

Commodification of transformation discourses and post-apartheid institutional identities at three South African universities

Felix Banda and Lynn Mafofo

Abstract

Using mission statements from the UCT, UWC and Stellenbosch University (South Africa), we explore how the three universities have rematerialised prior discourses to rebrand their identities as dictated by contemporary national and global aspirations. We reveal how the universities have recontextualised the experiences and discourses of liberation struggle and the new government's post-apartheid social transformation discourses to construct distinctive identities that are locally relevant and globally aspiring. This has led to the semiotic refiguring of universities from spatial edifices of racially based unequal education, to equal opportunity institutions of higher learning, and to the blurring of historical boundaries between these universities. We conclude that the universities have reconstructed distinct and recognisable identities which speak to a segregated past, but with a post-apartheid voice of equity and redress.

1. Introduction

Focusing on mission statements, the paper explores how the University of the Western Cape (UWC), a historically black university (HBU), and two historically white universities (HWUs) the University of Cape Town (UCT) and Stellenbosch University (SU) have appropriated and blended aspects of the discourses of the liberation struggle and government's social transformation to market themselves as unique institutions with differentiated brand identities. Struggle discourses include the universities' (in)direct references to their role against the apartheid regime, while transformation discourses includes extrapolations from governed policy documents, especially the White Paper on Transformation of Higher Education of 1997 and the Higher Education Acts of 1997. The focus is on the commodification and repurposing of struggle and transformation discourses to advertise the universities to potential clients. Fairclough (1993) defines commodification of discourse as a more general application of instrumental or 'means-end' rationality to discourse. Commoditised discourses tend to be formulaic in their proclamations of change and hence tend to ignore differences in contexts as their effect is to normalise, homogenise, and reduce differences. We use the notion of semiotic remediation (hence forth remediation) (Prior & Hengst, 2010) to illustrate the repurposing of struggle and transformation discourses, in the universities' mission statements, as promotional discourse; which, it is argued, has led to the blurring of boundaries between previously advantaged and previously disadvantaged universities.

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