

Rethinking the Teaching of Academic Literacy in the Context of Calls for Curriculum Decolonization in South Africa

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Abstract: This article explores the concept of decolonization and its implications for the teaching of academic literacy in the Unit for Academic Literacy at a South African university. It draws on existing literature on decolonizing knowledge in Africa and different models of curricula as well as on teaching and assessment practices in the Unit for Academic Literacy to provide a conceptual discussion on possibilities to rethink the teaching of academic literacy. The article acknowledges that the Unit for Academic Literacy has attempted to incorporate principles of curriculum transformation in the contents of its courses, teaching, and assessment practices, but these attempts are still not adequate. This article therefore argues that since the demographics of South African universities continue to shift rapidly toward a black majority, the design, teaching, and assessment of academic literacy should be more responsive to the epistemic injustice in South African higher education. To do this, the article proposes that the Unit for Academic Literacy should open up more space for epistemic plurality, which allows for the representation of African ways of being, knowing and doing embodied in its growing population of African students.

Keywords: Academic Literacy, Curriculum Decolonization, South Africa

Introduction

Curricula that are applied in academic literacy modules are supported by the philosophies, theories, and ideologies of those agents who facilitate them. These agents include curriculum designers, lecturers, institutional management, and even policymakers in education. In an educational context, a curriculum is a living document that draws on the powers, agency, and culture of those who implement it. These agents often intersect and influence the contents of university curricula and pedagogical approaches. In the context of South Africa, they play a key role in ensuring that hegemonic epistemologies associated with colonialism and apartheid remain at the center of teaching and learning (De Sousa Santos 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, 2018).

This article draws on existing literature and a curriculum transformation workshop held in the Unit for Academic Literacy (UAL) at a South African university to reflect on academic literacy teaching and assessment approaches in a transforming South African higher education sector. The article acknowledges that the UAL has attempted to incorporate principles of curriculum transformation in the contents of its modules as well as teaching and assessment practices, but these attempts are still not adequate. This article therefore argues that since the demographics of South African universities continue to shift rapidly towards a black majority, the design, teaching, and assessment of academic literacy should be more responsive to the epistemic injustice in South African higher education. To do this, it proposes that the UAL should open more spaces for epistemic plurality, which allows for the representation of African ways of being, knowing, and doing embodied in its growing population of African students.

To conceptually discuss how the UAL can rethink the teaching of academic literacy, first, this article briefly explains models of curricula in Africa and justifies the need to decolonize

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South African university curricula. Second, it broadly conceptualizes academic literacy and the implications for the teaching of academic literacy in the context of curriculum decolonization. Finally, the article proposes ways to rethink and reformulate the design, teaching, and assessment of academic literacy in the UAL.

Models of Curricula in Africa

The African higher education sector has been the experimental ground for various curricula models. These models include African knowledge systems, referred to here as pre-colonial curricula, as well as colonial and apartheid curricula. As explained in the following sections, colonial and apartheid curricula were designed to desecrate and devalue “African creativity, agency and value systems” (Nyamnjoh 2016, 71). They also sought to defend and promote colonial and apartheid ideologies across the African continent (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Nyamnjoh 2016).

Pre-Colonial Curricula in Africa

During Africa’s pre-colonial era, the primary purpose of educational and curricula practices was to further the survival of kin groups and the extended community (Ayittey 2006, 43). Curricula modes of educating children and older generations were conducted within the philosophical paradigm of ubuntu. Social values that underpin the ubuntu philosophy include group solidarity, compassion, respect, human dignity and humanistic orientation (Ayittey 2006, 43). Ayittey (2006, 43) states that when applied towards implementing educational practices, to Africans, ubuntu was “viewed as the basis for a morality of cooperation, compassion, community spiritedness, and concern for the interests of the collective.” Le Grange (2015, 9) expresses the foundational sentiment of ubuntu as an active force that “celebrate[s] the oneness of mind and body and the oneness of humans and the more than human world.” In isiXhosa, a southern African language, the philosophy of ubuntu is expressed in the following phrase: “a person is a person through others” (Mupedziswa, Rankopo, and Mwansa 2019). Although the ideology of ubuntu is very popular in post-apartheid South Africa, it has been practiced throughout Africa for centuries. Mupedziswa, Rankopo, and Mwansa (2019) remind us that in the Congo region, the philosophy is known as *bomoto*, in Angola as *gimuntu*, in Botswana as *botho*, in Malawi as *umunthu*, in Mozambique as *vumuntu*, and in Zimbabwe as *ubuthosi*. Further north, in Uganda, the names *umuntu* and *obuntu* are applied (Mupedziswa, Rankopo, and Mwansa 2019).

