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“What is this thing called ‘Transformation’ in South African Higher Education?: a view on Entrapment; a position on the kind of Leadership needed”

Transforming South African higher education remains a widely debated, and often heated topic. For the many different people, from many different backgrounds, who are involved in many different ways in higher education, the concept of transformation discharges a range of stories; filled with all kinds of thoughts and feelings; arguments, positions, and ‘facts’; all emerging from their own perceptions and experiences of having to deal with different types of Higher Education phenomena. These narratives range from formal and official debates on statistics and numbers, language policy, discourses on Africanization of curricula, and so on, to more informal and unofficial conversations on how to deal with pain and anger, stories of abuse and mistreatment, feelings of resentment and apathy, and ignorance, perceived ‘stupidity’, disrespect and disappointment. The issues are compounded as academics have to persistently deal with questions about how to particularise transformation for specific disciplinary contexts; How do I Africanise a curriculum on Information Security; How can I be more inclusive in the way I set exam papers for a module on System Analysis and Design? Students on the other hand may ask; Why do the School of Computing feel so distant – I never seem to get through to my lecturer? Why do I not feel a sense of belonging as postgraduate student? How long will I be able to cope with my old rude supervisor who simply never seem to understand my ‘situation’? I don’t understand the context of the questions in my first assignment? What can I do more to not disappoint my supervisor, my parents?

Transformation as concept is both abstract and real; vague and practical; distant and personal. Transformation and all its dynamics and narratives is riddled with contradictions and conflict, confusion and indifference; and despite ongoing research, policy initiatives, and public discourse, transformation still continues to mean different things for different people, to the point where people even feel beaten up about it. These often conflicting discourses about transformation persistently beg questions such as: Who and what should be transformed? Where should transformation start? If transformation is supposed to be liberating and emancipatory, then what should we – those who need to be transformed – be liberated from? How can we pin down a definition of transformation that is both universal and particularised? And is it possible at all to engrave into policy, a ‘one-style-fits-all’ approach to transforming South African Higher Education?

The phenomena of transformation cannot other than lead us to ask; What kinds of leadership are required to facilitate transformation that is both liberating as well as relevant for the international discourses we have to compete in? Who are the best types of leaders and change agents for this particular time in history? How could we continue to improve our abilities to perceive, and excavate knowledge about what we perceive and should perceive from Higher Education social phenomena? And at what point can we agree that we are now transformed, so that we can move on to enacting transformed-ness?

With this lecture I hope to stimulate reflection on these questions, using a particular sort of informed subjectivity; to illustrate the nature of the problem of transformation and offer an example of a path to liberating transformation. What I don’t do is offer conclusive answers to these questions. I also do not include the very many theorists and their arguments and concepts that all informed my way of arguing and reflecting (for example; Pierre Bourdieu, James Gee, Habermas, Mezirow, and some post-colonial theorists; Van Maanen, Whyte, Schultze, Myers, Thomas,

Hammersley, on ethnography and confessional writing; Bent Flyvbjerg on Phronesis; Greenleaf on Servant Leadership; and the many critical theorists in the IS discipline: Howcroft and Trauth, Walsham, Cecez-Kecmanovic, Ngwenyama and Lee, Stahl, Myers, Avgerou, McGrath). While I may include a story of two as I deliver this lecture, I cannot possibly include all the stories of all the life-lessons I learnt from the people that shaped me and my career – I'll leave those for the papers I have published and hope to still write. What I do hope to do though is to scratch the surface in answering questions such as; How can we better understand the status quo? How can we better our abilities to perceive what we still need to understand? How can we better excavate self-knowledge, about getting to know that which I don't know that I don't know about myself and about others? And; What can I do to better articulate what I think I perceive and at the same time liberate others like myself and people that I perceive to be different from me to also better articulate what they think they perceive. I do this by reflecting on a style – an approach and a way of valuing – that worked for me, and that I have seen to work for the colleagues and students I have come to know and who have been part of shaping me as an academic and as a person.

