PROFESSORIAL INAUGURAL LECTURE

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Entity: Centre for Higher Education Professional Development

Faculty: Education

Institution: North-West University

Topic: A timely question: how can we not talk about becoming a professor in the context of decolonising higher education?

Abstract

Drawing from my own experiences and critical reflections on my journey to becoming a professor, I show how two types of pressure facing higher-education institutions necessitate a revisiting of the role of a professor. These pressures are, firstly, to account for "market-friendliness" and, secondly, to respond to the transformation and decolonisation imperatives as a result of massification. I show the broader socio-economic and political conditions under which universities exist and the impact they have on the knowledge project. Given this impact, I explore the extent to which a professorial role may need to re-adapt to respond to broader socio-economic and political exigencies that continue to spill over into higher education. In this presentation, I neither prescribe how a professorial role needs to respond to these imperatives, nor am I questioning the role the professoriate currently plays in higher education. Instead, I suggest possible conceptual framings that we can draw upon as we attempt to re-envision this role.

Key words: professorial role; transformation; decolonisation of the curriculum; neoliberalism ideology; coloniality; academic leadership.

Introduction

You may have noticed that my topic is framed as a question put in the negative. I did this for two reasons. Firstly, I used "how can we not" to denote a need to be cautious. This cautiousness is necessitated by the context within which I am discussing the subject of becoming a professor. It is a context in which almost every sector in the western world is challenged by the need to juggle the rigidity of the ideology of neoliberalism, and the commitment to ensure its consequences do not affect peoples' mental health and general wellness. Therefore, in discussing the subject of becoming a professor, I am careful not to reflect on this role in ways that are laced by the "hegemony of instrumental reason" (Blake *et al*., 1998, p. 3). This hegemony tends to impose the criterion of economic usefulness to measure success. Within academia, the knowledge-generation project, its dissemination, leadership, as well as community engagement, cannot be measured in the same way we measure productivity in a shoe factory.

The second reason for framing my topic the way I have is that, in the South African setting, a context in which I have enacted my role as an academic since the late 1990s, there is a general political fractiousness and an undoubted awareness by all of us of social and material inequality. This broader societal uneasiness has spilled over into higher education. Its manifestation has been seen through an open and strong calling into question of the settled norms and epistemologies characteristic of universities. While this calling into question of the obvious inequalities that still persist has emerged mainly from students, some academics are beginning to grapple with it and call out the constraints that continue to undermine such calls. In the context of these calls, we cannot not talk about becoming a professor. Hence, as higher-education institutions (HEIs) operate within a climate in which the pressure from market forces co-exist with deafening calls for the transformation and decolonisation of institutional cultures, how can we not talk about becoming a professor?

In her 2017 publication titled *University professors as academic leaders: professorial leadership development needs and provision*, Evans (2017, p. 123) draws our attention to Malcolm Tight's opening question at his 2002 professorial inaugural lecture, in which he asks: "What does it mean to be a professor?" Evans (2017, p. 124) then admits, as would many of us in the South African context today, that: "the terms 'professor' and its etymological

derivatives, such as 'professorial' and 'professoriate', are reserved for reference only to those at the pinnacle of the academic staff hierarchy (full professors)".

Reference to "the pinnacle of the academic staff hierarchy" implies something more than a status one receives for having spent a specific agreed-upon number of years in academia. Rather than signifying a status, being at the "pinnacle" implies that very specific activities by an academic over a longer and sustained period have brought about quality interventions with tangible societal impact and a contribution to human knowledge. This constructs a "professor" as a *being*, a persona with very specific attributes, rather than a mere title. Several questions now emerge, for example: "what purpose(s) do (or should) professors serve and, in particular, what is the basis of their distinction?" (Evans, 2017, p. 124).

