

Critical literacy, citizenship, and the value of education in contemporary South Africa

- by Angelo Fick



Angelo Fick is the Director of Research at ASRI. He taught at universities in South Africa and Europe for twenty years, in various fields from English literary studies and Sociology through philosophy of science. His work remains vested in critical race theory, feminism, post-structuralism, and postcolonial theory. He worked in broadcast television for almost half a decade, doing both production and research, as well as on air analysis of South Africa's postmillennial post-apartheid political economy. Though no longer employed as a full-time academic, he continues to present lectures on colonial discourse and postcolonial culture in South Africa at a university in Gauteng. Mostly he spends his days reading.

Abstract

Critically literate citizens are essential for sustaining and maintaining democratic institutions and the freedoms they engender. Education, therefore, should be conceived beyond mere utility, its value for industry. Human beings should be thought of as more than productive units, their complex lives reduced, their status defined as homo economicus. To this end it is crucial to imagine the function of educating young people differently, and to assess the success of education beyond pass rates, passing through school and higher education. To sustain democracy, the success of education should also be reckoned by the longer-term positive outcomes, which include but are not limited to giving citizens of a democratic society the means to make their lives differently and with greater freedom, not just in service of economic goals and outcomes, and beyond individual profit towards the larger goal.

Edward Said, one of the leading intellectuals and educationists of the twentieth century, once compared the failures of the education systems in authoritarian societies across the Middle East with the education system of the United States of America, including the elite and much respected Columbia University where he had long been employed as a professor teaching Comparative Literature. The democratic US and Columbia did not necessarily come off better than the much less resourced and oppressed millions in Middle Eastern autocracies. Said suggested that

an imprecise, not very concrete hold on language and reality produces a more easily governable, accepting citizen, who has become not a participant in the society but an always hungry consumer. Literate, critical education has an extraordinarily important role to play in providing the instrument of resistance to this and, it must be said plainly, in providing a means of self-defense. Otherwise the picture of billions of people whose volition has been pacified and whose consciousness and will have been usurped is a truly frightening one.

Much continues to be made about academic achievement as pass rates, high marks, or such constructions as distinctions, either by individuals or by organisations laying claim to and taking credit for those individuals' achievements. We see this when the Minister of Basic Education announces the national school leaving examinations results every year; it is treated as an elaborate bingo game, with provincial, district, and school officials crowing at their outcomes as being superior to others, if not by outright comparison, then by subtle implication. This is a fundamental misreading and perversion of education; its purposes are not mere competition between individuals or groups for top marks or for top results, after all.

All good teachers know that the purpose of education is not to produce only super-stars – and which of us remembers or can even tell what the 'top matriculant' in 1997 is now doing, or where the top achiever in the school we work in currently finds herself? The purpose of the education system, in the broadest sense, is to prepare young people for adult life in the society they will inherit from us, and to give them the tools to be able to make life better, for themselves, certainly, but also across the board. After all, a truly liberated and liberating vision of a politically and socially successful future requires us to remember that it is all of us together or none of us at all.

Excellence is a current buzzword, following on from 'quality', which was its predecessor in the last decade. This is often reduced to the usual 'quantifiables' (sic) – pass rates, numbers of distinctions, numbers of university exemptions, numbers of university entrants, and back through pass rates, etc. I would argue that this is a very limited and limiting conception of excellence. It focuses on individual achievement, whether by specific pupils, or by specific organisations. It suggests that as long as we have exceptions, we do not have to pay too much attention to what counts as the rule.

Good teachers know that the majority of their students are not going to be in the top percentile of academic achievers, and so the purpose of teaching cannot be simply to get young people to 'pass well', or to achieve inside the 'quantifiables' I mentioned earlier. Success is defined differently for different students, based on a variety of factors. In a disturbingly economically unequal society, the achievement of distinctions and exemptions do not automatically lead to access to the doors of the organisations which those 'keys' are supposed to open. The doors of learning and culture are far from open, and in some senses, for many, remain firmly shut.

Preparing our young people for the future therefore, inside the educational processes, must also prepare them with the tools to build up the resilience for the world they will inherit from us. As such, academic over-achievement, important as it is, cannot be the sole criterion, or even the primary measure by which we judge our success as educators. After all, we do not only teach the top 10% in the class, and often it is more affirming to judge oneself by the progress made by those who do not achieve in those ranks. But that requires of us to look to that which cannot be quantified, those shifts and changes which the system does not account for, and does not reward teachers for producing. And again, all good teachers recognise those hidden benefits and consequences of a good education which cannot be accounted for on spreadsheets and in sweeping reports up the hierarchy of management and authority. They also know that some consequences will not be seen in the classroom, or even during a pupil's school years.

