


# Socially just pedagogies and social justice: The intersection of teaching ethics at higher education level and social justice

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This article is part of a longer term project between the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape and Umea University in Sweden. At both the institutions the teaching of ethics as a module within social science curricula has been an important focus area. The critical investigation of the growth of the ethics modules in the Department of Religion and Theology addresses questions of the growth in the number of students taking ethics as a module that have been escalated in the last few years. This research seeks to explore social justice as a pedagogy to teach ethics. The article investigates the relationship between socially just pedagogies and social justice as a means of knowledge production. The ethics modules and students at the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape are the context of the study, and different socially just pedagogies will be investigated as relevant and significant pedagogies for teaching ethics for social change. Particular attention is given to the interaction between the lecturer, student and non-human phenomena as means of knowledge production. The nature of the interaction determines the effectiveness of pedagogies for a social justice agency.

**Keywords:** Social justice; Socially just pedagogy; Ethics; Martha Nussbaum; Rawls.

## Introduction

This article seeks to investigate the correlations between socially just pedagogies and social justice. Socially just pedagogies consider the role of the students, lecturers and non-human phenomena to contribute to epistemology and agency formation. Normative pedagogies remain important criteria for knowledge production and graduate attributes within the South African higher education landscape. This research seeks not to motivate to replace the normative pedagogies, but to bring into the centre of learning and teaching the structure of the lecture room, participatory method of knowledge production, students and the lecturers. I seek to contribute to social justice within democratic South Africa through teaching ethics at higher education institutions. The question of this research is how teaching ethics at higher education institutions can contribute to the agency of social justice in South Africa.

Inequalities have remained a major concern in democratic South Africa, and according to the latest statistics it has reached new heights. Higher education within South Africa has made little strides and 'Despite post-apartheid policy intentions to redress the effects of apartheid, inequalities in higher education have remained an endemic problem in South Africa' (Bozalek & Zembylas 2017:1). The #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall and I movements highlighted the social, economic and political inequalities apparent in higher education and society at large. Clowes, Shefer and Ngabaza (2017) maintain that policies and legislature including The Department of Education's *White Paper of 1997*, The Soudien Report, The Department of Higher Education and Training's paper of 2010 and recommendations from academics and activists did not contribute to a more equal society. This calls for higher education institutions to take the historical inequalities into consideration when designing ethical course content. Historical inequality contributes to contemporary unequally resourced institutions. Socially just pedagogies are a resource of agency formation towards social justice (2017:1).

In view of the slow transformation in higher education institutions and the limitations of the normative pedagogies used at universities and colleges, socially just pedagogies consider the students and non-human phenomena, including the lecture room space, as more equal partners

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with the lecturers for effective knowledge production and a more sustainable just society. Social justice is a contested phenomenon and has been approached in many varied ways. I will describe social justice from the perspective of Rawls (1971) whose attempt is regarded as the first comprehensive theory of social justice. Recently, there have been many valuable critiques on Rawls' social justice theory, including Martha Nussbaum's (2002) attempt to relate social justice to the agency of those at the margins. This article will reflect critically on normative pedagogies and its contribution to social justice and the constructive part will conclude with markers for teaching ethics at institutions of higher education for social justice.

## Social justice

Social justice is embedded in the structures and processes that incorporate those at the margins and those at the bottom. Social justice concerns the role of social, political and familial institutions to ensure liberty for all citizens. The ordering of society and the structure of institutions should foster equal opportunities and basic rights for all its citizens.

According to Rawls (1971), justice assumes that free and rational persons concerned with the fostering of their own interest should accept from an initial position of equality the terms of their association. These principles form the basis of governments and other forms of cooperation (justice as fairness – Rawls). Rawls (1971) further explains the role of political, social and familial structures as a social contract. A social contract is undergirded by a 'veil of ignorance' (Rawls 1971), implying that no one knows their place in society and no one knows what preferential benefits they will get based on certain principles as opposed to other principles. The principles are the results of a fair agreement. This is followed by a constitution and legislature that will ensure just laws and rules to form (reform) and regulate institutions. Even (Ayer 2004):