In the remainder of this lecture, I share possible thoughts in response to these two questions. I do so with an intention to contribute to the ongoing conversations about revisiting the role of a professor in a higher-education context as all HEIs continue to negotiate their way in the face of two types of pressure: firstly, to account for their "market-friendliness" and, secondly, to respond to the transformation and decolonisation imperatives as a result of massification.

Enacting a professorial role within a neoliberal model

The effects of the ideology of neoliberalism on universities referred to earlier have manifested, among other ways, through an imposition of a managerialist ethos as well as knowledge commodification. Writing about tendencies leading to knowledge commodification, Mbembe (2016, p31) paints a rather worrying picture:

> These tendencies are inherent in an institution run in accordance with business principles: the students have become interested less and less in study and knowledge for its own sake and more and more in the material payoff, or utility, which their studies and degree have on the open market. …The task of the university from then on is to make them happy as customers.

Studies on the extent to which this neoliberal era has negatively affected higher education and the *being* of a professor abound. For example, on the effects of

the neoliberal economic principles, Rose and Dustin (2009, p. 398) show how "public universities are unable to keep up with the rising costs associated with providing a higher education through tuition and taxes ... more than ever, public universities must aggressively seek out external funding to make ends meet". The unfortunate aspect of this is that universities are then likely to be confronted with questions such as:

> What happens when public universities are forced to look beyond the state for their financial lifeblood? What strings are attached to private money coming into the university? What new research expectations are placed on professors? What is the impact of those expectations on retention, promotion, and tenure decisions? How do teaching and service fare? How does the undergraduate and graduate student experience change? In short, what does the increasing privatization of the public university mean for its role in a democracy? (Rose & Dustin, 2009, p. 398).

On the way the role of a professor is affected, Rose and Dustin (2009, p. 398) note that the professoriate will be:

> inclined to pay more attention to material human welfare than intellectual or spiritual human welfare, resulting in a preoccupation with the applied sciences and vocational training at the expense of the humanities … political pressure could hinder the academic freedom of professors to think and teach openly without fear of censure.

Owing to this seeming onslaught by problematic market- and economic-usefulness discourses, the knowledge production industries such as universities are subjected to cultures 'strange' to us: annual performance management, the quantification of outputs, the need to penalise what is seen as disobedience at the end of each year. Writing about neoliberalism as an ideology, Parker (2011, p. 438) points out that it favours "... self-discipline (with punishment for lapses), self-reliance and the accompanying pursuit of self-interest". This value system would make sense if universities were producers of cars, shoes or sausages – countable items that are easily discernible at the end of each day, week and month. The consequences of this value system within higher education are noted by Maistry (2012, p. 516) as leading to:

> an increasing momentum towards a quantitative, performance driven indicator mentality. Such a mentality is likely to reduce the finely textured richness of the academic enterprise of universities and its human communities to bland, detached numerical scores. It [also] assumes level playing fields both at a global

level in which HEIs of the world compete and at the micro level within individual HEIs.

In my capacity as a line manager in various capacities within and across different HEIs since 2009, I have witnessed how, at micro level within HEIs, the playing field is not level. Indeed, the personal circumstances of individual staff members within my units have been neither the same nor equal. For some, personal circumstances enabled them to thrive within the neoliberal culture because of the leverage to access material, technological and emotional resources, as well as the institutional knowledge owing to their longevity with the institution. Other individuals either did not have access to such resources or what the institutions could offer was grossly insufficient. So, the latter rarely receive bonuses and/or succeed when promotion opportunities arise. In other words, the value system imposed upon us by the neoliberal ethos seems not to take seriously the fact that it is often individual circumstances that either enable or constrain delivery on certain expectations.

