

"Feeling the disconnect": Teaching sexualities and gender in South African higher education

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Introduction

"Crowded out by the dead" is the title of a two-page article in the latest issue of *Drum* (20 September, 2007; #783). The piece is written by Liezel Steenkamp, a regular contributor to the popular South African magazine, which sells 25 000 copies a week.¹ *Drum's* market has changed since its inception in the 1950s as one of the most vibrant sources of political and social information for young black men moving into urban settings.²

In 2007, while the target market is still black, mid-low-income South Africans, *Drum* magazine works at an angle to the slick and high-powered voice of *Y Magazine* (which surveys the *loxion kulcha*, fashion drama, and media-focused interests of a fast-moving and wealthy – or would-be wealthy – urban black youth) or to the business-oriented black masculinity of *Pace*. Like both *Y Magazine* and *Pace*, *Drum* includes material on socially important events (the funeral of soccer star Gift Leremi),³ and the lives of TV soap actors and actresses. But *Drum* consistently highlights what is special or interesting about the lives of "ordinary" people: Bubele Mhlana, the first black captain in the South African Navy, shown working in his garden with his two children; Cordelia Molwea reading the Bible to her small daughter in Sepedi, so that the girl does not forget her mother tongue.

Drum also has a particular editorial commitment to the issues of HIV and AIDS. In every issue, there are several readers' letters on the topic, and there are frequent feature articles about the consequences of the virus, stories of heroic families and campaigns, and images of families where children have been adopted after the deaths of their parents.

"Crowded out by the dead" introduces the dilemma of Newcastle, a town in KwaZulu-Natal (the province hit hardest by HIV and AIDS in South Africa).⁴

Here, we read, 22 000 people are dying a year, half the pregnant women who visit the antenatal clinics in two municipalities are HIV-positive, and the town is running out of burial space. The facts offered by the piece are devastating enough, but what makes the two pages of information almost unreadable is the photograph upon which the words are printed. There is an image of a grey wasteland across both pages: mound after mound after mound of charcoal gravel and stone stretch out as far as the horizon, awkward chunks of corrugated iron standing in for headstones, the names (barely legible) painted roughly in yellow, white, black. There is no room even to walk between the mounds; on top of one mound stands a small red pot.

Within South Africa, the challenges of HIV/AIDS can be readily enumerated: the struggle to contain and prevent new transmissions; the politicised and fraught terrain of treatment; the economic implications of home-based care for the ill and dying; the challenge of loving and nurturing children (and others) left in the wake of death; the imminent collapse of certain hospital systems and the strain on all medical resources; the disappearance of teachers, nurses, labourers, fathers, politicians, and singers from their posts.

It is also true that significant victories have been achieved: excellent legislation on non-discrimination towards HIV-positive people, vibrant (if occasionally infuriating) debate at governmental and NGO levels, and ongoing work at every level of society to illuminate the severity of the epidemic as a threat to the very foundations of democracy. Those engaged as feminist activists and researchers have for the past decade been vigorously addressing the challenges of living in a country in which issues of sexualities and gender are dominated by the realities of the HIV and AIDS epidemic. Such work has been undertaken at multiple sites of intervention: state-affiliated, NGO-based, community-organised. This work has also unfolded within higher education, which has seen the emergence of critical research units and activist organisations on different campuses.⁵ For those located in higher education as faculty, one area remains relatively unexamined: the questions raised by HIV and AIDS, as a national crisis, for those who work as teaching faculty within South African higher education.

While some universities have begun to develop policies on HIV and AIDS, and many include pockets of activism (driven by student representative councils, or units attached to the university itself), the meaning of designing syllabi and imagining pedagogic practices equipped to interact with the images of Newcastle's graveyards is – at a level of national concern – rarely explored. This article emerges from a concern not with research (as one arm of the

“core business” of higher education), but with teaching, arguably the most immediately powerful wing of a university’s engagement with the world.

In Newcastle, Steenkamp’s article says, “They can’t even say ‘AIDS’... the nearest they’ll get is to mention ‘the sickness’, ‘this thing’”.⁶

What does it mean to work as a *teacher* within contexts in which issues of sexualities and gender include the “unsayables” of AIDS, the fraught discourses of ARVs, or the fact that South African undergraduates are, by and large, young men and women born in the mid-1980s, who have never had personal knowledge of a world in which options for sexual pleasure, reproductive health, or desire were not publicly wrapped in the realities of sick babies, dying friends, endless injunctions around abstinence/condoms/illness, strange medicines, and myriad overt and subterranean conversations about “*this thing*”? While it is true that the young men and women who gain access to higher education within South Africa remain a minority, privileged by class, that is not in itself a reason to ignore concern with the pedagogies of sexuality and gender in university spaces. We would suggest that precisely because of the privilege of these spaces, the exploration of how, where, and why teaching occurs is critical to understanding the role national university education is currently playing in transforming the graveyard mounds of Newcastle into a language of survival, or, further: resistance, reclamation.

