the classroom. The main contributors to the development of CRT are Gloria Ladson-Billings and Geneva Gay, whose theories are

reviewed below. CRT draws on a constructivist philosophical background in which knowledge is negotiated and grounded in people's history and experiences. The discipline of economics, as it is currently taught in higher education (in South Africa and beyond), remains theoretically driven (Ojo, Booth & Woollacott, 2018). CRT is suitable for studying economic relationships in that they cannot be separated from the wider scope of human and social behaviours in culturally shared contexts (Richards, Brown & Forde, 2007).

In the 1990s, drawing on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, Ladson-Billings began to conceptualise a culturally relevant pedagogy while working with African American communities. She states:

Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. (Ladson-Billings, 1995:160)

Ladson-Billings (1995) contends that all students should be able to achieve academically, while developing their cultural competence and their critical thinking skills with regard to society and culture. She shows that good teachers are all passionate about their roles and about giving back to society (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In addition to expecting high achievement from all learners, these teachers enjoy helping students to scaffold their learning from their personal base of knowledge and experiences. This invariably helps learners to engage in collaborative learning. Learners consider themselves part of the community and approach knowledge as constructed. Hence, Ladson-Billings (1995) encourages teachers to provide authentic learning activities while they remain open to students' learning interests and needs.

DI has been conceptualised and developed by various scholars (such as Heacox, 2012; Santamaría, 2009; Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2009; Tomlinson, 2014). It draws on the differentiation of content (degrees of knowledge complexity), process (different learning activities), and product (varying assessed outcomes) within a specific learning environment, to enable students to engage in meaningful learning activities. DI considers the diversity of learners' abilities, rhythms, readiness to learn, learning preferences, and interests (Borja, Soto & Sanchez, 2015). In their study of 25 graduate students, Santangelo and Tomlinson (2009:318) explain that:

Students strongly endorsed class-based activities and course assignments that allowed them to select topics and tasks that were at an appropriate level of complexity and that were personally relevant. These options increased motivation to put forth effort, enhanced understanding and internalization of the concepts, and created a desire to pursue additional, independent learning.

Enhancing economics teaching in South African universities

There is a dearth of literature concerning South African tertiary economics education. However, the few authors who have contributed to the debate agree that traditional approaches through 'chalk and talk' have dominated the economics classroom (Marire, 2018; Ojo, 2016; Ojo et al., 2018; Ojo & Jeannin, 2016; Schroenn Goebel, 2017). This traditional pedagogical approach and its theory-driven content with numerous mathematical models foreground the need to examine the value of CRT and DI to regenerate the South African way of teaching economics.

Within this context, and considering the diversity of the undergraduate student population in South Africa, what lessons can be drawn from the pedagogical practice of CRT and DI? To address this question, we offer a series of sub-questions to help economics lecturers think differently about their teaching, with reference to the wide literature on CRT and DI (see Gay, 2010; Pitsoe & Dichaba, 2014; Richards et al., 2007; The Education Alliance, 2006; Tomlinson, 2014). These questions aim to help lecturers to reflect on their teaching practices and consider the actions necessary to increase their classes' potential for inclusiveness and differentiation.

- *Are students affecting the content taught in economics classes and the assessment modalities?*

It is crucial to encourage students to co-construct economic knowledge that makes sense for them from an historical and socio-economic perspective (Gay, 2010). Lecturers can experiment with the negotiated syllabus (Harris, 2010) and encourage students to suggest topics of interest. As inspired by Santamaría (2009), instructors can also allow students to choose among different learning tasks, enabling them to develop different competencies, such as presentation or written skills.

- *Are students able to work on projects that are directly related to their lives or community?*

It is important to reconcile learning with students' real-life contexts in a given socio-economic context (Aceves & Orosco, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In addition to acknowledging the students' own fund of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), lecturers may use problem-solving teaching by asking students to identify a community/company issue, collect data (interviews and documents), and write a brief report that could contribute to economic and social change (Bridges & Hallinger, 1996).

- *Is collaboration encouraged, especially between culturally diverse students?*

Collaboration plays an important and integral role in knowledge creation and production, including that which occurs in the classroom. Collaboration offers the space for using academic activities as an opportunity for cross-fertilisation of ideas in a diverse, multicultural and multilingual South African classroom. Lecturers need to explain the importance of developing one's own intercultural sensitivity before suggesting that students work in assigned groups (embracing cultural, gender, and age diversity). In such an assignment, it is necessary to support students throughout the team project by emphasising the importance of constant communication to build trust and confidence, and to minimise misinterpretations. As proposed in Vygotsky's socio-cultural learning theory, students will learn more effectively from their knowledgeable peers if meaningful sharing is encouraged (Borja et al., 2015). In addition, instructors may ask students to write a brief report about their learning experiences. This raises self-awareness about their beliefs and reflects on their intercultural and collaborative experiences, as illustrated by Erez et al. (2013) in the online environment, and by Elliott and Reynolds (2014) in a face-to-face context.

- *Can students use a language other than English to collaborate?*

A socially just effort is required to acknowledge linguistic diversity within the classroom, enabling students to feel welcome in the academic sphere. Lecturers may enable students to use the languages they wish during group activities to facilitate peer work and support. By accommodating different languages in the classroom, instructors encourage students to embed their learning in their own language and knowledge base.

Conclusion

We have extended the discussion in Chapter 6 of this book by suggesting ways in which CRT and DI can improve economics teaching in South African universities. Specific examples are by offering a menu of learning activities, accommodating students' diverse perspectives, and using content that is relevant to the South African context. On this basis, we argue that these pedagogical methodologies make teaching more relevant for culturally and linguistically diverse students. Using CRT and DI, economics lecturers who are culturally sensitive and inclusive are given the opportunity to transform their pedagogy by enabling students engage in authentic and meaningful learning activities. In addition, this presents a space for lecturers to critically analyse their socio-economic environment, aligning their inclusivity with student's diversity. To avoid creating a gap between students' identity development and their academic success, the use of CRT and DI in the economics classroom is strengthened when teachers "consciously make connections to students' cultures, languages, and everyday experiences in order for students to experience academic achievement while preserving their cultural and linguistic identities" (Aceves & Orosco, 2014:22).

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