For the most committed intellectuals and scholars, particularly the professoriate, this gradual erosion of the culture of collegiality and unconditional support for one another remains one of the hurtful experiences. Under pressure to deliver outputs in the same way a person working in a bakery needs to, some professors have become invisible, often cognitively absent at Senate meetings, though present in body, with little to no sustained and scholarly resistance to the erosion of the culture of defending, supporting, and sustaining the knowledge project. Indeed, there is even no time to thoroughly read long documents that serve at Senate meetings, apply our minds, and engage in defence of genuine institutional care, staff wellness and sincere support for younger academics. The urgency is focused on chasing the next publication, the completion of a research grant application to ensure a successful NRF rerating, while there is a mechanical pushing of students to complete postgraduate study research at the expense of quality and impactful knowledge.

For these reasons – just like Maistry (2012, p. 515) – I had to critically "reflect on my complicity in and my attempts to temper the effects of alienating, market-driven university discourse and culture" in my capacity as line manager. Among other things, I created a two-phased process for a publication output by my staff to enable a balance between ensuring their mental wellness and generating a dignified and impactful knowledge contribution. Over a two-year period, every

academic had to commit to delivering evidence for the conceptualisation of an idea and data generation strategy, as well as a successful ethics application (Phase 1), and then in the second year to providing evidence for writing up and submitting (Phase 2) the knowledge generated. Only in the third year was I expecting an output in the form of a publication with a subsidy-generating academic journal.

This is perhaps the reason I still hold a view that individuals who have (currently are) actively worked(ing) and contributed(ing) to knowledge generation make humane and good academic leaders and managers. I also think they have the skills and aptitude to subvert and/or manage wisely the consequences of the neoliberal-era onslaught on the academic project.

Research seems to indicate that, within a context where a neoliberal model to run operations is in place, the majority of the professoriate within various academic entities receive unfavourable reflections on their contribution to supporting upcoming, younger cohorts of staff within academia. Various experiences by the university community in different contexts reveal the need for the deepened re-opening of conversations on what role a professor should play in a field of study. In her study on *Professors as academic leaders*, Evans (2013) attempts to engage in such a conversation. She reports on the extent to which, and in what ways, academics, researchers and university teachers think professors should be providing academic leadership to junior colleagues. Here are the highlights of some of the responses from her study participants:

> The most outstanding professors with which I've worked (regrettably the minority) are those that lead by example through engagement with the discipline. More importantly, though, has been their commitment/desire to engage with staff: supporting, inspiring, mentoring and developing them. With many others a professorship seems to have had the opposite effect, leading to non-engagement and protectionism of their own research interest/external recognition (Evans, 2013, p. 684).

In expressing what I would describe as one of the symptoms of the consequences of subjecting HEIs to individual rankings, annual performance management culture and ratings by international agencies, one of the study participants noted:

> Some of our professors are preoccupied with their own image outside the institute and are not really interested in what the "little" people in the institution need, whether it be in terms of career or personal issues. Even when

> they listen to you they give the impression of being concerned but when you don't get the result you know that it was just a pretence on their part (Evans, 2013, p. 684).

Indeed, this is not a surprising reflection. A climate in which success is measured by providing evidence that one is better than others, a professorial contribution takes meaningful shape only if there is something in it for the professor. As Maistry (2012, p. 520) notes, in a context where:

> competition is presented as an acceptable, moral characteristic and value, and incentives driving individual success; those subjects who are less capable for whatever historically determined reason are relegated to the barren hinterlands of a cold, ruthless and discriminating institutional structure.

The urgently needed academic leadership by and contribution from the larger sections of the professoriate in higher education therefore remain small. In writing about a professorial academic leadership, Evans (2017, p. 126) reminds us that:

> When applied specifically to professors, academic leadership generally connotes their influence upon junior colleagues' development into successful academics, and since professors are usually distinguished researchers, then the academic leadership they are considered best equipped to provide involves "creative", scholarly, research focused and intellectual-related development delivered through guidance, advice and example – incorporating much of what Macfarlane (2012) calls intellectual leadership.