I draw on a personal narrative; a journey that officially started with my PhD research late in 2008 but that still continues to ignite realisations of the need for self-inquiry as a precursor for social inquiry. It is by means of this personal narrative that I argue that this prioritising self-inquiry, and hence self-transformation, can eventually spill over to (and from) the people (colleagues, students, and research partners) I relate with on a daily basis. Using this personal and confessional style, I argue that all transformation starts with self-transformation; just like emancipation starts with self-emancipation and just like social inquiry starts with self-inquiry.

While I see this lecture a reflection on a position for doing what I am doing as academic – I reflect on a form of value rationality for doing the right thing for the right reasons – it is also a celebration of a newly acquired identity and social capital. The community I have associated myself with now for a while and to whom I have offered considerable demonstrated evidence of the type of social capital and ways of valuing they seek (e.g. I write papers, I have NRF rating, I supervise students, I have a red gown ... a PhD), have given me the title of 'Professor' – and I am grateful for it. However, while it is a title and position, the reality is that this new official identity also implies power to influence and a responsibility; I should be held accountable for my actions and work. I have a choice on how I respond in my role, especially since many of the people I am accountable to, may not have the power, the capacity, or tenacity to contradict or challenge my style. I can use this position simply to further my self-interests, to play the game in the same way one would climb the corporate ladder so to speak, or move higher up the social 'food chain' – I can succumb to some trends in society that says: 'eat or be eaten' – or I can use my position and social capital to nurture, to grow, to protect others from the unnecessary battering and bullying so often prevalent in society.

To be real and truthful to myself and to you though and to properly situate my argument, this newly acquired position cannot be separated from other identities that I am part of. And therefore, as I reflect on my journey as emerging academic, I will have to include personal and other unofficial accounts that define me as person, such as that I am a husband, father of three daughters, family-man, I have a 'home office' and a real and personal life. I have been given the identity of white 'Afrikaner' male. I grew up apartheid and in post-apartheid South Africa. My family life was actually mix-culture in a way, and somewhat dysfunctional. My father was a Dutch immigrant – he never got further than Standard 8 (grade 10) and worked with his hands his whole life. My mother is from the small Karoo.

PICTURES

My reality is that I started out in life with considerable baggage; misguided assumptions about life, what is needed to survive 'out there', about who I am and should be, what I need power and social capital for. This all affected the kinds of social entrapment I was conditioned into, to the point where I didn't know that I was conditioned to actually value social entrapment (*social entrapment can be defined as the tendency of people to think of their own style, ways of valuing, approaches, and ways of perceiving – their own worldview – as the best and most sensible. It refers to the variety of mechanisms, emanating from one's own worldview, that are applied to assure social harmony and conformity to interactional norms, organisational rules, institutional patterns and ideological concepts*). Growing up Afrikaner – which is just one of the identities I associate with – seemed to enforce onto us that being culturally entrapped is in fact valued, practical, and something to aspire to. This entrapment – and I am not only talking about cultural entrapment. I'm including all the conditioning that I grew up with as an individual – however, was challenged in many ways. One of the key moments being when I fell in love and married 21 years ago – we had to merge two very different worldviews.

PICTURES

My journey as emerging researcher led to me giving myself an official identity: I see myself as a critical theorist and ethnographer. For me it means that over time I have developed a tenacity to seek out and interrogate what is wrong in the world; to understand oppression and its causes; to develop ways of highlighting and explaining contradictions of society; to offer particular types of concepts and ideas that are designed to articulate the hiddenness of power and domination in society and in inter-personal communication, and to help the people I mingle with on a daily basis to self-reflect.