Locating research on teaching sexualities and gender in South African higher education

Over the past ten years, parallel sets of research interests have galvanised thinking in the African context within circles of researchers and practitioners concerned with the meanings of “gender activism” on the continent. One strong set has involved intensive engagement with issues of sexuality. Debates concerning the importance of engaging with policy and programme work that can integrate feminist insights on gender constructions with diverse theorisations of sexuality have resulted in a number of critical publications and events. The first post-1975 decades of feminist research and activism concentrated on changing the material conditions of women’s oppression in African contexts, in the mid-late twentieth century, prioritising issues of political representation and access to resources (land, education, and reproductive healthcare). In the exploration of gender-based violence, issues of the body and sexuality emerged, but rarely as questions demanding focused research in their own right.

Since the 1990s, however, this profile has changed. The combination of (1) broad-based policy and advocacy work on the prevention of HIV/AIDS, (2) the recognition that policy initiatives frequently fail because of inadequate recognition of the ways in which sexuality, culture, and identity organise the possibilities of “policy uptake” within different contexts, and (3) the growing interest in notions of sexual citizenship within emerging democracies, has led to increased engagement in African-based questions of gender and sexuality.

Such engagement has been visible across diverse spheres: new NGOs have been formed to spearhead educational and policy projects, legal reform to do with notions of “sexual rights” and “sexual citizenship” has been initiated, debates concerning the meaning of globalisation for sexual commodification and trade have become prevalent in discussions of poverty and development, and new research programmes with specific interest in sexualities within African contexts have been developed. Such programmes have been explicit about the need to research sexualities within African contexts from a perspective sensitive to the colonial, exoticising, gaze of earlier Western anthropology (Arnfred, 2004) and with a clear commitment to designing theoretical and methodological approaches capable of envisioning continentally indigenous and politically transformative knowledge.⁷

The need to integrate challenges of gender dynamics into continent-wide higher education debates (looking at issues of globalisation, academic freedom, access, citizenship and nationalism) constitutes a key contribution to a robust discourse on epistemology, and higher education in African contexts. Feminist analysis of political space, for example, interacts with either partnership or with challenge in relation to traditional departments of political studies; feminist theorisation of the body finds itself in complex, not always amicable, dialogue with theories of post-colonialism, performance, and representation, and so on. However, it has been much easier to demand that disciplines such as psychology and education integrate feminist questions about gender dynamics than it has been to insist on the essential connection between sexualities and gender. Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that ideas about sexualities emerge in very diverse disciplines. If the term ‘sexualities’ encompasses ideas about the body, reproduction, desire, trade, health, representation and social organisation, its relevance permeates different “knowledges” (gynaecology; history; film), each of which approaches the relevance of sexualities with a distinct lens, and not necessarily a lens simultaneously interested in feminist understandings of gender.

After researching the options available to South African students for contemporary, high-quality, life-salient university education on sexualities and gender, we had to acknowledge that very little is known about how the research and teaching of sexualities in South African higher education occurs across disciplines (such as public health, medicine, law, gender/women's studies (G/WS), social anthropology, cultural studies, and so on). Connections and disjunctures across diverse research initiatives, a highly complex issue, remain outside the purview of this article. But the possibility of looking at the salience of university teaching within "sexualities and gender" in South Africa was opened by an invitation for a small South African project to join an international team, headed by the Women's Studies Department of El Colegio de Mexico, the prestigious graduate university of Mexico City.

The South African team involved researchers at the African Gender Institute (Professor Jane Bennett) and at the Human Sciences Research Council's Gender and Development Unit (Professor Vasu Reddy). The invitation to us, from Professor Adriana Ortiz Ortega, was to join a five-country project looking at the interaction of higher education and sexualities and gender, with a particular focus on teaching. The project included Mexico, China, Chile, Argentina and South Africa, and the full results of the international research are to be published by El Colegio de Mexico early in 2008.

As South Africans, we wanted to map the terrain of disciplinary engagement with sexualities and gender in South African higher education, with introductory research into the teaching of sexualities and gender in higher education institutions in South Africa. The focus on teaching was chosen as a way of highlighting the importance of the connection between university classrooms and the environments beyond those classrooms, represented through students' needs and through university faculty, positioned as they are within the politics of higher education itself.