In a postcolonial, post-apartheid and post-conflict society like South Africa, these thoughts on the role a professor could play are relevant. They are in fact timely if one considers the fact that the majority of the professoriate is ageing and soon to retire, and is currently supposed to mentor and support an increasingly younger, female, and mainly black cohort of new academics (Hlengwa, 2019). A possible dilemma with this expectation for the ageing professoriate is arguably that most of the fields of study most professors have worked in have serious traces of coloniality. By this I mean most fields of study in which the soon-to-retire professoriate has worked still hold undeclared yet powerful mindsets that see Euro-American worldviews as superior to other worldviews.

While I am not at all arguing that Euro-American knowledge and the traditions accompanying it should necessarily be thrown into the bin of forgotten histories (Mbembe, 2016), I am, however, insisting that, within our fields of study, it

would be prudent for the current professoriate to also draw from (or at least point younger academics to) different knowledge traditions to support their academic trajectories. The world is certainly larger than Europe and America, and we therefore cannot confine the next generation of knowledge producers to northern hemisphere epistemologies only.

The implication of this suggestion raises a question: to what extent has the majority of the current and/or soon-to-retire professoriate willingly and successfully embraced, and indeed begun to work towards, drawing from alternative and/or indigenous knowledge traditions from the Middle East, Asia or Africa? If the professoriate is to mentor and offer academic leadership to a younger cohort of future knowledge producers, how do we ensure that this process necessarily involves a deliberate countering of the colonial, gendered, racialised and discriminatory perspectives that have characterised various knowledge fields for centuries? These are important questions if our commitment as a country is to enter the global stage from our own perspectives, drawn from longstanding knowledge traditions that have sustained the continent and our country for centuries. Indeed, it is the goal of every nation to enter the global stage as equal role players and partners with the so-called powerful nations. South Africa is not an exception to this rule, and higher education in general, and the professoriate in particular, has a big role to play in ensuring this.

In the next section, I share some thoughts on the nature of the role a professor could possibly play if the commitment to contribute to transforming and decolonising knowledge generation and dissemination is to be realised.

The professoriate's role in transforming and decolonising higher education

As is reflected in some of my earlier academic outputs in academic journals and conferences, in the early years of my career I was persuaded that it is only by making explicit disciplinary discourses to all students that we will enable epistemological access. In my journey to becoming a professor, however, I have since realised that I was in fact omitting to ask the most critical questions. These questions include: to whose epistemology was I so committed to enable access? Epistemologies that are influenced and shaped by whose worldviews? In whose language was such access being facilitated? Whose interests were going to be served by successfully enabling such access? Finally, since written texts (to the

exclusion of oral ones) are seen within Western hegemony as the only medium for curriculum knowledge, what price were students whose backgrounds are predominantly oral paying as I was enabling epistemological access? As I will attempt to show in this section, a shift has occurred in my thinking.

Part of this shift has had to do with calls for the decolonisation of the curriculum that have received much-needed traction. Most importantly, these calls seem to have started mainly from fields other than education, as Leibowitz (2017, p. 95) notes that calls for the decolonisation of the curriculum in South Africa:

> … have been couched in arguments derived from the fields of philosophy, politics, literature and psychology, thus the social sciences broadly, for example with reference to contributions by Franz Fanon, Steve Biko, Ngugi Wa Thing'o or Edward Said.

There are growing conversations within the field of education on the subject of educational theory and decolonising the curriculum that link these broader discussions within the social sciences. Examples are Le Grange's (2016) work on decolonising the curriculum, Mbembe's (2016) work on Africanising the university, Seepe's (2004) work on indigenising research, and Msila and Gumbo's (2016) work on Africanising the curriculum. All this work represents growth in this area in the field of education. What appears to have been developing rather slowly in the field of education, however, is scholarship on theorising teaching and learning from a decolonial lens.

