Obed Mfum-Mensah

"Transgressive" Instruction as Cultural Production: Teaching Strategies to Disrupt the "Dirty Gossips" about Sub-Saharan "Africa"

Abstract

There exists a power asymmetry between instructors and students in the physical classroom and other learning spaces which symbolizes the distribution of power in social spaces. Because of the structured power asymmetry in most learning spaces, promoting effective classroom teaching sometimes requires instructors to replace existing hierarchical power relations and with fluid, organic, and transgressive classroom dynamics in their relationships with their students. This approach has the potential to empower students to become their own agency for interrogating the assumptions and ideologies that they bring to the classroom. This paper outlines the instructional strategies that I incorporate in my "nonwestern" course that aims to introduce students in my university to the sub-Saharan African region. The course uses the interdisciplinary approach to explore the complicated ways history and social changes (including globalization) intersect to shape education reforms, and economic and social development in sub-Saharan Africa. Students bring a plethora of assumptions about sub-Saharan "Africa" to this course and my goal as an instructor is to help students interrogate their own assumptions and deconstruct the myths and distortions about the "Africa" in a broader term. The paper outlines the way I deliberately select course materials, and sequence course contents and themes to scaffold and promote incremental knowledge about the region for students during the semester. Furthermore, the paper outlines the strategies that help nudge students' critical thinking and restructure the power relations in the classroom. While these strategies may not automatically change students' assumptions about sub-Saharan "Africa", they nonetheless become opportunities for my students and I to reposition for effective discussions about the region with the goal to interrogating students' prior assumptions and views about the region.

Keywords: curriculum, higher education, pedagogy, teaching methods, sub-Saharan Africa

Introduction

Human interactions in the learning space are symbolic of the power relations and the potential roles of individuals and groups in our society. Interactions between instructors and learners are one of the symbols of hierarchical power relationships. Louis Althusser defines power as "that force which operates in ways that are subtle, disguised, and accepted as everyday social practice" (Althusser, 1971, p. 143). Teaching specific content knowledge sometimes demands that the instructor shifts from the solely "structured" teaching approach to incorporate "transgressive" pedagogical practices to help restructure the hierarchical power relations and empower learners (Hooks, 1994). Transgressive pedagogies can provide learners the tool to

become their own agency in interrogating the assumptions that they bring to the learning space. In this paper, I discuss the strategies I implement in my instructional space (and their effectiveness) in a "nonwestern" course, which focuses on sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). I teach in one of the American universities which are geographically situated in south-central Pennsylvania. Most of the students in our institution are White Christians of the evangelical tradition. Many of these students also come from the area where our institution is located.

Several years ago, our institution introduced "nonwestern" course as a component of the undergraduate curriculum to promote inclusive excellence and strengthen students' knowledge in diversity and the dialectic of the global and the local. One of the objectives of the course is to help students explore the effects of external (western) contacts on nonwestern societies' development. To help learners grasp the all-encompassing discourses the course explores, I intentionally select different nations in SSA based on their colonial histories and their contemporary engagements with global governing bodies and development entities. I do so deliberately with the understanding that societies in SSA constitute diverse ethnic groups and cultural states even within those individual nations. I employ a postcolonial framework to discuss the contemporary power relations between SSA and the global forces and the complicated ways global forces (particularly, Europeans and other western societies) helped construct power relations that portrayed the "outsiders" (mostly Whites) as the dominant and powerful group and indigenous African societies as dominated and marginalized groups in the global power relations.

Contextualizing reflexive narratives

As a rooted African scholar who lives in south-central Pennsylvania, I share the complicated "baggage" that African academics carry in their diasporic spaces. Because my academic and scholarly works focus on SSA, I view teaching *Education in sub-Saharan Africa*, as an opportunity to initiate deeper conversations about the African continent and SSA with my students to explore ways to interrogate the "dirty gossips" about the region. Employing reflexive narratives as an epistemological framework for this paper is heuristic, insightful and a reclamation of dignity. I use this epistemological approach to discuss the nature of strategies I implement (and their effectiveness) in my "nonwestern" *Education in sub-Saharan Africa* course, which introduces our university students to sub-Saharan Africa, helps to deconstruct some of the myths, distortions, and "dirty gossips" about Africa, while exploring some of the development challenges facing the region and their causes. Some of my goals in the course include nudging students to become their own agency for interrogating the "trusteeship" and "organized infantilism" ideology in global governing discourse, and inculcating sensitivity to the global injustices that continue to marginalize sub-Saharan African societies. Narrative reflexivity can be a treasure trove for analyzing how power relations are symbolically constructed in societies. Donata Ndongo Bidyogo-Makina captures this poignantly when he pointed out that:

