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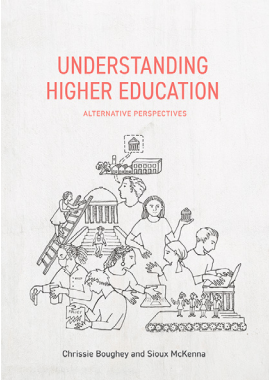
BOOK TITLE:
Understanding higher education: Alternative perspectives



AUTHORS:
Chrissie Boughey
Sioux McKenna

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REVIEWER:
Kathy Luckett[1]

AFFILIATION:
[1]Institutional Planning Department, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

EMAIL:
kathy.luckett@uct.ac.za

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Understanding Higher Education – Critically

This book is an excellent critical introduction to contemporary issues facing higher education. It is based on the knowledge and experience of two authors who have worked in and researched South African higher education for over two decades, at both institutional and national levels in roles that have covered student, staff, research and institutional development as well as contributed to national policy development. The book offers substantial commentary and critical analysis on the following topics: policy and dominant policy discourses in higher education; the discursive positioning of students and the implications thereof for teaching and learning; the importance of knowledge for higher education curricula; and the impact of institutional history, culture and type on changes and challenges to the academic job and academic project, policy implementation and possibilities for transformation. The authors correctly argue that, although written from the South African higher education context, the book holds relevance for all readers interested in understanding more about higher education, especially for those from Southern contexts. The book is a must-read for higher education researchers and practitioners in a range of roles – senior managers, policymakers, academics and postgraduate students, especially those on higher education studies programmes.

A key strength of this book is the way the authors provide an accessible introduction to their deployment of Roy Bhaskar's Critical Realism (an 'underlabouring' philosophy (p.21)) and Margaret Archer's Social Realism (a sociological theory of change over time) for researching higher education with a concern to promote social justice. They are particularly concerned to 'produce a theorized response to questions about the relationship between teaching and learning in higher education, and its role in reproducing the status quo' (p.136) – and how this might be explained in order to be challenged. The authors' deployment of critical and social realism allows them to gather data from surface-level descriptions of the goings-on in higher education institutions, such as observations, experiences and empirical regularities that arise from the events that take place in higher education institutions and wider society. However, in order to explain the emergence of these data and why some things do or do not work in certain contexts, the authors demonstrate how researchers of higher education need to dig deeper to understand how phenomena emerge as an effect of the interplay between human agency and the historically sedimented structures and cultures that condition particular contexts. While not being observable, it is these 'real' mechanisms that shape or constrain individuals' potential to exercise agency and thus the extent to which change can occur.

Boughey and McKenna are skillful in the way they put Archer's social realist theory and its concepts to work in subsequent chapters. In Chapter 3 they discuss how dominant global discourses such as the shift from the idea of a welfare state to neoliberalism's 'new public management', have shaped higher education polices since World War II, in ways that promote higher education as a 'private good' and students as consumers – undermining the idea that higher education should be state-funded as a 'public good'. Turning to South African higher education as a case study, the authors critically analyse policy developments since 1994 that aimed to make the South African higher education system more equitable as well as more efficient. Drawing on social realism, the authors show how historical socio-cultural conditioning during the apartheid era continues to shape the ways different types of institution have responded to the state's new policies.

In Chapter 4, the authors challenge readers to interrogate their discursive constructions of students, and particularly the prevalent notion of the student as 'decontextualised learner'. They argue that this discourse works to position individual students as personally responsible for their academic success or failure (p.54). Consequently, learning is understood as 'a set of skills or competencies which are a-social, a-cultural and a-political' (p.71). This understanding of the student and its attendant pedagogical 'solutions' partly explain why success rates in South African higher education continue to be strongly differentiated by race. The persistence of this discourse allows universities to get away with their failure to address the effects of classism and racism that still work as causal mechanisms on South African campuses long after the political demise of apartheid: 'That the university, through its current practices, plays a role in reinforcing the unjust social status quo is a bitter pill to swallow' (p.58). According to the authors, contributing factors include 'the language problem', whereby the individual student is blamed for failing to adequately assimilate into the dominant culture and acquire the dominant colonial language (English). This misrecognises students' identities and cultural resources and works as a barrier to academic success for many students. Furthermore, acquiring the academic literacy practices valued in the disciplines is a complex process involving identity shifts for most students; this acquisition process is a lot easier for students already familiar with middle-class literacy practices. The authors sum up this excellent chapter by arguing that, as long as students are constructed as 'deficient' and 'disadvantaged', universities will fail to offer them the requisite cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical resources required for learning the distinctive knowledge-making practices of disciplinary and professional fields.

In Chapter 5, Boughey and McKenna offer a nuanced discussion on the curriculum challenges currently facing higher education institutions, especially the importance of weighing up how to respond to the legitimate interrogation of whose knowledge and interests are served by our inherited curricula against the need to provide all students with access to theoretical knowledge. In keeping with social realist theory, they show, with South African examples, how access to this 'powerful' abstract curriculum knowledge is conditioned by social and institutional histories and contexts. They argue that access to abstract knowledge is necessary if the 'public goods' of society are to be distributed equitably.

Chapter 6 provides a critical summary of the pressures facing academics and the academic project from neoliberal ideology and the global 'knowledge economy'. A consequence has been a shift in power from academics to senior management, the casualisation of academic labour, the introduction of performativity and measurable accountability checks on academics such as quality assurance and staff appraisal and, consequently, a hollowing out of collegiality and a culture of trust.