My evolving researcher identity, however, also came as a response, and I may add a desperate one at that, to make sense of the research situation I encountered as a brand new PhD student where I was confronted with my own social entrapment and need for self-transformation. On a fact-finding mission and the start of an ICT for development project in Tugela Ferry in KwaZulu-Natal, the heartland of the Zulu people, I was confronted with a social environment with which I was totally unfamiliar, to the point that I felt severely vulnerable. While I had all kinds of assumptions about what it means to 'develop' others, what it means to be 'academic', and what I believed I should do and be as project leader at that stage, I simply could not connect to the people or make any sense of what was happening around me. I did not understand the language and the meanings of things, the body language, and the types of social connections between the local people. The places I visited were foreign to me; hostile in some instances. The ways people did things were unrecognizable. The types of feedback I expected in teaching technology situations were just not there.

Over time the severity of my perceived inabilities intensified. I was misunderstood. My attempts at showing sincerity and honesty was misinterpreted as disrespect. My style of showing respect, by for example offering opinion was seen as intrusive and disrespectful. My learnt ways of doing interviews were considered wrong and inappropriate. At times I was told to wait when I thought to respond quickly and proactively. I was told to not make eye contact, while I felt that it is necessary to make people understand me. My ways of doing research interviews were disregarded. People swore at me in response to my teasing them. I was told that people were scared of me, because I don't know when to keep quiet. I was told that responding quickly and proactively was considered disrespectful and a typical problem of my type. The contradictions started manifesting as stress and conflict in me. I felt deaf and dumb, not knowing how to respond, act, be practical at things, and so on. Despite having some presence – I was perceived to have IT knowledge and was seen as the one from the city university – I simply was unable to do what I was supposed to do. I experienced frustration, conflict,

confusion, apparent gross inabilities, struggles in intercultural 'whats' and 'hows', and insecurities in how to deal with people. I concluded that 'I can only interpret that which I am able to perceive', and I started out unable to perceive the social phenomena I was supposed to explain.

PICTURES

I sought the corrective inputs of cultural interpreters to help me make sense. I realised that I can only perceive better in this new social environment once I managed to escape from my own cultural entrapment and conditioning and find maximum immersion in the social situation. I had to get carried away by the game of social interaction, in such a way that the game got the better of me.

It took time, almost a year of constant reflection, allowing the local people to correct me, guide me, give inputs, offer concepts and examples to explained that which I was seeing but not perceiving, that things were starting to open up for me. It struck me that while I went in at first with certain assumptions about power, position, and knowledge to 'develop others', that in the end it was me learning the most. I was the one changing, perceiving better, articulating better. Collisions, misunderstanding, and conflicts, turned into new articulations and concepts, beautiful stories of contrasting cultures, stories of success full of care and looking out for each other, recognition and accomplishment, hospitality, and new friendships. While I thought to myself to have leadership skills as an 'IT expert' and 'researcher', I was oblivious regarding how to exercise the leadership. The cultural interpreters whose style I started shadowing and mimicking, turned out to be the real and very patient leaders in the project. They patiently allowed me to grow, they nurtured me into a new way of being and valuing, they protected me from my own misguided assumptions of not being able to function properly. I am grateful to Mbo Mabaso, Dumisani Mtungwa, Elzet Malherbe, Mrs Khumalo, Baba Bani, King Mabaso, Goodness Zuma, Mr Dlamini, Lolo and Khululiwe Mtungwa, Thabsile Mtungwa, Mseni, Phiwe and Nkasi Nkomo, and Thobani Buthelezi for being those people I needed during my time of acculturation.

I discovered a totally new worldview; a people-orientated and loyalty based culture – some call it Ubuntu – that embraced human unpredictability. Doing things – tasks – wrong is not associated with who you are and your identity. One is defined not by what you do but with whom you belong. Integrity is not something associated to task completion or productivity, but to loyalty to who you are responsible to. I also discovered that I have lots of Ubuntu in me, but I'm quiet about it, because I thought that it is not appreciated in the social systems I need to function in. I started enjoying the way in which time and completion is seen to be when everyone has been acknowledge and not when the clock says so. I also found myself to not that easily fit into the prior settings I used to see as my comfort zones.