The broad motivation for undertaking such a project was twofold. Firstly, theories on the history and culture of higher education institutions suggest the overwhelmingly patriarchal nature of institutional norms within African (and indeed, global) higher education systems. These norms include curricular approaches to the body, identities, sexualities and the relevance of such concepts to diverse disciplines. Such norms are however constantly under negotiation, and have been challenged in a number of ways by feminists, especially feminist academics and teachers within diverse disciplines. There is a need to know more about how such challenges have approached issues of pedagogy, in South African

territory. Has the national discourse on “gender equality” at a constitutional level impacted in any way on the representations of “women”, “men” and sexualities within the paradigms through which the body is “taught” to young doctors, anthropologists, lawyers, cultural critics, and economists?

Secondly, theories on the institutional culture of higher education institutions also argue that while such institutions are key forces in the production of “professional” citizenship, they also construct gendered norms of sexuality (heterosexuality) that embed such citizenship into conservative notions of reproduction, sexual moralities, and “respectability”. How to “teach gender and sexuality” in environments which work to construct conservative gendered citizenship has been a focus of research in secondary education systems in some African contexts.⁸ Within South African contexts, too, there has been strong state-driven interest in school syllabi on sex education (still focused mainly on issues of physical development, morality, and health, but nonetheless present as a “subject”) and also ongoing work against sexual harassment, which continually raises questions of gender, violence, and sexuality.

The opportunity to work within an international team led us to design a project involving several different components:

- (a) the production of a database of information, covering baseline data on the numbers of higher-education sites (within departments, faculties, and institutions) at which issues of gender and sexuality are addressed, the range of courses and modules available, the curricula used, a breakdown of the resources drawn upon by these curricula, and the pool of academics currently teaching in the area(s);
- (b) intensive engagement with faculty, based in different disciplines, regarding their pedagogic principles and practices, located as these are within specific disciplinary paradigms, teaching contexts, and political locations and histories;
- (c) feedback from students involved in selected sites of teaching in order to develop a research strategy for uncovering the meaning of courses within students' social, political and academic lives.

The project was recognised at the outset as one which was simultaneously ambitious and introductory. We had no expectation of doing more than looking for the right questions to ask of the South African “gender and sexualities” pedagogic landscape within higher education. In the next sections, we share some of our preliminary findings as a way of opening up a dialogue on pedagogies, gender and sexuality within higher education, both within South Africa and more broadly across the continent.

Critical starting points

In 2007, debates on sexualities include debates on the meaning of rights, as articulated through recent international movements seeking to leverage space for sexual, reproductive and cultural agency. These movements are embedded in diverse activist histories – feminist, queer, and socialist – and there is not always agreement about the priorities of a sexual and reproductive rights agenda. Across the continent, the need to combat the transmission of HIV, to curtail sexual violence, and to ensure that women and girls have access to education, healthcare, and political rights as basic conditions of democracy has increasingly placed issues of sexuality at the forefront of theoretical and activist engagements with the state. The terms in which “sexualities” are brought to the fore as legal and political terrain remain contested – it is easier to insert conceptions of “sexuality” into frameworks of health than it is to discuss sexualities as sources of empowerment; constraint and “management” are often more audible as political approaches to sexuality than exploration or alliance-building across diverse “sexual” constituencies. Nonetheless, African-based debate on theoretical – and activist – engagement with local and continental struggles to understand the links between sexualities, gender, and socio-economic space is vigorous, nuanced, and valuable.

In South Africa, this debate currently cuts across several different political issues: the failure of the state to implement its ARV programme wholeheartedly in the face of an HIV and AIDS epidemic that is devastating the whole Southern African region; the integration of HIV and AIDS as an issue in the succession question for the ANC, in ways that are both vicious and complex; the validity of the Termination of Pregnancy Act (recently referred back to Parliament by the Constitutional Court on the grounds that, in 1996, there had not been enough popular participation in debates around certain clauses); the changing legislation on marriage – which (differently) impacts Muslim personal law, customary rights, and the rights of gay and lesbian people to marry; the outlawing of surrogate motherhood as a paid contractual arrangement; the processes of the new Sexual Offences Bill; the significance of the trial of Jacob Zuma, charged with rape in 2005 and acquitted in 2006 in a verdict that split the nation around the meaning of rape; the attempts to change legislation on trafficking; the attempts to subject the media to pre-publication government censorship on the grounds that this will decrease child pornography; the fact that 54 000 secondary school girls “dropped out” in 2006 because of pregnancy.

Within this national context, sexualities constitute a live zone of continuous negotiation for rights, where masculinities and femininities are deployed both as points of access and as barriers to social justice. For young South Africans, a critical education in sexualities and gender struck us as a prerequisite for engaging citizenship, and this project offered an opportunity to understand what those in higher education could be expected to encounter as part and parcel of their academic and professional development.