[T]hose who hold different conceptions of justice can, then still agree that institutions are just when no arbitrary distinctions are made between persons in the assigning of basic rights and duties and when the rules determine a proper balance between competing claims to the advantages of social life. (p. 333)

The subject of justice is not so much about the actions of persons, or persons themselves, or decisions, but the institutions, such as governments, and more specifically, political constitutions, and social and economic systems (Ayer 2004):

[T]he basic structure is the primary subject of justice because its effect is so profound and present from the start. The intuitive notion here is that this structure contains various social positions and that men born into different positions have different expectations of life determined, in part, by the political system as well as by economic and social circumstances. In this way the institutions of society favour certain starting places over others. (p. 333)

According to this notion of justice, the citizen is a 'rational economic man' who is disembodied, autonomous and

independent. This raises the fundamental question about difference. In a country such as South Africa with a long history of racial, cultural, economic, sexual and political suppression, difference plays an important role in social justice and reform. Here, difference distinguishes between the generalised and the concrete. Rawls ignores the concrete actual other whose reality and identity are particular, biographical, plural, contextual and relational.

The two principles of social justice are that every citizen will receive equally according to basic rights and duties, and that inequality is only justified in the event that it compensates for everyone and, more specifically, the least socially and economically enriched members of a society (Rawls 1971). This model of Rawls is a classic one which is used widely by both academics and practitioners. The different principles refer to inequality that is justified when the least advantaged members of society benefit. Even here the historical injustices, decades of oppression and generations of discrimination are not taken into account. These social and political phenomena play itself out in institutions such as the higher education sector.

Admission criteria, prior education, competencies, access to resources, language and geographical location are important markers for successful academic competencies. Many of the students at higher education institutions come from very poor socio-economic conditions (Pym & Kapp 2013) and unequal education systems (Pym 2017):

[F]or the most part, however in South Africa (and no doubt elsewhere), there is a reliable correlation of being black, working class, and first in family. The schooling background—whether of good or low quality—of these students in South Africa and elsewhere varies, from being well prepared in the appropriate skills, concepts, and experience, to being seriously underprepared. (p. 177)

Socially just pedagogies take these inequalities into consideration in the structure and practice of knowledge production processes.

## Martha Nussbaum

Nussbaum follows in the tradition of Kant that all, just by being human, are of equal worth and dignity, that the source of this dignity is the power to choose according to one's own assessment of ends and that equality gives everyone a claim to treatment by society and politics. Society and politics must respect the liberty of choice and liberty of persons as choosers. Adapting a theoretical approach from Classical Greek and Roman philosophy and drawing on the literature from various contexts such as Europe, America and India, she raises the question of what a life of dignity is (Gasper 2004:182). Nussbaum's political liberalism goes beyond fair procedure and embeds theory in practice by defining capabilities in 10 practical and concrete aspects. These capabilities include life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, play and control over one's environment (Nussbaum 2002:72–74).

Nussbaum opts for a 'thick' description of the good and differs from both Rawls and Sen. Although Sen follows in the Rawlsian tradition and postulates for liberty, Nussbaum's capabilities approach argues that all capabilities have equal value and should not be ordered according to priority (Nussbaum 2002:75).

However, affiliation and practical reason have central roles as actual functionings (Gasper 2004):

[F]or as part of the conception 'human' comes the idea, found in Aristotle and Marx, that there is human, not merely animal, way of performing the other functionings: as a reflective, self-determining actor who takes other persons into account. So capabilities 6 and 7<sup>1</sup> are the core of the core. A person who does not think, or does not consider others, falls short of Nussbaum's normative conception of 'human'. (p. 183)

Three critiques have been levelled against this liberal approach to justice. Individualism suppresses common values that we find in families and communities. Equality is abstract and not contextual. It ignores differences, social settings, tradition and history. The focus on reason leaves no room for emotions. Reason is practical reason that is 'the capacity for understanding moral distinctions, evaluating options, selecting means to ends, and planning life' (Johnson & Reath 2004:532).