> *We write not as mere storytellers; we conceive of our office as a solid ethical and moral commitment to our suffering societies, miserable specters wandering on immensely rich soil. We choose between supporting the sane or the insane, the oppressors or the oppressed, the executioners or the victims… the gift we possess will not immunize us from the pains of others, a collective pain that is our own pain.* (Bidyogo-Makina, 2017)

Deconstructing the "dirty gossips" about "sub-Saharan Africa"

The course introduction explores the "dirty gossips" about "Africa". Ugandan scholar Okot P'Bitek defines "dirty gossips" as distortions and misrepresentations about Africa (P'Bitek, 2011, p. 11). These "dirty gossips" are etched in the psyche of many people who are not from the African continent. For the past seventeen years that I have been teaching the course, I have come to realize that many of the students that enroll in *Education in sub-Saharan Africa* come to the course possessing little knowledge about Africa and a slew of myths and distortions about the continent and its people. This lack of knowledge about the continent by many people in our global community translates into the "othering" of Africa and Africans. The selected texts for the introduction include the late Kenyan journalist, Binyavanga Wainaina's piece, *How to Write about Africa* (2005), Curtis Keim and Carolyn Somerville's book *Mistaking Africa. Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind* (2018), and my book *We Come as Members of the Superior Race* (Mfum-Mensah, 2021).

I use both symbolic violence and postcolonial frameworks for the introductory discussions. My objective is to help students explore the deliberate ways western societies employ myths and distortions to construct African societies as subordinate and inferior in transnational and global governance discourses. Symbolic violence discusses social relations, power, and the "othering" of people in postcolonial and development discourses. (Richards, 2013). Within these frameworks, we read and analyze historical materials to help students understand the complicated ways western forces employ written texts to create power asymmetries and hierarchies that put Africans in subordinated positions. We also explore the ways colonial cultural processes and political structures created indelible imprints on colonized societies in SSA. In the process of colonization, colonial powers prodded colonial subalterns in SSA to embrace an internalized deficiency mindset, an inferior status, and an inferiority complex in their relationship with colonial dominant groups in what Frantz Fanon describes as "epidermization of inferiority" or what Pierre Bourdieu calls as the "habitus" disposition (Johnson, 2013). I lead students to investigate and document evidence of Africa's resistance to external forces. The *Africans: A Triple Heritage* a documentary series by Ali Mazrui and Basil Davidson's *Africa* documentary series together provide an excellent and balanced perspective on Africa's engagement with outsiders.

My use of postcolonial framework helps challenge and estrange colonial episteme and discourses which project the narratives of white Europeans and colonial people at the center of cultural processes and occlude the history of colonialism and imperialism and rather reproduce epistemic structures and Eurocentrism (Mfum-Mensah, 2021). As part of this exercise, the course examines diverse African epistemologies and philosophical thoughts and the complicated ways they shaped African cultural processes, social, and political organization, and economic forms, and diverse religious views.

Discoursing western "trusteeship" and "organized infantilism"

A major objective of the course is to foster students' critical thinking about the nexus between education and development in SSA. To achieve this objective, I incorporate research activities that give students the freedom and flexibility to formulate questions that merit investigating. Students then choose one of the selected

countries in SSA as their focus country throughout the semester. The themes for investigation include the following: tribalism, racism and ethnicity; religion and nation building; regional disparities and development; sociopolitics of language and development; gender and development; conflict and development; education and nations in transition; and terrorism and development. Throughout the semester, I use activities that help model how to provide a balanced perspective when discussing outside trusteeship and organized infantilism of African societies. The strategy includes helping students to explore how outside forces engaged Africans.

Transgressive discourse

An effective negotiating strategy that drives the discussions about the relationships between global governance, education, and development, is to minimize the tensions that are likely to emerge from students' contact zones in the course. At the introductory phase of the course, I emphasize my commitment to respecting students' opinions and that students commit to respecting each other's opinions. I also assure my students of my commitment to "fostering a safe classroom environment" for all discussions. Furthermore, I help students approach the discussion of global governance, education, and development in SSA from intellectual and scholarly perspectives rather than those *Old World Novels* (Mfum-Mensah, 2021). These approaches help to minimize my students' feelings of anger or guilt for any past injustices created because of western trusteeship and organized infantilism.

I provide research questions that help students to research the history and context of the spread of Islam as a religion and cultural and political force, and as an agent of education in SSA. My goal here is to nudge students to investigate the complex ways Islam has shaped societies in SSA and its contributions to social, political, and cultural processes and educational development in the region. Some of the exciting discussions focus on Islamic philosophical thoughts, Islamization of Africa, and the Africanization of Islam. I should point out that many of my students come to the course with diverse views (some negative) about Islam given what they have read about the religion and the "street lore" they gather from the United States media and recent events around terrorism. Part of this course is to help students demystify the myths about Islam using scholarship, and to help them learn the skill of developing balanced views on the contribution of Islam in the development discourse in SSA.