With these as starting points, we began the work of mapping what was available to South African university students as “education in sexualities and gender”. We used three different routes: intensive web-scanning; the collection and coding of faculty handbooks (listing course offerings in all disciplines and faculties on different campuses); and communication with faculty members in different universities and disciplines willing to share syllabi, put us in touch with other teachers, and alert us to zones of teaching on their own campuses invisible through web-pages or academic handbooks. Because our team was small, we were aware from the outset of our vulnerabilities (nothing “comprehensive” was likely to be achieved), and proceeded with respect for the fact that the information we gathered has to be considered with as much caution as possible.⁹

Any national survey of university curricula needs to acknowledge that between 2003 and 2005, the higher education sector in South Africa has gone through a large restructuring process, in order to attempt to address some of the imbalances caused by apartheid policies and legacies, which segregated educational opportunities at every level through racial classification and allocated resources in accordance with the racialised prioritisation of campuses. According to the state, South African higher education is being restructured to “eradicate racial duplications created under apartheid, to cut costs and improve efficiency across the sector, and to build stronger and better institutions able to produce more and better graduates.” Transformation of the higher education sector through institutional mergers and incorporations is intended to construct the foundations for a higher education system that is more in line with the vision and values of democratic development.

Throughout the country there have been multiple debates about the relationship between the intended effects of the mergers, and those unintended (such as the lack of “merger-stress” placed on the most well-resourced universities). The number of public institutions has been reduced through mergers and incorporations affecting most of the country’s former 36

institutions. The changes involve both (a) the restructuring of some institutions (technikons) which did not formerly offer degrees, but rather technical and professional tertiary education, into degree-granting “universities”, and (b) the merger of university campuses, in similar geographical regions, but with vastly different race/class-based constituencies.

There are now 22 universities in South Africa, but some of them have roots within the old apartheid system and carry the legacies of that (either in ways which privilege them – the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town are two of these – or in ways that leave them largely deprived of the resources they need to cope with massive increases in student demand, such as Walter Sisulu University). Others are completely new organisations, created by merging and renaming two previously separate higher education institutions. Mapping the course offerings available within a university is thus a task in which it would be easy to overlook options, because of the fluidity in the structure of a particular university.

The library of available websites was unstable, but was nevertheless a useful place to start to map the faculties, departments, schools and institutes located in each university. University websites provided access to faculty and departmental websites and these were then scanned for degrees and diplomas for courses that integrate gender and/or sexuality as part of the coursework. At the onset of the research, it was assumed that sexualities would not be taught in certain faculties and departments; namely agriculture, natural sciences, and engineering. However we did scan these courses, and our assumptions were confirmed.

As part of the scanning process, we used the words “sex”, “sexuality”, “gender”, “masculinity”, “women”, and “femininity” to search the website for courses. Within medical faculties, these terms were not useful at all, and instead we used the terms “reproduction”, “sexual dysfunction”, “maternal health”, “gynaecology”, “sexually transmitted disease” and “sexual health” to highlight teaching areas to which we needed to pay attention. Courses that were recorded for the purposes of the project were: (a) courses that made explicit reference to “gender” and/or “sexuality” in the course title and/or course outline, and (b) courses that made reference to topics related to sexuality (such as HIV transmission, or teenage pregnancy). Where courses were identified, we made no assumptions about the approach of the curriculum, nor the way in which issues of gender and sexualities might be connected to one another; we were simply seeking to sketch a general profile of the entry points through which

South African students might encounter questions of the body, rights, or health through the broadest of relations to gender or sexualities.

Other than the formal courses offered to registered students, courses being offered in workshops and seminars for professionals both inside and outside of the university in question were also recorded as “short courses”. These are offered by research units/groupings that operate as part of the faculty.

The search of the university websites allowed us to begin to map a national array of courses that integrate gender and sexuality into the curricula. Then we acquired as many formal university academic handbooks as possible (these handbooks list the formal options available to all students in hard copy, and are much more detailed than web-based information, in many cases). This was an arduous and time-consuming process, and we could not obtain all universities’ compendia of handbooks. Finally, once we were sure that a relevant course was being offered at a particular university, the lecturers and/or course conveners were contacted by email. A list of contacts was compiled, indicating the contact’s title, name, the name of the course taught by the contact, and the department and faculty in which the contact is located. Where no email address was available on the Internet, the university was telephoned and the email address obtained. We sent each contact a letter informing them of our research, asking them for further information about (a) the specific course that led us to them, (b) any information about other teaching and research that they may be involved in, and (c) other people within the university that they could refer us to. At least one contact, and often more, from each university was invited to participate in the research.