Nussbaum concludes that self-sufficiency and detachment are not necessarily strongly linked with individualism to the extent that the individual is in an ethical and political sense a separate unit. She further asserts that even if the individual can be self-sufficient, independent of relationships, it is normal to demand care and concern for the other, such as in the case of Jeremy Bentham's extreme self-centred psychology with an exigent normative altruism. Even Kant concedes that in the case of marriage, loving the other goes against the grain, but it is possible (Johnson & Reath 2004:523–524). In short, liberalism merely means that the individual is separate from others in an experiential way and not in a metaphysical (Buddhist and Platonic) manner. With regard to education, Nussbaum illustrates her openness to difference and in fact the indispensability of otherness for one's own identity by emphasising the importance of studying humanity. Referring to the Stoics, Nussbaum asserts three arguments to support education as formation for cosmopolitan citizenship: firstly, the study of humanity has value for self-knowledge; secondly, world citizenship challenges partisanship and thirdly, world citizenship recognises what is fundamental for human beings including justice and goodness and to apply reasoning to these ends (Crosbie 2017:133; Nussbaum 2002:8).

Despite the strong emphasis on the idea that a person is an end and not a means and that every individual rather than community or society has capabilities, Nussbaum does not deny the connectedness of persons.

1. Functioning 6 refers to practical reason as the ability to form a conceptuality of the good and to engage critically about the planning of one's life. Functioning 7 refers to one's ability to live in relation to other persons.

Affiliation (capability 7) (Gasper 2004):

[B]eing able to live and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for that situation, to have the capability for both justice and friendship. (p. 187)

is a clear indication that she moves away from 'earlier versions (e.g. 1992, 1995) which included a partly excessive individualism in their picture of universal requirements for a good life' (Gasper 2004:187).

Nussbaum responds to the criticism of equality that is abstract according to some feminists by contradicting the assumption that the individual is cut from his or her social and historical contexts. Within these social and historical narratives are phenomena such as power relations, social, cultural and political influences.

Power is not abstract but embodied in relationships, cultural practices and politics. Men are the ones who formulate (liberal) principles of power relations within the traditional society, and these principles form the moral foundation of society. This brings into question the equality of citizens (Johnson & Reath 2004:518).

From a theological feminist perspective, Ruether (1983:109–110), when working within the liberal feminist paradigm in her earlier career, moves to the social constructionist paradigms. Her motivation is the limited view of anthropology of those who place themselves within the liberal paradigm (Klaasen 2016):

[S]he claims that liberalism does not recognize the psychological and economic exclusion of women from the public sphere. The traditional male is regarded as the norm and women can be incorporated through tokenism. Liberalism provides the right for women to function in the traditional structures of society without transforming the institutions that enslave women. (p. 12)

Nussbaum argues that unlike the sharp criticism of feminists against abstract rationality, emotion is also regarded as a part of the moral life. Emotions and reason are different but not separated. Without denying the emotions as part of the citizen and without dispelling emotions as essential, emotions are a form of reason. By comparing Sen and Nussbaum, Walker and Wilson-Strydom (2017) asserts that:

Nussbaum (2001) is especially helpful on the role of emotion, fleshing out the thinner view offered by Sen to argue that emotions have a cognitive dimension, that they involve thought, judgement, and evaluation about what is important; they shape our mental lives and are a source of knowledge and understanding. (p. 33)

The distinction between reason and emotion can be taken further by stating that emotion, although not irrational, falls within the non-rational tradition and reason can be traced back to the tradition of Kant and Hume, and even as far back as the Greek and Stoics in Western philosophy. Nussbaum who follows in the tradition of Kant does not discard emotions.

Nussbaum opts for practical reason and not technical reason. Practical reason includes reflection on concrete situations and phenomena and less abstract than technical reason. Practical reason is rationality that is embedded in actual living situations or contexts. Such reasoning reflects on the past and present experiences for meaning making (Klaasen 2012):

[R]eason is not used as an abstract phenomenon, but as both an independent and a dependent variable. In other words, by its very nature, reason is formed and informed. Reason is a process that happens in, and influences specific circumstances and contexts, yet it is also influenced. (p. 2)

Social justice is the process, both in theory and practice, that ensures the protection and capabilities of participatory growth processes. The process is inclusive, multifaceted and varied. It seeks to address 'what society ought to be' through 'who we are'. Institutions, policies, societal structures and governments are the main proponents of social justice.