In this regard, Leibowitz (2017, p. 95) notes that scholarship on theorising teaching and learning has "mainly been produced in the West, and within the discourses and paradigms emanating from the West". This has produced what can be referred to as the "Western hegemony" of knowledge on theorising teaching and learning. This "hegemony" or the domination of one body of knowledge or one way of seeing the world over others has led to what Balibar 2016, p. 216) describes as "… one-sided, or historically dissymmetric 'translations' between cultures". In most fields in higher education one knowledge system has become dominant and has ignored the value of and/or suppressed other knowledge systems. This hegemony is sometimes justified, or perhaps defended, through the globalisation rhetoric, which I describe elsewhere (Mgqwashu, 2019a) as a tenet of neoliberal ideology to which even the self-professed critical thinkers within academia voluntarily surrender their academic freedom. Some of my research has attempted to show that in most post-colonies, both the globalisation and/or internationalisation rhetoric has

been conveniently used as camouflage for "coloniality". In clarifying this concept, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, p. 11) posits that:

> Coloniality must not be confused with colonialism. It survived the end of direct colonialism. In post colonies it continues to affect the lives of people, long after direct colonialism and administrative apartheid have been dethroned. What, therefore, needs to be understood is not just the "not yet uhuru" postcolonial experience but the invisible vampirism of technologies of imperialism and colonial matrices of power that continue to exist in the minds, lives, languages, dreams, imaginations, and epistemologies of modern subjects in Africa and the entire global South.

The understated negative effects of the power of coloniality on theories about learning and teaching, on the supervision of master's-degree and doctoral research, as well as on academic leadership by the professoriate, mean that the scope for revisiting the professorial role in our context is wider than we can imagine. My view is that most of what we consider to be scholarly professorial knowledge contributions and academic leadership could still be extended to also include inspiring dialogic encounters across various knowledge systems for their mentees.

If we fail in this, the consequence will be that future scholars inducted into various knowledge fields will be confined and limited to where their mentors (the professoriate) have ended. Future knowledge producers will in turn struggle to use their knowledge in ways that will enable the generation of alternative knowledge traditions for solving known and long-standing global challenges. Leibowitz (2017, p. 100) explains the consequences of this much more clearly: "The problem with an emphasis on the known and the given is partly that it impedes the consideration of what other societies or groups have to offer, and it impedes knowing what has not yet been said." As I will be attempting to show shortly, one of the consequences of relying on theories of learning and teaching (here I include research teaching and postgraduate supervision) informed by Western hegemony is a perennial tendency to still frame our work mostly from our middle-class positions and privileges. Writing about the limitations of this Western worldview in theorising teaching and learning, Leibowitz (2017, p. 68) notes:

> … several important interrelated phenomena are seen as bounded [within Western hegemony]: knowledge [is seen] as separate from learning and as separate from language; the personal as separate from the social; and curriculum as separate from pedagogy or teaching and learning.

Our four-year research project titled, *The influence of rurality on student trajectories through higher education: a view from the South* (2017–2020), enabled us to generate data that exposes the poverty in theorising learning and teaching in ways that are shaped by this Western hegemony. This was a collaborative international research project involving South African and United Kingdom (UK) partners. In this project, we investigated how students from rural contexts negotiate the transition to university. We also wanted to understand how prior cultural and educational experiences enabled or constrained their higher-education trajectories (Timmis *et al*., 2019).

To avoid treating students that were involved in the study as subjects we were studying, we deliberately positioned them as core researchers. We did this as a way of signalling, and indeed acknowledging, that who they were, what they knew and how they learned were aspects that constituted their identities and daily lives, and only they could educate us to understand these dimensions fully. We wanted to learn from and through them to gain access to alternative ontological orientations and epistemological traditions about which our years of university learning could not educate us. Only they could educate us about how their ontological orientations and epistemological traditions enabled or constrained their negotiation of their transition to and through the lived spaces of higher education. To be educated on these matters, we relied on narratives, digital artefacts and focused group conversations. These data generation techniques enabled us to gain access to understanding how family and community, including religious, study and self-help groups, influenced their transition into higher education and their journey through university. Among other things, our study revealed that:

> … students' histories and lived experiences in rural contexts help them to negotiate their trajectories across different lived spaces, including spaces still laced with colonial legacies that underpin HE curricular, systems, practices and values, thus shaping their identities, agency and sense of belonging (Mgqwashu, *et al*., 2020, p. 943).

