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The textbook as conversational partner

Undergraduate teaching in psychology relies heavily on textbooks. Once the textbook has been selected, lecturers tend to relax. Modern textbooks include ready-made slides and test banks. All the information the student needs to know is thus packaged, illustrated, colourful and ready. This article questions whether learning is a mere transfer of the contents of the textbook to the student's mind. It would be more benefical if academics could view knowledge and learning from a postmodern, social constructionist perspective. This would imply a view of learning as a conversation rather than a linear process. This article proposes to take the 'text' out of the textbook and to engage with it together with other texts such as tests, class material and conversations in a larger context.

Die handboek as gespreksgenoot

Voorgraadse sielkunde-onderrig leun swaar op handboeke. Sodra die handboek voorgeskryf is, is dosente geneig om te ontspan. Moderne handboeke sluit klaargemaakte dia's sowel as klaargemaakte toetsitembanke in. Al die inligting wat die student moet ken is dus verpak, geïllustreer, kleurvol en gereed. Hierdie artikel bevraagteken egter of die leerproses slegs bestaan uit die oordrag van inligting uit die handboek na die student se verstand. Dit mag meer nuttig wees indien akademici die leerproses beskou vanuit 'n postmoderne, sosiaal konstruktivistiese oogpunt. Dit impliseer dat leer as 'n gesprek eerder as 'n liniêre proses beskou word. Die artikel stel voor dat die handboek as teks tesame met ander tekste soos toetse, klasmateriaal en gesprekke, binne 'n groter konteks, gebruik word.

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Τhis article aims to stimulate reflective thinking concerning the role of prescribed textbooks in psychology education at tertiary level, with the focus on current shifts in South African learning contexts:

> Our educational system is traditional and backward-looking, and it produces students who cannot deal with change. A curriculum which trains students in the processes of learning, recognizing that the critical content of any learning experience is the method or process through which the learning occurs, must be student-centred, question-centred, and language-centred: it must consist of relevant questions (selected by the students as worth knowing the answers to) which will help students to develop and internalize concepts which are appropriate to reality; it must take place in a questioning, meaning-making atmosphere in which students 'learn by doing' how to be a successful learner and in which the teacher serves as a guide; and it must include a study of the new media language and of the relationships of language to reality so that the student can develop standards by which he [*sic*] can judge the value of perception (Postman & Weingarter 1969: *s p*).

These words, written as early as 1969, warn that a world of change demands new skills from learners. Teachers/lecturers of psychology must reflect on whether they meet these requirements, and consider how textbooks play a role into such a learning context, now that change occurs more rapidly.

A social constructionist view of teaching in conjunction with textbooks as conversational partners allows teachers/lecturers to reflect on their own teaching in a far more interactive way with students as proactive participants in a three-way dialogue. This is congruent with the principles of outcomes based education (OBE) approaches currently promoted by the national education system.

1. Background

Local South African contexts have made teachers/lecturers aware of the problems experienced by many of their students living in South African townships and in rural and often traditional African contexts. These problems often seem to be attributable to less than ideal school backgrounds while there appears to be evidence of a sense of alienation from the teaching material. Other South African students

who struggle to identify with typical Euro-American examples also experience similar problems. Teaching material found in commonly prescribed textbooks, in particular those written in Euro-American countries, do not attempt to address the local students in a familiar language or to draw from ideas in their own ecologies. It is ironic that these textbooks are still prescribed in psychology, a subject that addresses human thought and behaviour in social contexts.

The social and learning contexts of South African students in higher education are complex. Recent transformation in the higher education system has led to greater cultural diversity in the typical university classroom. However, despite the cultural diversity, the unifying factor in such settings is the cultural distance from Euro-American teaching materials. Even in a prestigious university the majority of the students, irrespective of their cultural background, do not have English as their home language. Students from different backgrounds find themselves at various distances from the material in terms of both language and culture.

2. Local knowledge

In reflecting on their teaching practices in local contexts, teachers/lecturers have become curious as to how psychology could accommodate and integrate African local knowledges and ways of thinking about the world. In their search for relevance, they have noted a scarcity of literature on local knowledge in psychology untainted by western thinking. Local knowledge is often referred to by means of other terms but can be characterised as follows:

> … meaning and use [which] are context-bound, […] has utilitarian value, and it is generally acquired through direct participation in real-world activities […] Such knowledge can be seen as constituting a particular world view, or a form of consciousness (Barnhardt 2002: 242).