## Socially just pedagogies

What kind of pedagogy fosters an awareness and agency for social justice? I will mention five important aspects of socially just pedagogy.

Firstly, socially just pedagogies (Walker & Wilson-Strydom 2017):

[I]s not perfect pedagogical practice (and hence not the technical-rational concern with 'what works') in an ideal higher education system but pedagogy which advances justice especially for disadvantaged students by enabling their access to knowledge and their success. (p. 32)

Socially just pedagogy has a dual role: it is embedded in socially just principles and its aim is to form citizens that seek to advance justice for all people.

Secondly, socially just pedagogy moves beyond the ideal or abstract to the concrete. It is not technical-rational or abstract reason oriented (Rawls) that limits agency to the 'rational economic man' for its own benefit. Reasoning is practical (Nussbaum & Browning) or engaged reasoning (Klaasen) that encounters the other as constructive for self-identification. Practical reasoning takes theory and practice seriously to make sense of information and circumstances. Reasoning is a process of reflection on theory and experience.

Thirdly, instead of a one-way relationship between teacher and student, an interdependent relationship allows for a much richer epistemology. This kind of relationship moves beyond the question of 'what kind of society' to 'who I am'. Socially just pedagogy makes claim to identity of those involved in the pedagogy.

This relationship is described as reciprocal (Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015:4). Drawing on Kreber (2013), Leibowitz and Bozalek (2015) assert that:

[S]he sees authenticity as involving transformative learning, and as implicating both students and all academics in a process of becoming. Kreber argues that teachers achieve this authenticity through reflection: about the purpose of education, about student learning and development; and about the purpose of education, and about knowledge's, curricula and pedagogy. (p. 4)

I take the reciprocal relationship a step further and propose a three-way interactionist relationship amongst student, lecturer and non-human phenomena. I am suggesting that higher education institutions, teaching and learning material and methodologies play an important role in the transformation of teaching and learning processes, structures and agents. These non-human phenomena influence the 'becoming of students' and the identity of academics. This notion of relationship goes against the grain of rights-based models (Marshall 1950) and male enlightenment theorists (Rawls 1971).

Fourthly, students do not come to the lecture room without a history, background or narrative. History, background and narrative influence the academic development of students. If the lecture room is a space of care and belonging, then students' needs can be met, which will result in greater participation. A caring community evokes openness, trust and confidence.

Leibowitz and Bozalek (2015) draw on Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional theory of justice, economic, cultural and political, and conclude that persons can either be excluded or included from participating in higher education as equals. The economic dimension raises the question about equitable distribution of resources, the cultural dimension raises awareness about the valuing of past experiences of students, especially underprivileged students, and the political dimension refers to the membership of higher education institution and, in a more damning way, the complete exclusion on the basis of race, gender, class and ability (2015:4-6).

Within our department we get many students who visit our offices with requests for food, money, prescribed material and other forms of stationery. Many of these students keep us informed about their studies, and on occasions we are invited to their graduation celebrations and even after they have left the university we get invited to their weddings. Group assignments, debates, student-on-student discussions and other interactive learning experiences foster engagement, critical thinking, deeper learning and thinking, using imagination and enabling to expand existing academic barriers. Although identity politics, such as race and personal histories, is important, Bozalek and Carolissen (2012) add the belonging dimension that propagates crossing the threshold into common epistemologies and principles of social justice. The pedagogical space becomes more than dialogue. The space breaks the limits of words and language and opens a way for (Bozalek & Carolissen 2012):



[A] component of engagement that have a reflexive self problematisation (reflexive justice) as a central goal. This may mean that academics and students should reflect not only on their own histories of marginalisation, but also on histories of current and on-going privilege within and outside the frame of HE contexts. (p. 15)

Fifthly, public participation by students is both an aim and substance of socially just pedagogies. Public issues and critical engagement about these issues in the higher education institution or lecture room and outside in the broader society are one of the fundamentals of socially just pedagogies. Walker and Wilson-Strydom (2017) assert that:

[V]ivid dialogic and participatory pedagogical processes enable the formation of a capability for voice in decision-making, valuing students' ability to express their points of view, to argue and defend these and to do so in an educational environment which fosters this not only for individuals but through collaboration and group work supports a collective agenda too. (p. 234)

Continuous interaction, entanglement or overlapping of the public and private is realised by the university as the bridge that connects the societal and personal. Students are not only enabled to participate, but take responsibility for the development of self and others. Participation is twofold. It is a process of forming citizenship and transforming institutions, structures, policies and systems to foster social justice for all citizens.

Public reason opens up spaces of self-criticism that expands the epistemological horizon. Students and dialogue partners (whether human or non-human) exercise imagination and welcome risks and uncomfotableness. The results of such creativity are new ideas and (Walker & Wilson-Strydom 2017):

[R]eflection on the partiality of our own positions and prejudices whether about gender equality, genetically modified crops, or the death penalty, as well as requiring us to work collaboratively across the rich boundaries of human diversity. (p. 234)

Socially just pedagogies have many strands and vary in approaches. South African scholars such as Bozalek, Clowes, Zembylas, Carolissen, Leibowitz and Ngabaza appropriate the capability approach of Sen, the participatory approach of Fraser and the response-ability approach of feminist, new materialist scholars such as Barad and Haraway to teaching and learning. These strands have the marks of socially just pedagogies, and the aim of such pedagogies is consistent with addressing justice and equality in higher education institutions and its impact on the broader society.

Students take a more central position than the conventional one-way approach. Space is created for students to engage as equals with other living beings without discarding non-living beings. Knowledge production is as much the lecturer as it is the student's capability. Lecturers are open to newness, and students are open to becoming and growing.

Becoming and growing necessitate imagination and risk taking. The barriers between higher education institutions

and the spheres of politics, economics, society and culture are blurred or, for the very least, entangled. Socially just pedagogies such as the affirmative and transformative approaches (Fraser) concern itself with redistribution or more equitable outcome (affirmative) and the eradication of the root causes of exclusion, unjust distribution and misrecognition (Bozalek 2017:92–93).

This list of five aspects is by no means exhaustive, but it represents minimum capabilities (Nussbaum) or primary goods (Rawls). The list is the minimum for social justice in higher education institutions. It also represents a view of justice that makes compatibility with major religious, educational, political and social doctrines reasonably possible.

## Markers of teaching ethics to contribute to social justice in South African higher education institutions

### Ethics: An interactionist perspective

Ethics is a dynamic discipline and cannot be limited to a narrow definition. Over the last few decades ethics has become multidimensional and any attempt to define it neglects the dynamism. Ethics takes cognisance of society and social phenomena. Ethics is able to influence societies and social aspects. Critical reflection on ethical theories and embedded reason is aimed at structural injustices and root causes of alienation. On the contrary, societies and social phenomena influence ethics. This approach to ethics (as partner of theology) is described by Gill as interactionist. Drawing on Weberian or interactionist sociology, 'the emphasis is placed on theology seen both as a dependent and an independent social variable' (Gill 1996:2).

Within the South African context, teaching ethics must take seriously the changing social realities of post-apartheid South Africa. Ethics must ask the fundamental questions of the role of theology in general and ethics in particular in interracial, multicultural, interreligious and diverse societies. How can we teach ethics in such a way that it contributes to rights, human worth and caring persons? On the contrary, ethics, as a dynamic discipline, is also subject to social, economic and political constraints. What are the determinants of teaching ethics in faculties of humanity and social science? The South African Council of Churches became ineffective when it lost the prophetic role it had during the apartheid era. Financial and political constraints have placed the once influential role of the ecumenical church at the margins of political and social debates.