From the professorial point of view, the study findings humbled me when I realised how the "worlds" students from rural contexts bring into higher education "evaporate" as they are forced by higher-education knowledge traditions to unlearn the practices that have enabled them to define their world, who they are in it, and what contributions their worlds have equipped them to make. To ensure other elements of our findings are accessible to the higher-

education community, this project has documented its findings through theses and dissertations written by master's-degree and doctoral graduates, publication outputs in several local and international journals, and a book titled *Rural Transitions to Higher Education in South Africa: Decolonial Perspectives,* published by Routledge in 2021. All this work shows the limitations of monolithic Western worldviews with respect to understanding and solving problems in our world.

With the aid of fellow professors in our research team, this body of work shifted our view of students from rural contexts in fundamental ways. Rather than a deficit construction of this group of students that we held as a result of our subconscious tendencies to equate a lack of resources in rural areas with cognitive mediocrity, our findings revealed how students utilised this prior collective experience in rural contexts and their own agency to move into new worlds. In one of the discussion groups of April 2017, a student co-researcher noted:

> … we found that we have a common thing … we know in rural areas that we were struggling … in terms of resources, teachers, and that thing of struggling made us to be able to read for ourselves, to be able to seek for information … (Discussion group, Town, April 2017).

This is an example of how what Western hegemony constructs as a deficit is actually an example of the development of good work ethic, dedication and commitment. It emerged very strongly from student co-researchers' narratives and as part of their daily practices in rural communities. Incidentally, this is a disposition that is necessary to succeed at university. It continued to emerge as discussions continued, as another student co-researcher noted in May 2017:

> … you have to do things for yourself in the rural areas. I think that's one basic thing about us as children from rural areas. In primary school, children had to clean the classrooms with cow dung and when it rained, they had to cover the holes with paper (Discussion group, Urban, May 2017, F).

Within the higher education context, this good work ethic translates to academic involvement in the form of self-directed learning as well. This is more pronounced in cases where there was an absence of an educator for a particular subject during their schooling or where they struggled in terms of resources and subjects taught. As I show below, co-researchers found ways to negotiate these challenges and work collectively in a self-directed learning manner. This was

translated by students into coping with university life, as one of the student co-researchers noted:

> In grade 12 there was no Physical Science teacher, so students studied the subject in groups in the evenings. We had to take responsibility for our own learning … Poor quality education … lack of educational resources, did not stop us from teaching ourselves (Discussion group, Town, May 2017, F).

These brief findings from our study reveal, among other things, the poverty implicit in the manner in which a Western worldview theorises on teaching and learning, with its insistence on constructing critical aspects of human life as separate. To suggest that knowledge and its generation are separate from the gender, race, social class, location, the day-to-day, contextual, cultural and linguistic elements of those generating knowledge, is plainly misleading. It is even more embarrassing to accept that this simplistic rational has continued to shape curricular design, its development, pedagogy and assessment within formal education. Leibowitz (2017, p. 96) asks questions I believe every pedagogue who still holds a Western worldview on the theory of knowledge, knowing, teaching and learning needs to take from this conversation: "… what would be the means for students who do not share social worlds with the world where such theory is developed, to engage with this knowledge? How would they come to know it?"

In another 2019 collaborative research project in which we and colleagues from the SADC region generated data that exposed the limitations of attempts to separate knowledge from the context of its generation and the knowers, we intended to contribute:

> …to efforts to shift the paradigms of reason on matters concerning social justice and higher education, namely repositioning the focus from the global North by concentrating instead on a lesser-discussed region: southern Africa. In doing so, we highlight[ed] the value of the use of drawings, or, as known in participatory research literature, participatory learning and action (PLA) techniques in place-based geographic research which, we argue, fits within the band of "socially just" and "decolonising" research methods (Leibowitz *et al*, 2019, p28).