These characteristics would appear to be desirable in terms of the study of a social science – in the hope that some undergraduate students will be inspired to pursue their studies at more advanced levels, in particular.

2.1 Western hegemony in academic psychology knowledge

The dominance of western hegemony is apparent in psychology, as indicated by a continuing Euro-American focus in research and theory. South African learners in all academic contexts are mostly exposed to sophisticated western textbooks imported for use in their classrooms. However, many academics are questioning their usefulness and appropriateness to third-world/African/developing contexts in which the majority of South African graduates will be working irrespective of their personal backgrounds.

Fouché (1996) and Lincoln (2000) discuss how the dominant paradigm of psychology in South Africa currently promotes the western scientific method in research and psychotherapies, which have evolved from within mainly western contexts. Many of the major theories from developmental, personality and social psychology comprise content found in European (mostly British) and American texts (Fouché 1996, Lincoln 2000). This article suggests that while there is undoubtedly a strong place for the western scientific paradigm view, this should ideally be balanced with some recognition and comparative discussion of local knowledge systems and content.

2.2 Psychology failing Africa

Psychology has been criticised for failing to become established as a major service resource in Africa (Peltzer 1998), possibly on account of African psychologists' inability to find a niche for psychology, as it exists in the mainstream, in the African context. In light of the above, this is not surprising.

The literature criticises what has been perceived as mainstream, generally indiscriminate western, scientific, positivist approach of psychology, and of the frequent irrelevance of this form of psychology to local cultures.[1] The literature also refers to psychology as hav-

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1   Cf Akin-Ogundeji 1991, Anon 1986, Atal 1981 & 1990, Azuma 1984, Bakker & Snyders 1999, Dawes 1998, Denzin & Lincoln 2000, Durojaiye 1993, Holdstock 1981, Kim & Berry 1993, Lincoln 2000, Marsella 1998, Moghaddam 1993, Seedat 1997, Seedat & Nell 1990, Turton 1986, Vogelman 1987.

ing little impact in Africa,[2] of being in a state of disillusionment and disempowerment (Seedat 1997), and as taking an inappropriate individualist approach in certain local contexts.[3] Calls for greater contextualisation and relevance of the profession have been made in the past.[4] However, pressure is simultaneously exerted on the discipline to maintain and/or discover universal and global frameworks (Danziger 1994, Dawes 1998). Other voices remind the profession of the need to acknowledge, understand and address the role of cultural variations in behaviour and experience in practice, research and training (Marsella 1998).

The question is raised as to how academics can expect their graduates to be sensitive to the communities with which they engage if their learning ignores or even negates their own life experiences.

2.3 Alienation within Psychology

One result of the use of Euro-American textbooks and curricula has been reported as a sense of alienation (Said 1994: 55, Seedat 1997: 261). There is global criticism of psychology that allows western domination, translated into an experience of colonisation in the academe. In other contexts it has been referred to as a "… borrowed consciousness" (Enriquez 1989: 24).

Local criticism has pointed out that the vast majority of South African psychologists are still white (Berger & Lazarus 1987, Peltzer 1998), although this has been a concern of the Professional Board for Psychology for some years (Professional Board for Psychology 1999, 2001 & 2002). This may be partly responsible for the accusation that psychology is an elitist profession and in the past a passive supporter and maintainer of the apartheid system.[5] These critics suggest that identification with the local cultures is essential for effective psychology practice.

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2 Cf Dawes 1986, Eze 1991, Gilbert 1989, Nsamenang 1995 & 2000, Peltzer 1998.
3 Cf Akhurst 2001, Mungazi 1996, Mwamwenda 1999, Seedat 1997.
4 Cf Gilbert 1989, McAllister 1998, Nell 1990, Van Vlaerenden 2001.
5 Cf Berger & Lazarus 1987, Dawes 1986, Seedat & Nell 1992, Yen & Wilbraham 2003.