The experiences and my prioritising self-inquiry, led a tenacity to articulate and explain, the collisions between the typical task-orientated or performance-orientated value systems of western-minded societies (of which I was the primary research subject) and the traditional loyalty-based value system or people-orientated culture of the Zulu people. I found 'vocabulary' to highlight contradictory ways of being and valuing. For example, while in my home-based worldview, offering opinion is considered to be a way of showing interest and respect, the Zulu people did the same by reserving opinion. It followed that doing interviews with elderly people in the community should start by me keeping quiet. This was contrary to ALL of the readings I came across about how to do qualitative interviews. Doing data collection implied nurturing a relationship first, over time. All of this required a whole lot of critical self-reflexivity and introspection, and I felt that I was the one who changed the most in the end.

Back home at the office, I started superimposing these analogies of worldview contrasts onto the social phenomena I had perceived and interpreted in culturally entrapped way before; such as the phenomena of teaching, learning, leadership, nurturing supervision relationships, and so forth. It struck me that just like I needed bi-worldview change agents to guide, protect, and nurture me to grow in a foreign culture, so too do the students entering the higher education system need a particular type of support. It struck me that my students experienced the same sorts of frustrations, conflict, confusion, apparent gross inabilities, struggles in intercultural 'whats' and 'hows', and insecurities in how to deal with people, with one big difference: they may have less of a benefit of bringing in some recognizable social capital like I had during my first encounters. They may feel 'deaf and dumb', like I felt, unable to perceive, let alone function. While they are conditioned to easily function within people-orientatedness and all its expectations and assumptions, the very hostile and imported higher education system expected something else. They may suffer from cultural entrapment differently than me, but they also need a specific type of leadership and mentorship.

I started asking myself: How can I nurture and protect? What familiar concepts and examples can I offer to help my students make sense of these new worldview collisions they have to deal with upon entering higher education? How can I settle the nerves? What can I say and do to articulate meta-knowledge of the contradictions they may experience? How can I liberate them, get them to reflect, so that they do not reject their home-based identities as they acquire new degrees – new ways of being and valuing? How can I create a sense of belonging? And what about emerging academics seeking to build social capital in higher education?

THE STORY OF ME PRESENTATION AT RHODES

Over time these encounters have re-shaped me and affected the way I believe I should exercise leadership for self-transformation and I learnt about things that I am not good at doing.

For example, I learnt that because I am so disconnected from the realities of the community where I attempted to do ICT for development, that I cannot really 'do development' in appropriate ways. I may have too little experiential understanding of the realities of what the local people are dealing with. In many cases I may do more damage than good. What I can do though is to inspire, empower, and liberate those who are the real change agents. I can empower leaders, influencers, and cultural interpreters. Rather than being one who does the developmental work, I can be the one who acts as a points-man, pointing out opportunities, pointing to ways of getting symbolic access appropriately and responsibly, while leveraging on my own experience of immersion in worldview collisions.

I also often noted that many of my students have to deal with breaking out from a spiral of hopelessness and mental slavery, and from an entrapment where you think that emancipation without self-emancipation is possible. Thinking that someone else is responsible to emancipate me, may simply lead to entitlement. And one should reflect on how one can move beyond giving people money or jobs, to address hopelessness, mental slavery and entitlement, to inspire, and to liberate ways of thinking about the need for self-transformation. A risk here is that empowerment without liberation from social entrapment and all its dynamics, may simply lead to the 'empowered' now rejecting their own and joining the ranks of the oppressors; because hurt people hurt people and all bullies have experienced being bullied.