The name of this research project was *Decolonising research: The use of drawings to facilitate place-based biographic research in southern Africa*. In this work, we used our findings to suggest concrete strategies to resist the blatant denial of the embeddedness and contextuality of coming to know. We achieved

this by using what we consider to be the decolonising method. It involved hearing the stories of the five senior academics through pictures depicting their way of looking at their educational journeys through their own eyes rather than through the eyes of another person, thus bringing to the fore their own experiences and interpretations. This approach has also been taken up in the South African context by, among others, Leibowitz, Swartz, Bozalek, Carolissen, Nichols and Rohleder (2012). They all drew from Zembylas's (2015, p. 2010) work on learning and emotion. This work:

> … stresses that learning is not only cognitive: it is active and affective, and experiential (Michelson, 2015). The problem with the view that knowledge is most importantly theoretical, is once again that it is viewed as disembodied, and separated from process, context and experience (Leibowitz, 2017, p. 99).

I was introduced to the idea of learning as active and affective and experiential at undergraduate level by Prof Michael Anthony Samuel. It was in 1997 when I was a final-year BPaed student at the then University of Durban-Westville (UDW). One of the assignments he gave us in the English Method course was titled: "Who am I?". We were all offered an opportunity to reflect in writing on how we were taught English, learned English, and learned in English. Not only did this assignment convey a message to a young person from a working-class background that my experiences were valued at university level, but also that my life in a black township, as well as rural context, and my schooling in grossly under-resourced schools were in fact great ingredients for making a great English teacher. Testimony to this is a closing comment he wrote to my assignment: "I would be happy if you taught English to my children".

As though to further testify to the value of the idea of learning as active and affective and experiential, in the same year that same assignment was converted into my first-ever conference presentation at the National Postgraduate Conference hosted by the University of Cape Town. It is the same assignment, furthermore, that became my first-ever academic output published in an international academic journal called *Language Learning Journal.* The title of this 2009 publication was: *On becoming literate in English: a during- and post-apartheid personal story*. This particular Vol *37, Issue No. 3* was edited by my mentor, colleague, doctoral studies supervisor and line-manger, Prof John Robert Balfour. In their own unique individual ways, over a sustained period, both Michael and Robert assured me I had something significant to contribute

within academia. I will forever be grateful to you both, my dear colleagues, friends, mentors, and at various times, my line-managers.

Concluding thoughts

In concluding this brief conversation on my journey as an academic since 1997, I have attempted to reflect on the impact of the neoliberal ideology on a professorial role. I also indicated possible theoretical and conceptual tools I have used over the years to escape the trappings of Western hegemony in my teaching and learning, postgraduate supervision, as well as leadership and management. In all this, I have attempted to reveal the theoretical and conceptual conditions that have continued to favour the elite and disadvantage the majority of university students.

Overall, the message from this conversation is that all postcolonial contexts need a professoriate that will consciously free themselves and those they mentor from the discourses that normalise the supremacy and infallibility of Western hegemony, in other words, Euro-American cultures, ideas, worldviews and definitions of the world. It is a professoriate that will consciously enable their mentees to critically reflect on and be reflexive in the way they engage in the knowledge-generation project. For all of us operating at the professoriate level and who are committed to contributing meaningfully to the transformation and decolonisation of higher education, we may need to take Santos' (2014, p. 157) advice very seriously:

> In order to identify what is missing and why, we must rely on a form of knowledge that does not reduce reality to what exists. I mean a form of knowledge that aspires to an expanded conception of realism that includes suppressed, silenced, or marginalised realities, as well as emergent and imagined realities.

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