The continued adherence to western principles entrenched in textbooks allows psychology to avoid ecological evolvement. This filters through to the practice of psychology and has resulted in a sense of alienation in professionals working in the field.

Bodibe (1990), Manganyi (1973, 1977 & 1981) and Seedat (1997) are among those South African psychologists who have explicitly expressed this personal sense of alienation. The words of Mahommed Seedat (1997: 261) display an acuteness of experience:

> … the process of becoming acquainted and familiar with unfamiliar and 'foreign' psychological concepts proved to be an emotional and intellectual dislocating learning experience […] the methodological and conceptual ethnocentrism inherent in psychology as a discipline [… yielding] an emotionally and intellectually estranging experience and a source of early disillusionment for black and women psychologists and those operating in low income contexts.

2.4 Colonisation

Nsamenang (2000: 91) bemoans the fact that, in his opinion, contemporary Africa has been swayed by academic acculturation, implying that current academics may already be successfully colonised by Euro-American ideologies. Successful colonisation results in the non-critical emulation of the colonisers by the colonised, forsaking their own cultures in the process (Eskell-Blokland 2005).

Western academic hegemony has served to promote colonisation in the field of psychology by the dominant use of western paradigm textbooks. Glossy texts sell the Euro-American values and lifestyles as a commodity, carrying a brand label that speaks of achieving prosperity, well-being and success.

3. Textbooks and learning

Learning is more than the mere transfer of contents of the textbook to the mind of the student. A social constructionist perspective proposes that human nature and the social order are products of conversation and interaction (Freedman & Combs 1996). Thus the textbook could be viewed as a participant in a conversation where knowledge is co-created with the student within the process of interaction or

conversation. The premise that reality is co-constructed within interaction implies that the textbook becomes one partner within a three-way conversation between student, lecturer and the authors of the textbook. This also implies that the textbook in isolation has little value without being part of the interaction. The dialogue between lecturer, student and textbook becomes a co-created reality. Co-constructed realities exist in the domain of shared meanings between individuals, cultures, societies and groups, and are told in stories or conversation (Epston 1998). This co-created reality is characterised by a reciprocal exchange between all elements of the conversational process involved. The lecturer, student and textbook are therefore responsible for co-creating knowledge within and beyond the lecture room. If one acknowledges that each partner to the conversation brings a world of understanding, a number of discourses and contexts, to the conversation, the complexity of the learning process becomes clear. One cannot reduce it to a linear "fill an empty vessel" paradigm. This is especially important in a complex developing society where the worlds of understanding the textbook, lecturer and student may be different.

However, this perspective raises the following questions: how does one converse with the textbook and the student so that learning happens, and how does one create a context where the student can have a meaningful learning experience.

3.1 Textbooks are the key to knowledge

The irony of the situation in which teachers/lecturers find themselves in the academe is the position where the textbook is used as the evaluation of course content and learning. Textbooks carry knowledge, theory and practical explanation but it remains the role of the lecturer to facilitate the learning. Or does it?

The typical textbook has glossy pages, colourful pictures, ready-made slides, test banks or test generators and self-study sections. These are some of the criteria for a good textbook. Throughout the process of colonisation and the need for global recognition, African and South African universities have to a large extent adopted the North American textbook; this illustrates the dominant discourse concerning the

prestigious American textbook. Authors working in the narrative paradigm urge that discourses reflect and constitute a specific worldview and influence how one views the world and thus shape one's experiences (Epston 1998). The discourse of prestige attached to American textbooks assumes the legitimacy of the content. It also promotes the ideas of elitism in education. However, within developing countries, in general and not specifically South Africa, there is a need to look beyond the individualist and capitalist society represented by America. Perhaps in developing countries the dominant discourse concerning textbooks from America needs to be challenged and deconstructed. Deconstruction is not aimed at destroying or undoing, but is involved with exposing the invisible (Myburg 2000). In developing countries the invisible issues at the heart of psychology, and thus education within the field, are at grassroots level where the textbook needs to appeal to the student, in other words can it be linked to their worldview, be relevant to the student and the communities in which they live, and promote the mission of the democratic society in which developing countries find themselves. This also deconstructs the idea of the textbook and university education as being elitist and reserved for a selected few. By making the textbook content applicable within the student's personal life enhances its value and "usability" within our consumer-driven society.