African community members were instructed about the ways of survival within age groups and by family members, craft guilds or secret societies (Ayittey 2006, 58). The curriculum instructed community members in methods of blacksmithing, goldsmithing, medicinal healing, pottery, basketry and trading of commodities (Ayittey 2006, 58). In addition to actual, hands-on practices, epistemic values behind these were transmitted via multiple curricula modes. These included storytelling, mental arithmetic, community songs, dances and learning the names of local animals and vegetation (Ayittey 2006, 58). Sharing of and reciting community proverbs was also utilized to further inculcate in youth and community members those values which associated with respect for communal cooperation (Ayittey 2006, 58). While it is unrealistic to expect a complete return to pre-colonial curriculum models, it is necessary to revisit those principles that underpinned African modes of instruction and are still relevant today. For example, ubuntu is still vital in that it reminds curricula planners of the agency, traditions, and cultures of Africa that should feature in their modules of instruction. In so doing, the curricula should aim to generate a social order that is just and based on principles of egalitarianism, inclusivity, and cultural awareness.

Colonial-Era Curricula

The central aim of curricula developed during the colonial era was to reinforce socioeconomic relations between Africans and their colonizers, which advanced the imperial project. Jansen (1990) argues that curriculum models, introduced primarily by missionary societies, were “slave education,” which trapped and inhibited the development of African people (Ball 1983). Curricula content and the methods applied by colonial and missionary agents were directed toward developing communicative aptitude and skills to enhance Europe’s clutch on the continent’s natural resources. For this reason, Africans were instructed in European languages to carry out administrative roles in the colonies (Kumalo 2018, 4). The effect of imposing European languages on Africans through curricula structures was a “denial of indigenous epistemic frameworks” (Kumalo 2018, 4). Colonial and missionary curricula were not only aimed at introducing Africans to Christianity and European languages. Ball (1983) stresses that as a form of indenturing Africans, students were taught vocational skills that were needed by the colonial regimes. These skills included practices associated with carpentry and masonry, hospital dressers, and teachers. Schools would not receive grants if they were not technical in nature (Ball 1983). It should be noted that, while they are in the minority, some schools, such as those introduced by the Basel Missionaries, aimed to introduce trading and agricultural practices into their curricula; however, the overarching aim of curricula modes introduced during the colonial era was to further the interests of missionaries, settlers, and colonial authorities (Ball 1983, 241). In establishing these pedagogic outcomes, “the only group...which did not find its needs and interests being served were the Africans themselves” (Ball 1983, 241).

Apartheid-Era Curricula

In drawing on the colonial ideology that Africans are uncultured and incapable of managing their relationships with each other and the natural environment, the apartheid government sought to systemically formalize racial inequality through its curriculum projects (Blamires 1955; Christie and Collins 1982; Mahlalela-Thusi and Heugh 2002). Christie and Collins (1982) argue that the curriculum applied towards instruction of black students was designed to maintain their status as “working class” citizens. Students were prepared to fulfill “menial” roles in society—such as gardeners and domestic workers—and were a cheap source of labor for the apartheid economy (Moore 2016, 51; Thobejane 2013). Instead of being engaged in critical thinking, analytical processes, and deep introspection, as expected of curricular experiences, African students were educated to embrace principles such as punctuality, submissiveness, and diligence, which were desired by the apartheid economy. To enforce these principles, the Minister of Native Affairs and the architect of the Bantu Education Act Hendrik Verwoerd discouraged the instruction of mathematics, history, and science in township or rural schools (Giliomee 2012, 72). During the Bantu Education era, indigenous African languages were excluded from the classroom (Giliomee 2012, 69). This is because African culture was seen as inferior and a hindrance toward the curricula aim of developing citizens whose primary purpose was to provide cheap sources of labor. When Bantu Education is reconsidered through a decolonial framework, it is evident the apartheid government applied curricula that uses culture, including language, to reinforce class and power relations. Bantu Education was destructive in its constraining of African communities, and its effects can still be seen in the current era.

