

A reflection on “Trash, teaching and the city”

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This is a commentary on Carina Truys’s photo essay entitled “Trash, Teaching and the City: The ‘Big Hole Counter Narrative’ project and the ‘Urban Anthropology: Research Methods and Fieldwork’ Course at Sol Plaatje University.”

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Carina Truys provides us with a touching learning moment in “Trash, teaching and the city: the ‘Big Hole Counter Narrative’ project and the ‘Urban Anthropology: Research Methods and Fieldwork’ course at Sol Plaatje University.” The piece invokes sadness for the many missed opportunities to teach and learn in different ways when we are not open to trying out new approaches. However, the piece also invokes hope. In seeing the final exhibition, we can see that there are possibilities when we are being intentional. The newness of Sol Plaatje University provides an opportunity for a “clean slate” and a space to think and talk about new approaches to teaching anthropology in ways we have not had to before, and also allows Truys to think about how we can reimagine universities all together. In thinking about teaching anthropology, Truys places the body, movement and space into the centre of her teaching. Although her students are sometimes failed by language in articulating complex ideas in anthropology, she knows that they know, that their bodies know and their senses know from just being in the Kimberley space and that they engage with these ideas daily. This is a challenge I face in my teaching as an anthropology lecturer and my learning as a student in anthropology, and Truys expresses it perfectly in her teaching approach as seen through the photo essay.

Truys takes seriously that “learning is doing” and highlights that assessments as we know them complicate this. Feldenkrais’s (1972) work in the area of learning by movement suggests we need to feel, sharpen our powers of sensing, and allow ourselves time and attention, in order to learn effectively. And this is what leads to the tears and the song at the end of the exhibition, a moment where the students who get it really get it, and the audience gets it or feels a desire to get it. Regardless of the different stages that the people are at in terms of “getting” the counter narrative, the teaching moment has happened. The photo essay shows that Truys created a space for collective feeling, knowledge production, teaching and learning. This work is a true reflection of the following saying, cited in two versions by Gentry (1990): “I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand”; and “Tell me and I’ll forget. Show me and I’ll remember. Involve me and I’ll understand.” From Gentry we see that experiential learning — which is what I feel Carina Truys is doing at Sol Plaatje University — is a participative, interactive, applied process that involves the whole-person. There is value in involving the person as a whole in the process, and not basing the learning simply on posing questions and receiving answers. The course, as Truys reports, recognises power, process and pluralism, without “prioritising structure and theory, nor omitting it.” Instead, it takes the day-to-day seriously in learning, it stays expectant of what students can offer and what

Kimberley has to offer; and students are able to go off to mine for knowledge, both the knowledge that is already within them and that which exists on the streets of the town.

In Truys' piece and the video that accompanies it, we see student agency being given room to flourish and not bound by the strictures of "this is how we do things in anthropology," "this is how universities do things," or "this is how assessments should be." In the activities that students participate in, we see a relationship established between bodies and knowledge that can only be heard when we create spaces and opportunities to hear, and open ourselves up to hear. Truys creates a space that is accessible to students and to people outside the university, which provides an important attempt at community-engaged learning or, at the very least, context-based learning.

Using our bodies and movement in teaching and learning allows for us to make that which was visible, but made invisible, to become visible once more. In this manner, Truys' teaching process allowed students to unearth new narratives in Kimberley, such that they became the knowledgemakers. She thus asked the students "to listen for stories that were not sketched up in the Big Hole Tourism Centre; or to tell them from the view of present (or the future); and/or using other voices (while examining our own)."

In the narratives around the city that sparkles, diamonds are visible and so are the stories of the miners who dug them up. However, generally the focus is on the visibility of the sparkling diamonds, and that angle makes invisible the stories and struggles of the miners — an angle that the students pick up in the counter narrative. We know that "diamonds are forever" and great for engagement rings and beautiful jewellery and displays of opulence, but what the students elicit and embody is "the rage of Black men, exploited; people, disinherited." Truys' account opens up a conversation about things that we know of but continue to make invisible in our communities (including the academy as well): the so-called elephant(s) in the room that we feel overwhelmed by and ignore; the elephants we cannot afford to see and confront at this moment.

The students were able to make visible the invisible, make heard what is silent, articulate impressions with all their senses: they sang, danced, walked, felt and cried out. They also completed the tasks at hand and went home with stories to share — stories about power, agency, inequality, colonisation and many other concepts from anthropology — without having to sit only in lectures, deciphering complex and inaccessible readings (even though the stories are about their lives). Through Truys' embodied learning approach, the students were able to learn more about things that impact on their lives, in a way that was accessible to them. They were able to make invisible stories visible when allowed to speak in languages that made sense to them — song, dance, Setswana.

In the depth of my excitement about this project and Truys' approach to teaching and learning, I am also hearing a voice of "reason": one that says that it is not possible to reproduce such a teaching style in a room with 300 students, or that Sol Plaatje will only be able to sustain this for a while, as student numbers are still low. However, maybe responding to this approach to teaching and learning with concerns about size and capacity is not the most productive response; it threatens simply to shut down an important conversation that Truys wants us to engage in. I think this work challenges us to ignite the desire in us to teach differently, the aspiration to make teaching and learning accessible and the wish to genuinely include our students and see them as people who carry experience and knowledge. I am hopeful that the desire will make us willing and more intentional in coming up with solutions on how to do things differently. Ultimately, what Truys shows us is that, at a time when we are thinking about transforming the academy in various ways, we cannot insist on holding on to stagnant pedagogy.

References

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