3.2 The format of the book and the role of the lecturer

There are many implications for considering the textbook from a social constructionist point of view. For example, ready-made slides, teaching aids, test banks, internet 'psych labs' and the remainder of the teaching process including assessment becomes prefabricated. Their content is generalised. The lecturer becomes an extension of the textbook, a conveyer of the knowledge held within the pages, to the exclusion of other sources of knowledge, such as local knowledge, indigenous knowledge and personal experience. In class, pressure is exerted on the lecturer to become an entertainer and a performer, a face attached to a module for the student with which the student interacts but is no longer an essential element in the process of learning. One can ask whether the lecturer has become obsolete.

The practical problem of large classes in psychology remains. However, the textbook can play a role in the alienation and theme-park-entertainment discourse, or work alongside the lecturer to build bridges towards the students' daily lives.

3.3 The process of assessment

The presence of ready-made tests and assignments together with a complete memorandum illustrates the 'instant' nature of society in which we live – instant foods, drive-in banking, telephone contracting, and so on. The purpose of the ready-made test banks is to provide lecturers with instant access to a wide range of questions without them personally being involved in the cumbersome process of setting the examination papers. The instant-soup recipe for test papers is further enhanced by the presence of electronically available marking systems upon completion of the tests – a computerised memorandum marks the paper. The overall result is: open the package, stir the questions in the computer system, pour in the students, pop back into the microwave for some final processing, and a final mark is produced with minimum effort from the lecturer and an uncertain and invisible amount of thinking from the student. This process applies not only to multiple-choice questions but if marked electronically, written answers are evaluated according to keywords from textbooks. This instant 'input output' technologically advanced nature of society lends itself to many problems. The assessment process becomes divorced from the remainder of the learning conversation and turns into a conversation of the textbook with itself. Students are quick to sense this. Even if they bring their personal learning to class, they leave it behind when preparing for assessments and rather seek to imbibe the textbook. Proper assessment is closely linked to the teaching situation. In a reverse way the textbook rather than the learning process becomes the main feature in the classroom.

This is another example of how the dominant discourse informs us of the one truth or reality to the detriment of existing alternative realities or answers. Our instant generation attempts to oversimplify complex questions concerning reality.

3.4 Language issues

Second- and third-language English speakers are at a disadvantage in more instances than understanding class content, in particular within the scope of the ready-made assessments and memorandums. For example, the written questions which are evaluated on selected keywords from the textbook assume that the student will use those keywords and not explain the concept using alternative words while still providing a satisfactory answer. The problem is further compounded when students attempt to understand a foreign text, and make sense of the content and the examples given. Second- and third-language speakers may find it difficult to cope with large quantities of reading in unfamiliar vocabulary. The textbook assumes immediate comprehension whereas many students will first have to make sense of the content, by using a dictionary to translate terminology, before any level of comprehension can take place.

Questions can also be raised concerning the preference of American English as the official language of textbooks, since language can be viewed as a general-purpose symbolic tool used by people to create versions of the world. Language both formulates and objectifies a constituted reality. Thus it has the power to encode and clarify one version of reality rather than present alternatives. In addition, since language embodies conventional cultural categories, it can impose culturally shared meanings. For example, the practical explanations and examples in American textbooks promote the ideals of individualism, capitalism and the ultimate pursuit of self-fulfilment. These ideals may contradict other worldviews found in South African classrooms. Questions are raised as to whether using an American textbook further reinforces the view that global ideals are to be aspired to while local, indigenous values are inferior and should be eradicated. On a more basic level, students struggle to relate to the examples in American textbooks as these are foreign and do not suit their frame of reference. Freedman & Combs (1996: 16) state that:

> … societies construct the 'lenses' through which their members interpret the world […] These realities provide the beliefs, practices, words, and experiences from which we make up our lives, or, constitute ourselves.

A local example of how our lenses are being blurred is that the American textbook often provides examples of how young adolescents strive to become independent, for instance learning to drive a car. Once they are able to drive, they automatically have their own vehicle to further enhance their independence and autonomy. In South Africa, the majority of the population will never own their own car and will have to rely on public transport such as community taxis. By virtue of linking identity development and independence with owning a car, where does this idea leave disadvantaged students in terms of the development of their autonomy? Lecturers may be party to cultural ideals that are alienating to their students, disconfirming their sense of reality and invalidating their life experiences.