Furthermore, I provide directions to students as they dive deeper into European trading and exploration activities, Christian missionary activities, colonization, early twentieth century philanthropic initiatives in SSA, contemporary western development in SSA, and global governance groups. From that early encounters and Europe's trading activities, explorations and institutionalization of imaginary geographies, the Christian missionary enterprise, formal colonization, and post-independent development discourses, one can see similar props of European (western) "trusteeship" and "organized infantilism" of African societies. In postcolonial discourse, "trusteeship" alludes to territorial conquest and occupation of an entire region. In the process of conquests and occupation, colonial actors usurp the lands and resources of the indigenous (and rightful) owners and forcibly exploit them. Trusteeship draws from the concept that, more advanced powers have a special duty for the welfare of the so called "backward" people (Holland, 1946). "Organized infantilism" on the other hand, is a sinister strategy used by people in positions of power to construct an "infant" identity of subordinated groups so they cannot think for themselves with the objective

to gain control and dominate them (Giroux, 2015). The concept of organized infantilism explains the complicated strategies of dominant groups to keep individuals and groups they have power over, in situations that Stephanie Frances Beswick terms "dependable patronage" and infantile stage of development (Beswick, 1994).

Conversations around the issues of "trusteeship" and "organized infantilism" are some of the most challenging topics in the course given that me and my students' identities and positionalities and the tensions that usually emerge from such discussions. Most of my students are socialized and oriented in the "white savior" mentality and ideology. They believe that Christian missionary activities and other development activities should be strengthened in SSA and the developing world as part of their service to humanity. Whether this view is a self-serving one is a conversation for another time. There is a broad range of "nonwestern" courses offered in my institution. Students who enroll in *Education in sub-Saharan Africa* do so because of their passion for SSA development, and the last thing I want to do as an instructor is using the course to "kill" that passion. A lot of these students have been made aware of only the positive role the American government, nongovernmental entities, and church-related organizations have played in the past and continue to play in global governance and development. Few (if any) have encountered texts that critically explore the contradictory roles of western entities in the development of SSA. Discussing the contradictory roles of western agencies can sometimes be perceived by students as a slight of the "good" works western nations and national agencies pursue overseas.

How does the instructor use her or his teaching as a tool to equip students, who are in all sense a "captive audience", to exercise a balanced perspective in a situation where the instructor is also a native African and therefore considered as an "embodied other" who occupies an advantaged positionality in the classroom power relations? This situation potentially exposes the instructor to some vulnerabilities, especially because students are also actors who wield the power to evaluate the instructor at the end of the semester.

Over the years, I have come to adopt Byron's (2012) *positive engagement* approach and Ekblad' (2011) *model*, which they recommend for teaching inclusive excellence, as an important transferable strategy to negotiate students' and my feelings of vulnerability. Both scholars advise instructors to foster positive engagement through reflections on power dynamics, establishing ground rules for class discussion, and cultivating a commitment to overcome the fears and anxieties associated with stepping out of one's comfort zone through teaching. The approach also includes awareness, and sensitivity to students' views and ideologies (Ekblad, 2011). While it is important to identify and navigate the unique challenges that instructors encounter as they seek to deconstruct students' prior assumptions and ideologies, I approach discursions around these sensitive issues through circumspection, empathy, and ethics of care (Byron, 2012; Ekblad, 2011). This approach requires that I come to the level of my students as I provide authentic leadership to move students from the "known" (their prior assumptions) to the "unknown" (deconstructing those assumptions).

Conclusion

It is expedient for instructors to become aware of the context of teaching, deliberate in selecting the content and subject matter and restructure the power relations in the classroom as they seek to implement effective strategies in their instructional spaces. I have highlighted the strategies I employ in teaching a course that introduces

students to sub-Saharan Africa. I come to the course with the understanding that students are not homogeneous and monolithic. Every year provides a new group of students and I need to have that awareness. Nonetheless, I also come to the course with the understanding that students bring their prior assumptions about "Africa" to the course. To help students interrogate their prior assumptions and deconstruct the myths and distortions about the region requires deliberate selection of course materials and texts, sequencing course contents and themes in ways that help to scaffold knowledge incrementally for students, modeling what critical thinking looks like, and restructuring the power relations in the classroom. I implement the strategies I have outlined here by reinforcing the insightfulness of using both symbolic violence and postcolonial frameworks. I remind students that these frameworks provide a critique of how Western colonial and racial domination worked together to render the voices of colonial subalterns in SSA fugitive (Lennox, 2006). My goal is to help my students to "decenter" western and global discourses that distort and misrepresent sub-Saharan African societies and challenge imperialist narratives that depict the depravity of "Africa" and "Africans" without any agency of themselves, while positioning western entities as "trustees" and "saviors" of Africa's development.

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Prof. Dr. Obed Mfum-Mensah, Messiah University, Pennsylvania, USA