Our approach to mapping, through keywords in the title or brief course description in handbooks, clearly leaves out the possibility that courses may be taught (in any discipline) in ways that highlight gender analysis and/or interrogate issues of sexualities without having this visible at the surface level of a brief course description. Thus a course on “Holocaust history” may very well include an interest in the gender dynamics operative within that history, or a course on “African media of the 20 century” may address the representation of sexualities. Looking for “gender and sexualities” through course descriptions only blinds us to other – more interesting – possibilities. Nevertheless, we used the data we had to “read” as an incoming student, interested in questions of gender and sexualities, might read: “what is in the handbook, within my chosen programme? What can I find on the departmental or faculty website, if I am interested in sexual rights, HIV

prevention, the physico-medical repair of anal rape, desire and psychoanalysis, the economics of sex work and tourism?”

Several key findings emerged from our preliminary audit.

Firstly, although it was possible to find course offerings within almost all universities surveyed which drew on the term “gender” (or “women”), these were few by comparison to the overall number of courses offered by the universities, and heavily concentrated in the humanities and social sciences (aside from medical curricula on reproductive health, gynaecology and obstetrics, which assumed “women”). Of these courses, while the spread of disciplines in which “gender and ...” courses were visible (usually one within a department) was very broad, the term “sexuality” surfaced much less frequently. With a few exceptions (such as an undergraduate course in “Sex, Culture and Society”, offered by the Anthropology Department at the University of the Witwatersrand, a specialist graduate course on Sexual Rights offered by the Law School at the University of the Free State, and a course offered by the Classics Unit of the University of Cape Town School of Languages, “Sex from Sappho to Cyber”), most courses using the term “sexuality” within their title or brief course description were offered by G/WS departments. We found only one course in schools or faculties of health sciences that explicitly named sexualities as a curriculum interest (at the University of Pretoria’s Faculty of Health Sciences).¹⁰

Secondly, although departments (except for G/WS departments) usually seemed to house only one “gender and/or sexualities” course within their suite, the spread of departments and disciplines open to the consideration of gender and sexualities was very diverse. Despite the overall paucity of available courses at a surface level, the sheer spread of interests through which gender and sexualities can become part of a curriculum focus was interesting: courses explicitly looking at gender and sexualities could be found in almost every discipline (although not, of course, within every discipline in every university). Preliminary probing into this leads us to suggest that very frequently, where the teacher has had intellectual and activist experience in issues of social justice, including feminism, she or he is likely to bring questions of sexualities and gender into their syllabus, regardless of discipline. Without such experience, the curriculum – in any discipline – is likely to remain blind to the complex politics of gender and sexualities issues.

Thirdly, it is clear that key disciplines uniformly on offer to incoming undergraduates in most South African universities incorporate the potential

for teaching gender and sexualities. This may seem like an obvious point to a feminist reader, but it is worth spelling out. Within the law faculties, for example, questions of gender and sexuality were observed as being taught and integrated into the law curricula primarily through the departments of constitutional law, criminal law (criminology and criminal justice), private law, and public law. Sexuality is integrated into some law courses in relation to human rights (particularly sexual and reproductive rights),¹¹ but our survey suggested this is not a widespread approach at the level of course description. Determining whether legal faculty teachers approach the issues in a way informed by contemporary theory on the law, gender, and sexualities would require further investigation. We would see, for example, the following broad categories of the law as inherently gendered, and having the potential for the integration of gendered and sexual theorising: family law (the law of marriage, divorce and custody); criminology (the study of crime); human rights (sexual and reproductive rights, and the rights of children); and so on.

Within the health sciences, too, there is evidence that issues of gender and sexualities are regularly taught in the following departments: nursing, obstetrics and gynaecology, urology, public health, family and community health. From both course descriptions, and from (later) interviews with medical teaching faculty in four universities, bio-medical and development approaches dominate the teachings of gender and sexuality offered in the health sciences. With few exceptions, the survey indicates so far that sexuality is taught as “reproduction” or, occasionally (especially concerning youth) in relation to “risk” or “dysfunction” and is largely taught in isolation to the teaching of gender (e.g. gender as power relations, gender as access to medical resources, gendered analysis of health management systems, gender and epidemiology). Where there are innovative courses in “Gender and Health,” such as that offered at the University of Cape Town’s Public Health department, there is almost no focus on issues of sexualities.¹²

Obstetrics and gynaecology also teach aspects of sexualities (female), and courses include: women’s reproductive health, sexual reproductive health, maternal and child health and risks associated with pregnancy, and contraception. The researchers identified subjects or courses that are taught in the health sciences faculties that were assumed, by the researchers, to be gendered (i.e., an analysis of gender is critical to a valuable teaching of the subject), but in which gender was not mentioned at all in the course outlines.