The Need to Decolonize South African University Curricula

Despite years of armed struggle to end Western imperialism in Africa, the postcolony is still written about “as a problematic terrain of emptiness, illusions, myths, and shadows of being free and decolonized” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, 13). While some critics interpret this as Afro-pessimism, the Western epistemic domination in African universities tells us that the postcolony has yet to disentangle itself as an uncircumcised appendage of the West. It is well known that what we call African universities are in fact European universities in Africa (see Angu 2018; Asante 2007; Grosfoguel 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, 2018; Nyamnjoh 2012, 2016). The foregoing sections are therefore arguing that “the production, positioning and consumption of knowledge is far from a neutral, objective and disinterested process. It is socially and politically mediated by hierarchies of humanity and human agency imposed by particular relations of power” (Bourdieu 2004, 18–21). Therefore, the presence of Western epistemologies in African universities perpetuates one of the colonial myths that epistemologies from inferior humans of the South are subaltern knowledge systems (Grosfoguel 2011; Mayaba, Ralarala, and Angu 2018; Nyamnjoh 2012). Despite epistemological diversity in the world, proponents of colonized curricula argue that Africans are incomplete without the West, and therefore they have no agency of their own. Here, African students are still expected to continue imagining Europe as the center of gravity and to promote Western epistemic hegemony. African university curricula reconstitute a sense of inadequacy and epistemological entrapment in African students, which often results in the appropriation of Western epistemologies as superior, pure, and uncontested knowledge systems. In so doing, they inadvertently devalue “African creativity, agency and value systems” (Nyamnjoh 2012, 129). The global geopolitical shifts today tell us that “Europe is no longer the centre of gravity of the world” (Mbembe 2017, 1), but why are African universities still fixated with epistemologies of the Global North?

Since Europe is now a province of the world like any other continent, we need “to confront the problem of overrepresentation of European thought in knowledge, social theory and education or to de-Europeanize the world” in African curricula (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 4). The decolonial project is therefore an attempt to deprovincialize Africa and “build understandings [about Africa] that both cross geopolitical locations and colonial differences, and contest the totalizing claims and political epistemic violence of modernity” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 1; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). However, the clarion calls for the promotion of epistemologies of the South is not a “philistine rejection of Western-derived knowledge and argumentation” (Prah 2017, 226). Rather they are a deliberate attempt to rectify centuries of cognitive injustice that has allowed Europe to distort and misrepresent the social experiences of the people of the Global South. Here, to decolonize is to create spaces for discursive and autonomous debates “that will no longer be a far-flung appendix to European debates but which will directly pit African philosophers against one another” (Hountondji 2002, 104). For this to happen, “we must construct knowledge which speaks to our cultural and linguistic distinctions” and does not force African students to continue thinking only through the lenses of the West (De Sousa Santos 2016; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Prah 2017; Nyamnjoh 2012).

To challenge the coloniality of knowledge in African universities is to open up unrestricted spaces for “African people to think, theorize, interpret the world and write from where they are located, unencumbered by Eurocentrism” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 1; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). This means restating and defending the case that “Africans always had their own valid, legitimate and useful knowledge systems and education systems” before colonialism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 2). For Ndlovu-Gatsheni and like-minded scholars, Africans have never been intellectually subordinate to Europeans and curriculum decolonization is about subverting the subalternization of African knowledge systems, which reduces Africans to objects on the fringes of Europe (Asante 2007; Hountondji 2002). The #Rhodesmustfall and #feesmustfall student protests in the South African higher-education sector in 2015, 2016, and part of 2017 were calls for the

dismantling of imperial reasoning embedded in South African university curricula, which, in the eyes of the students, has only one purpose—to categorize Africans as sub-humans without any knowledge (Angu 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). For them, curriculum decolonization is a form of social justice against epistemic imbalances in favor of the Global North. It is the reconstitution of university curricula not only to promote plurality of knowledge, but also to reposition African knowledge systems at the center of research and scholarship in South African universities. This engenders a critical shift in the way that knowledge is accessed, constructed, and shared in university faculties, departments, disciplines, and programs. The teaching of academic literacy in diverse South African universities should not marginalize African students in their own stories but rather allow them to think from an African epistemological and ontological perspective to dispel the myth of Western superiority of knowing and doing. We are therefore arguing in this article that “to educate in postcolonial Africa in the twenty-first century without making visible the dignity, creativity and humanity of Africans, is to perpetuate Joseph Conrad’s imagery of Africa as heart of darkness” (Nyamnjoh 2012, 130).

