Book review

Understanding Higher Education: Alternative Perspectives (2021) by Chrissie Boughey and Sioux McKenna

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Higher education globally faces multiple challenges from decreased state funding, through increased enrolments, to the growing diversity and changing needs of students and staff. In countries like South Africa and others in the Global South—the higher education systems to which this book speaks most directly—universities are also asked to stand in where the state may struggle to provide adequate support, for example, by providing students with funding, housing, food, and health care, including mental health care. In such a complex, layered, and challenged system, the questions we ask about students' access to, progress through, and ultimate success in attaining the "goods" higher education can provide need to be carefully posed. And we need critical answers that look beyond what individual students (and staff) are doing to succeed towards theorised understandings of universities as comprising structures and deeply rooted (and protected) cultures that reflect the societies they are part of.

This book offers such an account, positing that we cannot truly understand and, therefore, provide the necessary access to and success in higher education if we cannot see the connections between, for example, neoliberal market forces, the culture of new public management, and the way universities are managed and funded. In other words, we must see individuals—lecturers, students, administrators, vice-chancellors—as part of a much larger system that has its own "rules of the game" and ways of working, which are internally and externally shaped and influenced. This system, therefore, has structures and cultures that impact on what individuals can achieve, sometimes despite all their motivation and hard work. If we cannot see these structures and the deeper culture of our institutions as both able to constrain and open possibilities for students and staff, we are more likely to fall back onto common-sense or overly individualised explanations for why some students succeed and many others do not, and why some staff feel at home and many others feel otherwise.

These kinds of explanations, and the processes and policies they would give rise to, would be far more likely to entrench and protect statuses quo that are exclusionary, unjust, and unkind to those who have always been excluded or pushed to the side in one way or another, such as working-class students and staff, those who identify as LGBTQI+, students and staff with

disabilities, Black and Indigenous students and staff, and international students and staff to name a few of the main markers of exclusion. If we are protecting the status quo that offers meaningful success to those who have always had access to this and, perhaps, a few more but not to all students, then we are resisting deeper transformation of the cultures of our universities and of the structures we create that enable some to move through the system with ease while many others encounter hurdle after hurdle. If we are serious about social justice—and we should be—then we need to challenge this resistance and move past it.

It is this broader issue that this book addresses: how do we see, theorise, and thereby really understand our own roles in the higher education system and the university we are part of, and which is part of the larger system? How do we use this understanding to create more socially just ways of doing higher education? The premise of the book is that we need theorised understandings of how higher education has been created and sustained, especially in post-colonial societies where higher education is tasked with providing both public and private goods—educating graduates who can contribute ably and critically both to the growth and development of the economy and to the growth and transformation of society. Theorised accounts, especially using critical social theory as the authors have (specifically the work of Roy Bhaskar and Margaret Archer), can help us to look past common-sense understandings of, for example, why students are not doing what we expect them to do with their writing, reading, or assessments, or why some lecturers come to all the staff development events and others tend to stay away or seek help elsewhere. If we cannot actually see that, in the first example, students may be doing something else because we have not actually made clear to them how and why the discipline we are teaching works in terms of how we write, read, and create, debate, and critique knowledge, then how can we change this? If we cannot see, in the second example, that the environments we create and sustain may make some staff members feel comfortable and others feel excluded, then how can we help everyone to find a place of belonging? We need critical theory to help us push past easy accounts towards more difficult but more productive and necessary perspectives that can engender change.

One of the significant strengths of this book is how clearly and accessibly it is written; the theory is complex but the authors tread lightly, explaining the theoretical framework clearly in Chapter 2 and then weaving it through their discussion of the dominant discourses and policy challenges (Chapter 3), discourses that shape how we see and teach our students (Chapter 4), curriculum design (Chapter 5), and academic staff development (Chapter 6). The authors walk the reader carefully and concisely through a complex and layered system, drawing out relevance for higher education contexts outside of South Africa and the Global South. This is no mean feat and it is refreshing to read a text that actually explains what terms like "the knowledge economy," "neoliberalism," and "massification" mean, given that these have become buzzwords and, as such, are often mentioned as if their meaning is clear when that is not always the case, especially for scholars and readers who are new to higher education studies. This book is essential reading for scholars of higher education and for academics who want to better understand the system they work in, themselves, and their students.