It is clear that at multiple points, health sciences courses hold enormous potential for thinking through a critical analysis of gendered relations, and a sophisticated understanding of sexualities. At this point, it is not likely that such analysis is pervasive, but it is obvious that the intellectual and practical expertises introduced through health sciences hold great potential for excellent gender and sexualities education, despite the current positivist and bio-medical orientation of the curriculum.

Preliminary thoughts on what has been uncovered through the attempts to establish a database of courses are that despite the potential for issues of gender and sexualities to inform a very broad range of curricula, the Internet and handbook search suggest that it is the rare department in which this is happening. Except for the trans-disciplinary sites of gender/women's studies, and isolated courses in social anthropology, community health, education and psychology, the audit did not suggest a rich reservoir of theory, knowledge and applied research informing the core curricula of South African undergraduate and graduate students on questions of gender and sexualities as a matter of *social and political literacy*.

Moving beyond a mapping

As already noted, the methodology we used to initiate our exploration of how South African students at universities were “being taught” about gender and sexualities could offer only a very broad sketch of pedagogic opportunities, challenges, paradigms, and philosophies at play. In order to approach the project with more depth, the research team moved from engagement with websites and handbooks into a much richer set of data, conversations with faculty who were actually teaching, from different perspectives, courses on “gender and sexualities”. We used a number of different methods here: interviews, the development of in-depth autobiographical pieces of pedagogies in practice, analysis of syllabi, and a small national workshop in which sixteen teaching faculty came together for two days of intensive discussion on the pedagogies of gender and sexualities in the contemporary South African context. Here we offer some of the key observations, taken from our analysis of nineteen interviews with teaching faculty in eight different universities and seven broad disciplines: education, law, health sciences, social sciences, arts, and commerce (only one interviewee came from commerce, at Rhodes University, where she was teaching a course on sexuality and organisation).

Regardless of discipline, the complexity of “teaching sexualities and gender” was a live thread within all interviews. This related directly to the prevalence of HIV and AIDS in the country, and to the prevalence of “culture” as a term through which to negotiate the right to speak on questions of gender and sexuality. National political debates concerning questions of policy and treatment create discourses in which teachers and researchers operate within pre-scripted territory. To advocate the importance of considering poverty when understanding transmission is sometimes to be automatically aligned with an AIDS-denialist discourse. To stress the importance of good nutrition risks arousing the ire of some radical – and vitally important – civil activists. So teaching “sexualities” in contemporary SA is to teach “HIV and AIDS”, and to be interpellated into constraining political discourses.

Where faculty were taking the politics of gender seriously in the construction of sexualities, this was often because they were self-identified as feminists, or explained that they were “interested” in feminism. This did not always mean that they taught in G/WS (there were only two G/WS-based interviewees); it meant that they were located in personal and professional relationships to political activism concerning issues of reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence, the rights of lesbian and gay people, access to political and educational space for women, and other issues. Such locations were often rooted in years of work, outside the academy, and meant that they were attuned to theories about patriarchal, capitalist, and/or colonial deployment of sexual politics in the control of “women’s” bodies and lives. Half of the interviewees did not see a need to concentrate on the dynamics of gender as a prerequisite for understanding the operation of sexualities.

Although three of the six faculty in the health sciences had academic and personal histories of feminist and social activism, four of them approached the teaching of sexualities primarily from within a bio-medical model. Emphasis was laid on the anatomical and biochemical construction of the body, the implications of such design for vulnerability to illness or “dysfunction”, the need to think through access to treatment, and the integration of “sexual health” into overall well-being. These faculty all acknowledged that questions of sexual pleasure, sexual orientation, desire, and identities rarely figured within their curricula.

Of the 19 interviewees, 16 were explicit about their levels of overload as teachers, and discussed the implications of this overload for their research (and in some cases, their social activism outside the university). Depending on

disciplines, classes were felt to be “packed”, “very demanding”, “exhausting”, and regardless of their commitment to teaching, students were described as “very under-prepared”, “struggling to cope”, “needing more attention than I can give”. This impression was not related to their sexualities and gender curricula; it was an overarching response to teaching environments in which there are often more students in a class than can be accommodated by the lecture-room, some of whom have had poor or mediocre secondary school education, and many of whom are working academically in English as a second language. The comments on overload also hint at the stress of their institutions themselves; many battle with under-resourcing, an increasingly managerialist approach to teaching (counting “throughput” and “intake” as matters of subsidy, rather than education), and difficult political contexts.