Broader Conceptualization of Academic Literacy

The three main conceptualizations of academic literacy as distinguished by researchers in this field, nationally and internationally, are the study skills, academic socialization, and academic literacies approaches (Clarence and McKenna 2017; Jacobs 2010; Lea and Street 1998). The study skills approach perceives academic literacy as a set of skills to be taught and acquired by students. With this approach, academic literacy is usually taught as a generic, add-on module, with the assumption that students will transfer the skills onto their subject areas. This approach perceives students in a deficit way, and teaching is aimed at correcting these errors. Jacobs (2010, 1) explains that this approach usually focuses on correcting students’ grammar and other language errors and argues that conflating language with academic literacy is a flawed approach. Clarence and McKenna (2017, 39) explain that the study skills approach focuses on “correcting students’ deficient writing, usually using methods to teach essay writing as a kind of formula (for example, the structure: introduction, three to five paragraphs of main text, conclusion, references.” Although the teaching technique is not necessarily wrong, perceiving academic literacy in this perspective only is inadequate.

The second approach, which is referred to as *academic socialization*, perceives academic literacy as integrated into the disciplines and is aimed at making explicit the knowledge required in the content subjects (Clarence and McKenna 2017; Jacobs 2010; Lea and Street 1998). Academic literacy is embedded in the disciplines and aims to assist students to make meaning of texts in their subject fields. According to Clarence and McKenna (2017, 39), it subsumes the first approach and aims to make students aware of the rules and conventions of their subject field—in other words, “students are shown the ‘rules of the game’ that they are expected to play by, and are not assumed to be deficient if they cannot yet play by them.”

The third is the academic literacies approach, which subsumes the other two. With this approach, literacies in the disciplines are multiple, contested, socially constructed, and transformative. According to Lillis et al. (2015, 6), the phrase *academic literacies* is used “to signal a critical and social practice perspective on writing and reading in the academy.”

Although the academic literacies approach is hailed as the most dynamic and the ideal to work toward (Clarence and McKenna 2017; Jacobs 2010), many researchers agree that it is not the most dominant in South Africa and Africa or even in other parts of the world. In many higher-education institutions, the study skills and academic socialization approaches are predominantly used (Boughey and McKenna 2015; Lillis et al. 2015; Mitchell 2010). For instance, in South African institutions, the academic literacy support given to students ranges from writing courses where lecturers teach students disciplinary literacies to academic literacy courses that are embedded within content subjects “to stand-alone courses that teach students ‘study skills’ and essay-writing practices that are only loosely connected to the disciplines in

which students need to use them” (Boughey and McKenna 2015, 40; Clarence and McKenna 2017). The academic literacies approach does not seem to feature. In emphasizing the predominant use of the study skills approach, Clarence and McKenna (2017, 40) state that when academic literacy “practitioners work with students, especially, they are often talking to them about the ‘rules’ or conventions of their discipline, and attempting to make these clearer so that students can come to know, and more successfully show that they know.”

Many studies on the teaching of academic literacy point out that it may be approached in several ways; however, Lillis et al. (2015, 6) advocate for an academic literacies approach, a critical approach to teaching that has “the role and potential for individual meaning-making and academic knowledge construction in higher education.” In this critical approach, they include socially situated accounts of writing and text production, the ways in which power and identity are inscribed in literary practices, and the need to explore possibilities for adopting transformative approaches to academic writing. The principles underlying academic literacies were designed to both recognize and value diversity and the language practices that students bring with them to university; however, it seems this advocacy has only been observed in theory in many higher-education institutions nationally and internationally. The current teaching approach is still largely skills based, and there is little if any emphasis on the transformative aspect of academic literacy (Lea and Street 1998; Jacobs 2010; Lillis et al. 2015).

Despite the merits of the transformative approach to teaching academic literacy in a multicultural context like South Africa, academic literacy is often “construed as teaching conventions (as if these were uncontested) and students were to adopt them and use them instead of critically engaging with them” (Lillis et al. 2015, 7). As academic literacy lecturers, we tend to adopt either the study skills or academic socialization, often neglecting the academic literacies approach (Boakye 2018; Clarence and McKenna 2017; Lillis et al. 2015; Pineteh 2014). But for Lillis et al (2015, 7), the academic literacies model is “best able to take account of the nature of student writing in relation to institutional practices, power relations, and identities”. It therefore provides a more transformative way of meaning-making that the other two models failed to provide (Lillis et al. 2015). Yet the transformative approach to academic literacy, which upholds diversity and could project students’ identity and backgrounds in positive ways, has not been used in academic literacy classrooms. This approach could offer a critical stance to the teaching of academic literacy and allow students to see texts as contestations. More lamentable is the silence on decolonization in academic literacy curricula and pedagogy. For the students in South African institutions and in Africa as a whole, transformation in academic literacy curricula also includes decolonizing the predominantly Eurocentric curricula, including texts, which are alienating and exclusive.

Curriculum Decolonization and the Teaching of Academic Literacy.