4. The textbook in context

4.1 Choice of textbook

In choosing a textbook, lecturers usually obtain a number of desk copies from different publishers; they study and compare the contents of the books to evaluate them. The contents are then matched with the specific student body, the educational institution (for example, contact or distance learning), teaching support available, and so on. Given the large number of introductory textbooks available, the process of selection seems far from perfect, even in more homogeneous societies (cf Griggs 1999, Griggs *et al* 1994, Griggs & Marek 2001). During the process, the textbook becomes part of the conversation between the institution and the publisher. Publishers develop specific marketing strategies to influence this choice, often through personal contact with lecturers, playing into the way the choice is made. Factors such as class size, availability of tutors, library facilities, budgets and, often implicitly, the teaching philosophy of the department impact on the choice and use of the textbook.

4.2 Matching textbooks and students

The standard North American college textbook carries certain assumptions such as students having access to technology and internet,

which is increasingly used in an integrated way with textbooks (Murray 1999, Worthington *et al* 1996). Given the large number of psychology students who use these books (Griggs 1999) it is not surprising that it is also assumed that learners share a certain cultural background and have attained a certain level and type of prior knowledge. Many psychology textbooks contain culture-specific examples drawn from North American television, prominent news items, popular or well-known people who have attained a high level of prominence in the USA, and even day-to-day examples drawing from what is assumed to be the daily life of the student, such as driving a car from the age of 16, on the right-hand side of the road.

Part of effective teaching and educational writing is to make realistic assumptions about the background knowledge of students. This is not easy in a multicultural, multilingual and historically fragmented country such as South Africa. Students come from a variety of socio-economic, cultural and educational backgrounds. Lecturers simply cannot assume a common background knowledge. Neither should a good textbook. In fact, in many instances lecturers cannot even assume that the student will buy and own the textbook.

An easy way out of this dilemma, and perhaps an ethically questionable one, is to attempt to change the learners to fit into a uniform teaching environment. The assumption is that the student must develop certain educational or language skills by means of, for example, bridging programmes, and that, once they are 'at the same level', they can work in the same class and understand the same textbook. Taken to its extreme, this view would have one following in the footsteps of the media and multinationals to promote North American culture, and work towards a global student culture. This view has its problems. First, one cannot "catch up" on an educationally disadvantaged past. It is unsure whether it is even possible to define "educationally disadvantaged". Those who have not had access to proper schooling have knowledge in areas that are not usually reflected in textbooks, but may nevertheless enrich their understanding. Secondly, it is questionable whether one can or should expect learners to attain a homogeneous 'student identity' that fits the standard textbook.

A social constructionist view of knowledge implies that it would enhance learning to invite the differences between students into the learning experience. Students' personal experiences and backgrounds may become vehicles of learning, rather than be ignored or invalidated in the classroom.

4.3 Consuming versus co-creating knowledge

If one assumes that knowledge is created in conversation, and avoids thinking of the student as an empty vessel needing to be filled by the contents of a textbook, it becomes inevitable that the person of the student should be involved and differences highlighted. Experiential learning encourages critical thinking, a culture of learning and reading, and even a culture of appreciating books. The idea of one prescribed textbook for every psychology module may discourage a culture of learning by teaching students how to imbibe rather than search. A student who is sent to the library to discover, compare and integrate information from different sources has a very different experience. A student who is exposed to the actual material produced by researchers, such as journal articles or dissertations, may learn more about psychology than the one who memorises the textbook.

Lecturers want their students to learn to contextualise and integrate knowledge themselves, if exposed to a variety of sources. By contrast, most undergraduate textbooks do this for the reader, and they decide to which context to link the content, instead of directing students to draw from their own knowledge contexts. This can be compared to buying ready-made take-away fast food. Obtaining a degree becomes comparable to ingesting a series of finished take-aways – appropriate within consumer culture. Students become consumers of knowledge. In keeping with consumer culture, the textbook invites students to become conservative – to believe that they do not have ideas of their own and that it is all 'out there' to be consumed.