There were radical differences of approach to “sexualities” based on discipline alone. The bio-medical/social constructivist split was only one among several (although it is perhaps the most influential). Social anthropologists spoke of approaching sexualities through theories on networking and the symbolic salience of body-fluidities; cultural critics spoke of identities as a primary lens; sociologists focused on intersections between class construction, transaction, and the politics of labour and human migration. The single law professor interviewed approaches sexualities through international frameworks on human rights, and national debates on customary and constitutional law (e.g. debates on marriage and inheritance laws). Within each of these approaches, different canons of authority preside (those who assign Mary Douglas do not assign Foucault; those who assign Jessica Benjamin do not assign Sonia Correa; those who assign Diwan and Thorson (on sex, gender and tuberculosis in *The Lancet*) do not assign Denis Altman; those who assign Sylvia Tamale or Amina Mama do not assign Mary Douglas). This struck us as both inevitable, given disciplinary divides and priorities, but simultaneously alarming.

There are widely differing relationships to “Northern/Western” and to “African and South African” debates within curricular design. While a minority develop curricula drawing on indigenous research on sexualities and gender (including material developed through NGOs), and contextualised within continental debates, the majority demand that students locate themselves primarily within Northern/Western literature on sexualities and gender, within their discipline.

It remains true that most university curricula in South Africa are dominated by texts from the US, Europe, or (occasionally) Australia. Interviews with

faculty about the priorities they select for organising curricula confirmed this – in only five cases was it said that, “A priority is to introduce students to writing from South Africa, or from southern Africa, about these issues. I think it’s crucial for students to read this material, to show them that the authorities can emerge from here.”

Most of the interviewees were explicit about the importance of teaching sexualities (despite the range of meanings this had), and many connected this priority to the national context, and to the daily challenges faced by themselves and students alike. These challenges were clearly named: HIV and AIDS (deaths in families, the need to take care of orphaned family members, the need to access ARVs, the difficulties of creating sexual pleasure and experimentation in a climate where transmission of HIV is high); the profile of fundamentalist and conservative scripts for femininity and masculinity; the prevalence of gender-based violence; the diversity of people on campuses (many different cultural beliefs, values, and histories are required to cohere in classrooms and beyond); homophobia and racism.

The most difficult part of the interviews came from questions which explored the impact faculty teachers believed their courses had upon their students; this was something developed more intensively within the national workshop and the autobiographical excursions into the politics of pedagogy. Interviewees were all asked to reflect upon the challenges faced by their students, and to think about the meaning of “what has worked” in their classrooms. For many interviewees, regardless of discipline, faculty, or university, this released a flood of concern. One said:

I am never sure what works. I don’t know what they hear, that they can apply to their own lives, even when they can write sophisticated essays, which is rare, I must say, the theories stay in their heads. Every week, one of them is outside my door, wanting advice about an STI, a relationship, needing to explain about why they don’t really like gay people. I’m not one of those department softies, you know, I’m not a mother figure. But they come and ask. And it’s as though what we’ve discussed in class has not touched sides.

In this interview, the interviewer points out that perhaps the topics on the student’s mind have been stimulated by readings on homosexuality or the networks through which viruses are transmitted. The interviewee (a lecturer in Social Development) shook her head: “No, I don’t buy it. I can feel the disconnect.”

Other interviewees recounted more positive impressions of the power of bringing gender and sexualities into students' intellectual paths, through different disciplines: public health, law, arts. Nonetheless, throughout the interviews, there is a sense of "spitting into the wind," of teaching vital ideas and materials into a context in which realities of political, social, and cultural difficulties render critical gender analysis of sexualities very challenging. Interviewees spoke movingly of students who would not take ARVs (and died), students who delivered babies in residences (for fear of getting help from friends and university health services), of students asking for AZT the morning after a sexual liaison, fearing HIV transmission but having been too scared to demand condom usage the night before.

Conclusion

There are diverse courses on South African university campuses that take gender and sexualities seriously, and this is, we believe, a relatively recent phenomenon. However, these are overwhelmingly located in the humanities and the health sciences, and in neither sphere do they constitute a primary zone of curricular emphasis for students. With the exception of material presented in obstetrics/gynaecology, nursing and community medicine, material on reproduction is not a core part of the curriculum, and is presented within a bio-medical model. A strong emphasis on HIV as "sexual risk" does help to develop another angle to the need for "sexualities education", but again, this is not generally approached as a non-medicalised area. Most other courses in which it is possible to see the presence of gender and sexualities issues from the course outline are elective courses, rarely taken within a cumulatively developed suite of curricula. There are also major areas of university education in which issues of gender or sexualities do not arise as curricular concerns.