Proponents of a decolonized curriculum in South African universities argue that Africans have their own ways of being, knowing, and doing that emerge from African cultural repertoires, histories and social experiences (Angu 2018; Mamdani 1996; Nyamnjoh 2012). But are lecturers of academic literacy opening spaces for African students to express these unique ways of being and doing? To be academically literate today presupposes understanding the different modes in which human beings transmit information or make meanings from messages (Pineteh 2014). In other words, we need to see academic literacy primarily as communication; ways to communicate include those from Africa, such as storytelling and oral performances. However, academic literacy teaching has tended to privilege the hegemony mode of communication in higher education, which is the formal written mode. What are we doing in our academic literacy modules to allow African students to communicate through the mediums or modes that they know best?

Research in South African higher education claims that new university entrants are not adequately prepared for higher education (Mdepa and Tshiwula 2012). It claims that students

lack the requisite skills to cope in a university environment, and one such skill is academic writing. Hence, the maxim in South African higher education today is that “students can’t write,” referring mainly to second-language speakers of English. This assumption or thinking has direct implications for the teaching of academic literacy in English-based universities. This stance explains the adoption of the study skills approach in the teaching of academic literacy. If we consider academic literacy as communication and/or social practice (see Boakye 2015; Lea 1999; Pineteh 2014), are we insinuating that non-native speakers of English cannot communicate? Note that one of the outcomes of colonial education is what Boaventura de Souza Santos (2016) calls “linguicides,” or the eradication of indigenous languages (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). This has given rise to the hegemony of English in teaching and learning and its use today as a barometer to test the cognitive ability of African students. In the context of academic literacy, students’ inability to communicate ideas eloquently in English is often perceived as cognitive deficiency. Here, the assessment of African students’ writings is reduced to the correction of cosmetic syntactic flaws, which are hardly indicative of comprehension of content (Lillis and Turner 2001; Pineteh 2014; Winch and Wells 1995). Are we therefore claiming that to be academically literate in South African universities is to be able to construct knowledge in English only? Why do academic literacy lecturers continue to expect African students to construct knowledge eloquently in English when their peers of different races are not expected to do the same in African languages? Lecturers are obliged to teach academic literacy in English because the university’s medium of instruction is English and because they have elevated the language to unattainable levels of supremacy in Africa. By not creating opportunities for African students to also read and write in their home languages, we are marginalizing African students’ linguistic right to study in the language of their culture as their European counterparts have done for centuries (Angu 2018; Prah 2017; Wa Thiong’o 1986). By doing so, “rights and customs of the indigenous are overridden by the coloniser, turning the colonised subject into an embodiment” (Mbembe 2015, 183–87). Teaching academic literacy solely in English “preserves the pre-eminence of the language of the colonizer, this way it persists in by-passing indigenous knowledge systems” (Prah 2017, 232). The epistemic diversity and the pluriversity of university curricula should be facilitated by linguistic diversity, especially in the way we teach academic literacy. In contrast, the promotion of African languages as academic languages has had minimal impact on the teaching of academic literacy in South African universities. As the calls for curriculum decolonization grow louder, how can academic literacy lecturers provide more opportunities for African students to use their home languages to construct knowledge?

Besides the language issue, the teaching of academic literacy in South African universities has tended to subscribe to the discipline-specific and generic models, or to Brian Street’s autonomous and ideological model (Lillis and Turner 2001; Street 1984), but these models are influenced by epistemologies of the West. Like other academic programs, African students are taught to read and write using Western theories even when they are writing about African experiences. For example, argumentation is still taught in academic literacy modules using models such as those of Toulmin, Giesler, and Kaufer, assuming that Africans have no modes of argumentation outside those from the West (see Kaufer and Giesler 1991; Kneupper 1978). But Africans have always read, written and argued in their communities before their modes of communication were repressed by the colonial project (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Nyamnjoh 2012; Wa Thiong’o 1986). To teach academic literacy to African students is to familiarize ourselves with reading and writing approaches that predate colonialism and forms of arguments outside those designed in the West. This means allowing African students to think and write in ways that are linked to their histories, cultures, and social experiences, even if they do so in English.