A social constructionist view of learning, by contrast, would be similar to spending time in the kitchen, first watching another person prepare food, then learning to cook a meal with others, laying the table, selecting ingredients and eating together (a socially constructionist, co-created process). In contrast to being a consumer,

the learner becomes a producer of knowledge, in a social context, together with others.

There is a common perception that universities should encourage a "culture of textbooks". The best students are the ones who have bookshelves filled with textbooks. This idea is of benefit to the publisher, as the university becomes active in promoting these books. However, this obscures the value of students using the library and other sources of knowledge to find knowledge.

The nature of the textbooks produced and prescribed is a product of beliefs about what education and learning is about. It hampers learning if it makes students more passive consumers.

4.4 Textbooks and consumerism

Textbooks are part of universities' buying into the dominant discourse of capitalism. The student has become a client, buying a product, education, from a supplier, the university. The degree obtained increases their value as a commodity. It is questionable whether education can be measured in this way. Obtaining a degree should signify more than that the recipient can effectively reproduce content. Being a student means more than buying a career and lucrative future. It means learning to create, contextualise, critically evaluate, apply and, ultimately, produce new knowledge:

> Although critical thinking has long been an important objective of higher education […] learning to think critically is not an inevitable outcome of instruction. Research shows that without specific instruction in critical thinking, only a small proportion of college students will develop such thinking skills (Griggs *et al* 1998: 254).

This leads to the issue of the values underlying education, including wisdom, ethics, and developing the whole person of the student.

5. Using the textbook as a partner in the conversation

If one views the textbook as part of a conversation one would have to deliberately move away from the lecture or monologue. Students may be prompted to think critically about what they are about to engage with, to pause for a moment to discuss a problem or a challenge, and

finally to consolidate new learning. This ideal assumes that students take responsibility for their own learning by actively participating in the co-creation of learning. This is not a new ideal: this has been suggested under the term of learning-centred textbooks and forms one of the basic values of OBE.

Learning-centred textbooks are readable and meaningful to students. They are sensitive to the target readers as they focus on language accessibility, unpacking and demystifying concepts and psychological jargon, and integrating an interactive approach. Understanding who the readers are includes the reality that some, though not all, students are second- or third-language speakers, and that they may come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The issue then is seeking ways to create textbooks that are more locally relevant but not patronising to the point of excluding certain groups of students.

Learning-centred textbooks would also acknowledge that students learn from contexts other than the traditional textbook. For example, self-study notes, study guides and journal articles may provide additional commentary to the conversation taking place. A learning-centred textbook needs to point away from itself to give students access to a wide range of information, not exclusively the information in the textbook. It needs to lead the student to a process of interaction with the content wherever this content can be found. Thus the lecture room becomes the place where students interact with the lecturer and the textbook to discuss the content, raise issues and additional content. This is in clear contrast to lecturer as entertainer, running through syllabus and slides.

The implications of viewing learning as an interaction process could have larger ramifications. The role of tutorial classes could be highlighted as an opportunity to continue the conversation with the text. The lecturer then becomes a trainer of tutors who interact in small groups, thus creating a greater climate of learning and reinforcing the active role of the students in their learning process. This may develop a culture of learning that can be taken further in all areas of the students' lives and not contained only within the current section of work being studied.

6.   Conclusion: the challenge

Lecturers need to seriously consider the role of educators in the conversation between textbook and student. Psychology lecturers may have become traders in a global market. However, they may also view themselves as growing knowledge – creating a context where students can develop as knowledge-creators. Lecturers who have to choose textbooks are in a similar situation to a farmer buying seeds, which are controlled by the international corporations who own the rights to their propagation. This contrasts with traditional propagation of seeds in local agriculture, which may prove to be more sustainable. Similarly, incorporating local knowledge and social conditions in teaching may prove to be more sustainable, given the current cultural diversity in classrooms. A social constructionist view of learning may be more akin to encouraging biodiversity and knowledge diversity. Choosing a textbook necessitates considering which textbook sprouts ecologically sustainable knowledge. The relevance and accessibility of psychology in addressing the problems of mental health in the country need to be promoted by using textbooks as part of an educational process to ensure that future generations inherit a world rich in human and knowledge diversity.

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