It is undeniable that the national context creates powerful dilemmas for both faculty and students. Faculty perspectives on gender and sexualities teaching indicate that while such teaching does indeed offer a route into potentially transformative learning for students, this route is compromised by the general academic environment, but more seriously, by the intransigence of the idea that "academic theory/writing" is fundamentally separable from "ways of living your life". Even in disciplines committed to the presence of "the body" (through diverse, even contradictory, routes), the role of the university as a route into "professionalisation" trumps – or challenges – efforts to radicalise consciousness at every level. Individual faculty are often

dedicated to interacting with these challenges, and do so with innovation, political courage, and theoretical clarity. The impact of this dedication may well be felt at the level of a single course; it is unlikely to translate into a more widespread influence.

As researchers whose engagement with teaching has long formed a core thread of our own political engagement with the world, this project has raised a number of questions. It is clear that there is an urgent need for the “reconciliation” of social and medical Sciences not simply at the level of research methodologies, prestige, and so on, but in terms of how some young men and women (who may remain HIV-negative, experience huge sexual pleasure and joy in their lives, and give birth to happy and healthy babies) deserve “education”. It is equally clear that G/WS initiatives, brave as they are, are insufficient as “thin ends of the wedge” in terms of transforming pedagogic cultures with university teaching which can genuinely educate for a future in which young professionals, with university degrees, can be expected to fully engage notions of “sexual rights” or “sexual health” from a well-informed perspective.

Finally, it is also critical that concern with the actual practices of teaching – moving from offering a course to the more complex work of actually designing and effectively delivering that course (something not addressed in this article) – remains as much a focus of critical institutional transformation and research as any other area. There are always students who yawn, or doodle, or daydream about prospective lovers at the back of the lecture theatre. To be “out of touch” with our students’ lives, thoughts, and anxieties, however, will not simply render us irrelevant in a way we may not have been before. It would also leave those young men and women who do transcend the challenges of the current epidemics of HIV, gender-based violence, sex negativities and conservatisms, unable to push forward ideas about sexual rights or feminist democracy with the necessary critical intelligence. Such irresponsibility would also damage students’ vision of the global solidarities and alliances they need in order to make sense of currently constrained and painful political debates on sexual and reproductive health. As South African university teachers, we believe we have a powerful and challenging task ahead.

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Endnotes

- 1 AMPS figures for annual circulation of *Drum* magazine in 2006 are 1 300 000.
- 2 See, for example, Clowes, 2001: 1-20.
- 3 The talented and popular Leremi was killed in a car accident in September 2007.
- 4 The South African Department of Health seroprevalence study of 2006 estimated that 39.1% of mothers attending antenatal clinics were HIV-positive; the National AIDS Study of the year before (2005) put KwaZulu-Natal's overall seroprevalence at 16%, higher than any other province.
- 5 Such as the AIDS and Society Research Unit, at the University of Cape Town, headed by Professor Nicoli Natrass, and the Health Economics and HIV/AIDS Research Division at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The Treatment Action Campaign, as an activist NGO, has branches on several South African university campuses.
- 6 This is said by Mandisa Cakawe, a researcher attached to Amajuba Child Health and Wellbeing Research Project in Newcastle, in *Drum*, 20 September 2007: 11.
- 7 We are thinking here of the work of Rainbo; the African Regional Sexuality Resource Centre; the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER), Sister Namibia, the African Gender Institute, the Law, Gender and Sexuality Project at the University of Makerere, the Coalition of African Lesbians, and many others.
- 8 See, for example, Pattman and Chege, 2003: 103-112.

- 9 Lindiwe Bardill, at the African Gender Institute, worked as a research assistant on this wing of the project, and offered many important contributions and insights to the “mapping” process.
- 10 Unless psychology was housed within the Health Sciences (as it is at the University of the Western Cape, for example).
- 11 There are innovations here; there is a graduate law course in Sexual and Reproductive Rights newly offered at the University of the Free State. It is funded by the Ford Foundation, and pioneered by key faculty in the law faculty there. Similar shifts, where one faculty member is creating innovation in a conservative disciplinary space, can be found in other university sites across the country.
- 12 There are some degree programmes that merge courses from different disciplines (e.g. community health, the sociology of health) with medical courses on sexual reproduction and health, so that a more holistic approach to sexuality and health, which includes an analysis of gender, is generated. This was observed in some nursing programmes (at UWC in particular), where, for example, courses such as reproductive health, which take a bio-medical approach to sexuality, are integrated with courses that add insight into the social context of health and disease.