I also learnt that the leaders with the most potential are the ones entering our higher education system. They are our students and the postgraduates. They have in many ways gracefully mastered (acculturated into) contradicting worldviews. They grew up with their home-based roots, but have also mastered an education system that can be seen as foreign and imported. They can articulate

and translate the contradictions that their peers may experience in ways that settle the anxiety and stress of trying to build knowledge and grow using someone else's worldviews – someone else's ways of defining oneself and ways of valuing things. They can articulate meta-knowledge better than the gatekeepers of the education system. It therefore follows that we as gatekeepers of the education system must realise that while we may be the experts in the particular knowledge or discipline that needs to be acquired, we may be less aware and less acquainted with experiential knowledge of what it requires to fit in and master someone else's style of doing things. We may have self-interests to protect as we continue to value entrapment, and we may not know this. We need to allow the students we deal with to educate us in what we don't know about their contexts and their worldviews; their styles and approaches; their ways of showing sincerity and interest; their ways of demonstrating that they don't want to disappoint us, because in the end education means 'to extract knowledge'. We need to move beyond the subject content to context knowledge and particularised experiential knowledge.

What is needed to exercise leadership for our place and time and history cannot be explained or addressed through a management how-to-do-it-manual. It should be a sort of servanthood-through-leadership-through-practice that operates not only on a surface-level but deep within a person's being. It should be a way of life rather than a management technique. It should be value-driven – doing the right things for the right reasons. However, to do this, leaders require renewed abilities to perceive better and to negotiate the contradictions of our social system better. Key to improving our abilities to perceive better is that we escape from the many sorts of social entrapment we have been conditioned into. Escaping entrapment or valuing entrapment are also learned and unlearned. On the one hand, it may mean that we may have been conditioned over time to value entrapment, which is often the case when you are not challenged to escape and to perceive better, and when your being entrapped actually benefits you and your self-interests. This could lead to us to simply protect the status quo, because 'it works' and have always worked.

On the other hand, some may have transcended from one style to another, also because doing so has benefitted them, there is more to lose than to gain, but they may have rejected their home-based worldviews; and they also seek to protect the status-quo. Reasons for this may be complex and many, but its affects may imply reproduction of the contradictions and conflicts for those you are a leader for. In both these cases, the leader and his/her followers may experience the contradictions and conflict as stress, abuse, anger, pain, etc. Both types of leaders suffer from entrapment and subconscious conditioning. Both types lack abilities to perceive. Their styles have been shaped and conditioned by others and by the perceived benefits that the social system offers. But both styles of leadership may simply reproduce the exact thing we say we need liberation from; bullying, abuse, marginalising. In both cases the collisions may magnify an inherent inferiority or superiority complex, and people snap into self-defence - they lash out in anger and self-preservation. In both these cases, leaders may be honestly sincere, but they are portraying their sincerity in a style unrecognisable by others; by their students, their colleagues, the people they may provide leadership for. In all these scenarios, the issues of an inability to perceive comes to the fore. I do not perceive the attempts at sincerity by others, because I don't know how others show sincerity. I do not perceive the reasons behind a blunt rude response. I do not perceive the reasons behind a 'no response'. I do not know how others do and perceive things differently. I interpret only that which I am able to perceive. I am unaware of my not knowing what I don't know.

What we need is that leaders are change agents. People who are able to highlight and articulate the conditioning of the social system. People who are able to articulate meta-knowledge of different worldviews for different people, like one would translate a conversation from isiZulu to English, but

also with a proper explanation and articulate of what words mean for the context people are in. We need people who have over time developed the habit of escaping, with eloquence, from the entrapment that social systems are attempting to condition into them. We need leaders with plasticity. People who are able to interpreting different things for different people. People who are able to get others to self-reflect. People who have made it a priority to put self-transformation before transformation, self-emancipation before emancipation. People who are acquainted with self-knowledge, who are open to self-inquiry and introspection. People who are able to contrast and compare their own experiences with the experiences of others.