Rethinking the Teaching and Learning of Academic Literacy in the UAL

In this section, we examine four main areas (teaching practices, teaching materials, assessment, and language use) in which the UAL could possibly restructure its curriculum to extend its

decolonization initiatives. This will allow for a more holistic approach to the envisioned process of curriculum decolonization in the UAL. In addition, it will open spaces for students to bring their unique scholastic and lived social experiences to bear on their learning in lectures and assessments

Rethinking Teaching Practices in the UAL

While the UAL applies multiple methods of facilitating course content, only two teaching practices and associated assessments currently enable application of principles and values associated with a decolonized curriculum. One of these pedagogic modes is an online discussion board in which students participate. The other is a literacy narrative in which they have to write about the interplay between their personal identities and cultures and their disciplinary paths. Both modes of teaching and assessment enable and achieve similar outcomes. As the first assessment in an academic literacy module for science students, the discussion board advances decolonization of the curriculum by exposing students to the life journeys, experiences, aspirations, and epistemic modes that emerge from their peers and beyond their own normative frameworks.

As Jansen (2017) asserts, contemporary learning experiences in higher education should allow students to access diverse, specialist ideas or epistemological knowledge, which they and their peers bring to the classroom. Incorporating students' perspectives about culture, identity, and their pre-tertiary activities into written learning spaces also decenters Western epistemic dominance in the classroom. This is because the discussion board introduces students to a wide array of cultures, ways of doing and traditions, which they themselves embody and bring to the academic literacy setting. Whiteness, unlike in colonial and apartheid curricula, is not accepted as a model for how identity should be constructed (Hitchcock and Flint 2015). Instead, the varied cultural characteristics and African-ness that all students bring to the classrooms describe and redefine what it means to be a student in an African university. As new identities enter written spaces in the UAL via the discussion board, the marginalization of African agency is reduced, and Africanized pedagogy adopts a central place in the curricula (Angu 2018). While applying a discussion board was effective in exposing students to a multiplicity of epistemologies, only the academic literacy module for science students applied it as a writing platform and assessment tool. This pedagogical approach has not been applied across all the academic literacy modules in the UAL.

Decolonizing Teaching Materials in the UAL

Just as teaching practices need to be transformed to enable incorporation of African principles and customs into the classroom, so do study guides, course materials, and other inputs incorporated into UAL modules. Currently, there is minimal evidence of African modes of organization or epistemic practices—specifically, those pertaining to mainstream disciplines—in UAL study guides. The agency, histories, and cultures emerging from African people are not very visible in UAL workbooks. When the literacy narrative, mentioned above, is facilitated, students in some modules are introduced to African narratives as examples for how they may construct their own; however, students are not introduced to African history, practices, or epistemic modes, which are directly linked to processes valued by mainstream disciplines. For example, the module for science students makes no mention of indigenous medical practices, modes of agriculture, or argumentation. Furthermore, the UAL module for economics and management sciences students neglects to highlight how Africans previously engaged, and in some regions continue to engage, in trade and commerce in distinctly African modes. While the aim of such textual inclusion in the curriculum would not be to replace Western approaches to science or economics, it would reveal to students that for centuries before the advent of colonialism, Africans healed their own illnesses and conducted their financial affairs in ways

which were uniquely their own (Ayittey 2006). The effect and implication of this marginalization is that students experience an epistemically violent curriculum. For these reasons, Heleta (2016, 1) declares that Africa must “dismantle the epistemic violence and hegemony of Eurocentrism, completely rethink, reframe and reconstruct the curriculum and place South Africa, Southern Africa and Africa at the centre of teaching [and] learning.” A starting point for decolonizing study guides and materials in the UAL should therefore be pluralization of content by revealing to students alternative modes of knowing, thinking, and doing as emerging from the African continent (Gay 2010).

Ubuntu is an African philosophy that may aid in decolonizing both teaching practices and the dissemination of course materials in the UAL. Gade (2011) points out that the concept of ubuntu has been analyzed in writing by scholars since the 1800s. Known as *Hunhu* to Shona speakers in Zimbabwe, Ncube (2010, 78) states that ubuntu “forms the core of most traditional African cultures.” Its central values are “a spirit of caring and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness” (Ncube 2010, 78). Ubuntu, as an epistemic and methodological paradigm, is required to decolonize both teaching practices and course materials in the UAL. In the context of teaching practices, students and lecturers continue to operate according to Eurocentric and individualistic principles. Most assessments are individually conducted, and students advance their learning by “looking out for number one.” While teamwork is a valued approach to knowledge development, there is resistance from some lecturers and students to shift away from a predominantly individualist approach to learning. This tendency can be traced to the West’s emphasis on individual advancement. Harkness, Super, and Van Tijen (2000, 23) state that “the idea of a distinctive ‘Western mind’ as opposed to its non-Western counterpart is very close to the contrasting constructs of individualism or independence versus sociocentrism, collectivism, or interdependence.” Ubuntu, in contradistinction, values interdependence and collectivism.