Such shifts often could be taking a student who has had learning difficulties or a history of under-achieving because of socio-economic 'deficits' into a space where they can pass courses rather than fail them, build up confidence in their ability to learn, and gain the skills to become what in cliché has become 'a lifelong learner'. Key to this is not to teach only towards and in light of the standardised assessments, but also to build relationships with young people that affirm their humanity, centre their learning in the process of education, rather than have their learning secondary to their achievement in our assessments. And some changes we are not even aware of: think of that the next time you collect your car from mechanical service, or have a script filled at a pharmacy, or watch an overworked and underpaid nurse pay gentle and caring attention to your elderly relative passing from life. Those people were pupils once, and someone taught them the lessons of care and kindness, imparted skills and capacities, from which we all benefit. Think about the teachers who impacted positively in your life, and of lessons which only 'clicked' years, sometimes decades, later.

A humanist and humane vision is therefore central to any good teacher's praxis. This requires of us to not only teach the particular subject matter in ways which affirm the significance of the skills for the intellectual development of young people. It is the 'invisible curriculum' which also teaches young people much about what is and what is not valued in the world. Toni Morrison, the Nobel Laureate, has spoken eloquently about this in an address

to university students in Minnesota a decade ago; she spoke of how values are taught in education, precisely by signalling to those who come to learn what those who come to teach prioritise in the human experience.

As such, an over-emphasis on academic achievement to the exclusion of a larger understanding of the role of such achievement in transforming society would not make for 'excellent education'. Technically proficient but inhumane populations do not make for a better world; think of the consequences of those education systems of totalitarian political regimes of the past, and the dehumanising effects on large numbers of people – the trains in Nazi Germany ran on time, the accounting systems of the Stalinist Soviet Union were beyond impressive, and as Noam Chomsky showed in his engagement with the United States of America's elite and elitist education system in the 1960s, it was the over-achieving class of that system which justified the horrors of imperial warfare in Indochina and across Southeast Asia in the 1950s and 1960s, the infamous backroom boys and girls.

Edward Said emphasised the need for critically literate education to avoid a dystopian nightmare world of millions of people enslaved to the exigencies of capital or of craven political regimes. He echoed others before him across the twentieth century. This is particularly important in societies like South Africa, with its spectacular and morally debasing economic inequality, its challenges of misogyny and the femicide it leads to, and racism. It is crucial everywhere else too, but here, given our history, it is important to teach young people to read the world and its politics more critically, and that includes taking more critical positions on those elected to govern us, and to be as critical of corporate entities and their power in our lives.

The ability to read is more than the sounding of the letters and the deduction of basic meaning from sentences. The Mexican poet Gabriel Zaid, in his assessment of literacy, suggested that most adults could be considered functionally literate, in that they could read for the basic information contained in a sentence, but could barely grasp the meaning of a paragraph, never mind convey their understanding of a whole book. The result of such tragedies, Toni Morrison noted, could be seen even in graduate students in the elite Ivy League graduate programmes in which she taught in the US. We have spent the last decade, in South Africa, barely surviving the consequences of a population which did not have the necessary critical tools to adequately engage either their elected officials to work for their benefit, or to hold those officials to account. The ubiquity of service delivery protests (both the peaceful and the violent ones) attests to some of this. But more importantly, so do the damning judgments against government officials in several cases at the Constitutional Court, from SASSA through to the Omar al-Bashir matter. We have strong institutions protecting our fundamental human rights, but we need stronger citizens that can engage even more powerfully on an every day basis to ensure their rights are respected, and that that which their elected officials owe them, is done. And a critical, literate education is key to working

towards achieving this vision which too many too often and too quickly dismiss as 'utopian'.

Therefore, essential to any education system is literacy, and not the basic kind that allows someone to read a contract and sign it, or to read a medicine insert pamphlet with some control. The critical literacy Said and others before him argue for, and which I suggest is central to citizenship in a successful democratic society, requires of young people to be able to 'read' their world, using all the skills and techniques they learned in disciplines like the sciences, mathematics, but also in their study of history and languages, to understand how power is exercised in the world, and how they can change that for the betterment of everyone's lives, not just their own. After all, any truly literate person who understands how things work on this blue marble spinning in this rather insignificant bit of the cosmos knows that it will be all of us together, or none of us at all.

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18 Walton Avenue, Auckland Park, Johannesburg, 2092
PO Box 2591, Houghton, 2041 - www.asri.org.za

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