You may ask; What does this all mean for a discipline where the IT artefact is central to knowledge reproduction? The answer may go like this: Techno-centricity, technology determinism, and the digital divide are all manifestations of digital entrapment. They are evidence of an inability or an unwillingness to perceive the risks and the abuse that may come with the subconsciously assumption that digitising things is naturally better. Like with cultural entrapment, digital entrapment may also be the result of a powerful discourse subconsciously enforced by powerful gatekeepers unto people and consumers. Examples of risks are ample; the way in which modern digitised cars may be easily hacked; only students with prior exposure to technology are able to participate in e-learning, which leave those without access with even less access; exploitation of social media user data for capitalist gain; enforcing of outsider constructed technology onto vulnerable communities, leading to an increased social stratification where the poor and vulnerable now have even less chance to participate in a knowledge economy; the post Y2K e-bubble that led technology producers to come up with new ways of making consumers dependent on technology; and so forth. The articulated overt message is that technology is beneficial, access to the latest and better technologies can be a form of perceived symbolic capital; acquiring mobile phones can be a form of self-actualisation. The covert strategy is the protection of turnover, covert control and monitoring of people. And while not everything digitised are inherently wrong or bad, we have a responsibility to continue to ask; what could be possibly wrong in our world?

To nurture, protect, and grow people for and in our context, I argue for that we consider specific types of leadership principles:

Firstly, there cannot be leadership without self-leadership; self-transformation is a precursor for transformation. One cannot for example supervise students and guide them to acquire new ways of being and valuing in ways that subconsciously forces them to reject their home-based identities and worldviews. The reality is often that emerging supervisors have experienced tough and difficult times and all kinds of worldview conflicts in their journeys in getting their PhDs. They may subconsciously and unknowingly reproduce the same style, and then simply transfer the hurt and entrapment. People assuming leadership roles, a chairman, a director, a supervisor, may simply reproduce the contradictions they had to deal with in their 'journeys to the top'. In such cases leaders seem to continue to suffer from entrapment and mental slavery. They have transcended from one way of being to the next, for example from an undergraduate student to PhD graduate, but they have not 'received' liberating leadership themselves. They have been expected to subconsciously reject their home-based ways of being and valuing as they assumed new positions and leadership.

Secondly, there are implications for the way we do research. In the IS discipline we have the tendency to borrow theories and methods from other disciplines and from authors who have employed them in other contexts, especially Western-European empirical settings. However, we need to ask ourselves; where did the first theories and methods come from? The answer is that it all started with 'data'; with narrative examples and reasoning particularised for a specific style of

perceiving, valuing, believing, and being. It follows that if we are to develop and nurture our own style of particularising, we are to restart for ourselves with the data and with narrative examples. And we are to develop our abilities in argumentation, to draw on different and possibly contradictory evidence from social phenomena.

May I therefore conclude, in a way that I hope could be the start of stating a vision of transformedness and for the kind of leadership I believe we need. As an academic, I seek to write to articulate the context of contradictions in society. I seek to put forward more particularised theoretical and methodological guidance. I seek to interrogate 'what is wrong in the world'. I draw on narratives. I prioritise and explicate self-inquiry before social inquiry. I seek to write about initiatives that is about empowering change agents, emerging supervisors, and postgrads. I hope to break through my own securities that previously led me to target 'easy' research outlets simply for the sake of bean counting and to satisfy funding models, to now target those outlets that may help put us on the international disciplinary radar.

May we all realise the need to for self-transformation. May we all realise that people-orientatedness is in all of us and that it should be valued. May we all be liberated from the mental slavery of trying to learn, grow, and build knowledge using some else's imported worldviews. May we all seek ways to perceive better, in order to interpret better. May we stop acting on an outsider-induced fear that makes us do and decide things with the sense of 'I am doing it to stay out of trouble' or 'I need the official recognition of a gatekeeper' or 'what would the originators of this social structure expect me to do?'. No creativity, innovation or *bricolage* can be enforced, boxed-in, or engraved in policy. May we see our innovation and emerging style through the analogy of creative writing, which can say things like; *I cannot write a poem in a language that I cannot feel*. Language rules represents that which has been done in the past and that which is standardised. Creative writing can only happen if new words and a new style is embraced and valued.

I thank you.