If students could be introduced to this philosophy as an operational principle, then values of community, interdependence, and caring may be brought into the classroom. With the aid of lecturers, group work may be adopted less as an uncomfortable task, which compromises marks, and more as a collective task to develop knowledge for the community. When course materials are decolonized by reintroducing marginalized epistemologies to UAL modules, then the curriculum develops more humane and diverse characteristics. As Ncube (2010, 78) argues, ubuntu is about “understanding what it means to be connected to one another.” Applying solely Western pedagogic modes and denying students the opportunity to learn about African ways of doing and epistemic traditions cannot achieve the aim of fostering a community or harmony among UAL students.

Rethinking the Assessment of Students

To rethink, reformulate, and remodel the teaching of academic literacy in the UAL is also to reflect on assessments and assessment strategies. The previous sections have argued cogently that we cannot continue teaching in the same way given that university student demographics have changed significantly in all perspectives—race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, and so on (Angu 2018; Montenegro and Jankowski 2017). In the UAL, we are aware of these demographic shifts and that “individual differences are clearly important to student success” (Strange and Banning 2015, 61). But are we doing enough to ensure that assessments in our modules are responsive to these shifts? Before we attempt to respond to this question, we should remind ourselves that assessment is one of the drivers of curriculum change and, therefore, the transformative nature and effectiveness of teaching and learning are contingent on the quality of assessments—both formative and summative (Evans, Muijs, and Tomlinson 2015; Wanner and Palmer 2015).

As academic literacy lecturers, it is our responsibility to design an “assessment in a manner that takes into consideration the various needs of different student populations” (Montenegro and Jankowski 2017, 4). To decolonize assessments in the UAL is to design tasks that are culturally

responsive and allow students to draw on their myriad learning experiences and indigenous knowledge systems. In this context, assessments should be designed to promote fairness, diversity, equity, and social justice and not to “reinforce within students the false notion that they do not belong in higher education” and that their sociocultural experiences have no place in their academic journeys (Montenegro and Jankowski 2017, 5; Brock-Utne 2016). This means our assessments should equally strive to deconstruct “dominant pedagogical frames that promote only Western worldviews, to create experiences that extend inter-cultural understanding in the HE system and the ability to think and work using sensitive frames and methods” (Wanner and Palmer 2015, 355).

The UAL has made some significant strides in designing assessments that allow students to bring their cultural orientations and social experiences to bear on their learning in higher education (see Angu 2018; Boakye 2018; Carstens 2012; Carstens and Eybers 2018). For example, the use of students’ literacy narratives allows lecturers to access the worlds of their diverse students and attempt to understand how their cultural values, norms, social realities, and scholastic experiences have influenced their ability to read and write in higher education. This is because this academic writing assessment allows students to draw on aspects of their cultures, customs and learning experiences as they narrate their literacy development from preschool to university (Angu 2018; Brock-Utne 2016; Wanner and Palmer 2015). This singular example is relevant in the context of decolonizing the teaching of academic literacy because it gives lecturers the opportunity to understand and appreciate not only students’ academic competence, but also their cultural competence and their ability to reflect on their lived experiences in a new South Africa still marred by social inequalities (Angu 2018, Boakye 2018; Carstens and Eybers 2018; Montenegro and Jankowski 2017).

Apart from the literacy narrative assessment, most assessments in the UAL are still influenced by “institutionally embedded socio-historical norms of scientific rationality” (Lillis and Turner 2001, 65). The prevalent maxim that “our students can’t write” simply means their writings do not meet these institutional norms of academic writing. The problem with these universal norms is that they do not consider the diverse learning experiences of students and discipline-specific modes of academic writing. For example, UAL modules are not only supposed to be discipline-oriented and help students to construct knowledge within a specific discipline. They are also supposed to challenge and transform the minds of students. However, assessments are largely generic and subscribe to perceived universal norms of academic writing, often disregarding the academic writing specificities of the disciplines. Essay writing, for instance, is still the dominant mode of assessment, which reduces academic literacy to the acquisition of a set of generic skills that can be applied across disciplines (Lillis and Turner 2001; Pineteh 2014; Winch and Wells 1995; Street 1984). Here, students are expected to write argumentative essays not necessarily aligned with disciplinary conceptions of argumentation but with the Toulmin model because of the false assumption that students in higher education cannot be academically literate without strong argumentation skills as prescribed by this model (Kneupper 1978; Pineteh 2014; Winch and Wells 1995). This assessment genre is rooted in a Eurocentric conception of literacy even though we know that literacy practices vary from society to society and from discipline to discipline. We are therefore arguing in this section that assessment in the UAL should offer students choices that are disciplinary, socially and culturally relevant to the diversity of students because “the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being” (Street 1984, 2). In a decolonial context, assessments should be transformative and should prepare students to address their societal problems and not “focus on discrete knowledge and skills that are easy and cost-efficient to test” (Marope, Griffin, and Gallagher 2017, 23). Here, assessments should not only promote institutional agency but also enable students “to operate adeptly in the production and reproduction of life in the society and the circumstances surrounding” them, using indigenous knowledges embedded in their cultures and social realities (Prah 2017, 231).