### The redefining of spaces of lecturer, student and non-human phenomena

The positioning of the students within the space of the lecture room, choice of material and content of modules, knowledge reproduction and the structure of the physical lecture space is not bottom up but within the centre. The student who

normatively occupies the marginal space of receiver occupies the centre space in socially just pedagogies. Bozalek and Carolissen (2012) view students as citizens that participate as equals. 'We regard participatory parity as a crucial concept for citizenship and social justice'. They further claim that (Bozalek & Carolissen 2012):

Nancy Frazer (2005, 2008, 2009) equates social justice with the ability to participate as equals and full partners in social interaction. Social arrangements that promote participatory parity are a prerequisite to enable people to interact on an equal footing. (p. 13)

Spaces of centres provide opportunities for students to bring their stories, experiences and perceptions, as critical epistemologies that engage the normative, yet sometimes uncritical knowledge of the all-knowing lecturers. The teaching and learning space is not fixed but dynamic. The student, lecturer and non-human phenomena rotate positions within these spaces so that learning and teaching become a process of growth, formation and enrichment.

### Formation of agency for social justice

Ethics concerns the incorporation of the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed. From an Old Testament perspective, ethics includes the prophetic ministry of the prophets. It is about the prophets challenging the disengagement of the kings and those in authority with injustice. The aim of socially just pedagogies is to engage the society and societal structures for the purposes of equality. Socially just pedagogies assume that taking responsibility and relationality is apparent.

Bozalek and Zembylas draw on the feminist, new materialist perspective when they claim that matter is not only tangibles like bodies, but it is intersected 'substance in the interactive intra-active becoming-not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency' (Kleinman 2012:76, quoted in Bozalek & Zembylas 2017:65). Matter is of the head, heart and hands, and refers to one's engagement with care, being active in the world for social justice. This kind of materialism includes taking responsibility for each other's 'becoming' and capability to participatory parity towards a more just world (Bozalek & Zembylas 2017:65).

Agency includes attentiveness: engaging with the text in a holistic manner. Listening to what is obvious, what is said and what is between the lines; using imaginary to bring out the symbolic, metaphorical and deeper conscious meaning of the text; and meeting the other (constructive other) with a common concern for social justice (Bozalek & Zembylas 2017:67).

Curiosity helps to expand the creativity of the mind and ultimately 'through the risk of opening up to encounters with the unexpected, to create enlarged mentalities' (Bozalek & Zembylas 2017:68). The expansion through imagination moves beyond the known and through

symbolically 'taking off one's shoes' enters the holiness of the other with expectation and awe. Curiosity entails the transformative encountering for change and expansion. It is blurring of boundaries or entanglement of the student and lecturer.

## Conclusion

The question of this special collection has been what may be learnt in ethics, and I have attempted to make a contribution in the area of ethics education at higher education institutions. At the University of the Western Cape and, in particular, the Department of Religion and Theology, the number of students studying ethics has grown astronomically, from about 300 registered students in 2010 to more than 700 in 2018.

Education has been a key issue in the transformation of the South African society, particularly post-apartheid South Africa. Education has been appraised as a tool of division during the five decades under apartheid rule under the umbrella of separate development. In 2015 and the ensuing years with the student uprising under the #FeesMustFall, education within higher education institutions received renewed attention.

The question that has become pertinent is the role of education in issues such as social justice. I conclude that teaching ethics contributes to social justice through self-reflection, pedagogical intervention and functionality. The interactionist approach to ethics allows for self-criticism by analysing how societal, political, religious and constitutional matters impact the discipline. On the contrary, teaching ethics also influences societal and political matters. Teaching ethics through socially just pedagogies without discarding the normative pedagogies places the student, lecturer and non-human phenomena at the centre of the teaching. The teaching space becomes a common space of reflection, growth and renewal for both lecturers and students. Teaching ethics has a function of formation and information. Students and lecturers become agents of social justice and not just producers of abstract knowledge.

Also of importance, contemporary matters of gender, race, ethnicity, class and culture intersect in varying patterns of power; matters of dismantling colonisation in ongoing processes and thinking around decolonisation are also noteworthy points to mention here. These issues are of importance in ethics education, as they are in the various disciplines within theology and religious studies.

Socially just pedagogies take social issues such as race, gender, sex, educational background and language seriously. It also considers and reconfigures the power relations of lecturers, students and pedagogical resources. What is the value of the relationship between these different agents and phenomena is important for formation and information.

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