The Language Question in the Decolonization of UAL Curricula

In terms of language, we advocate for the use of translanguaging as a pedagogical approach in the teaching of academic literacy, using the academic literacies approach that welcomes diversity and is open to critiquing and seeing texts as contestations of power, hegemony, and predominant world views. Translanguaging is broadly defined as a pedagogical strategy for using more than one language simultaneously. It has been described as one of the current approaches to resolving reading literacy among multilingual readers (Creese and Blackledge 2010; García 2009; Makalela 2014a). According to Li (2018), a Welsh scholar named Williams coined the term *translanguaging* in 1994 to refer to the planned, systematic use of two languages for both teaching and learning. Translanguaging refers to a pedagogical practice that deliberately switches the language mode of input and output in bilingual classrooms. Baker (2011) elaborates on translanguaging as the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, and gaining understanding and knowledge using two or more languages by multilinguals. Meaning-making may therefore involve the use of two languages (TL and HL) in concept formation. Makalela (2014b) defines translanguaging as a pedagogical practice in which students are required to alternate languages for reading, writing, and acquiring knowledge. He argues that this practice promotes social justice and equity.

Although the University of Pretoria has a monolingual policy, using English as the sole language of teaching, it also embraces multilingualism (University of Pretoria 2016). The Department of Higher Education, in its policy document on higher education, also strongly advocates for multilingualism (DHET 2018). Thus, considering the policy documents of the government and of most tertiary institutions, we advocate for the use of other languages in academic literacy classrooms. In other words, indigenous languages could be used, initially as a resource for meaning-making and later for more academic roles such as assessment and reading materials or texts. This approach acknowledges other African languages, valorizes students' various identities and backgrounds, provides social justice (Makalela 2014b), and ensures that what students bring to the classroom is harnessed for learning and teaching, rather than their viewing learning only from a Eurocentric point of view. The UAL has started on the right footing, but we do not have to stop here. Currently, the Unit works with students' literacy narratives and uses stories from other academics to project 'African-ness', but there is still a lot of room for improvement.

Conclusion

The experiences of South African students since the demise of apartheid have been ones of unequal encounters with hegemonic epistemologies of the West (Angu 2018; Nyamnjoh 2012, 2016). These unequal encounters exemplify how Western scholars have monopolized the production of knowledge globally, suggesting that the authority of knowledge still rests with them (Grosfoguel 2011; Nyamnjoh 2016). It is not surprising that Afrocentric thinkers like Molefi Kete Asante have strongly criticized the absence of African universities in Africa and the presence of European and American universities in Africa. Despite the noises, populism, and opportunism that dominated the nationwide student protests in South Africa from 2015 to 2017, there is still a pressing need to divest "the content of education of the inherited Western vestment" (Prah 2017, 226). Some of the noises and populist renditions in the protests seemed to represent curriculum decolonization as a "Eurocentric anathema" if what is taught and assessed in South African universities is not radically African in its totality (Prah 2017, 226). In this article, we try to avoid this trap by subscribing to Prah's (2017, 226) contention that "the decolonization of knowledge and education does not and should not mean a philistine rejection of Western-derived knowledge and argumentation."

The article therefore does not propose that the UAL should exclude other forms of knowledge that do not "qualify" as African. Rather, it is recommending that the design, teaching,

and assessment of academic literacy in this unit should be responsive to the needs and aspirations of its diverse students. They should allow students to bring their cultural, linguistic and social as well as scholastic experiences to bear on their learning in higher education. The teaching and assessment of academic literacy should also prepare students to be socially and ethically responsible citizens who can actively participate in addressing the social problems in their communities using the knowledge acquired at university (Angu 2018; Prah 2017). Lecturers and curriculum designers in this field should teach to disrupt the notion that the “one sole epistemic tradition” for the teaching of academic literacy is that which is from the West (Grosfoguel 2007, 212).

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