

At the Chalk Face: three generations of Wits students.<sup>1</sup>

*Edward Webster on the occasion of the award of an honorary doctorate from the University of Witwatersrand, 30<sup>th</sup> March 2017*

Mr Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests, and fellow graduates of this great University. I would also like acknowledge the presence of my wife Luli Callinicos, and my son Kimon and my daughter Alexia – all graduates of the faculty of humanities at Wits.

Let me begin by thanking the University for bestowing this honour on me. Let me also congratulate today's graduates. This is a day of celebration of high achievement for you; but it is also a day of celebration for your families and your teachers. So let us congratulate your families who have made such sacrifices to be here with you today ----- and your teachers, for their contribution to your successful graduation today.

The English historian E H Carr used to say that what you see depends on which side of the mountain you stand. I stand at what I call the chalk face – the classroom - I have stood at the chalk face here at Wits for over forty years. And what I see, and what I want to talk about this evening, are my reflections on the three generations of Wits students that I have had the privilege to teach.

My first year at Wits was a demanding one. I had arrived in Johannesburg on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1975 handcuffed to my co-accused Charles Nupen. We had been arrested under the Suppression of Communism Act for calling, inter alia, for the release from prison of Nelson Mandela and promoting black consciousness. I recall my first night in the holding cells of John Vorster Square. It had been a lonely night. When I woke up and

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looked across the corridor, I saw three young white men behind bars. Desperate for company I called out to them asking them what they were in for. The one said assault, the other said dagga and the third said rape. They then asked me why I had been arrested. I responded in my best middle class accent. I said I had been arrested under the Suppression of Communism Act. They looked at each other, and then at me, and then the one said; Godt, he is a blerrie Russian. (You may recall that the SADF was trying to invade Angola at the time and the Angolan liberation army was being advised by Russian officers.)

Reflecting on the students I taught over my forty years at Wits, - which I estimate at approximately 25 000 -I found that they fell into three distinct generations ; the first begins in 1976 . Let me call this generation the Soweto generation. It was a generation committed to struggle and looked for theories of radical – even revolutionary - change. As one of those I interviewed observed:

Intellectually, I would say that the central figure we all had to orientate ourselves to was Karl Marx – whether we chose to reject him and go in a different direction, or adopt one or other of the intellectual currents that had their source in Marx – Antonio Gramsci, Leon Trotsky, Ernest Laclau, Vladimir Lenin, et cetera”.

Our classrooms were a familiar and comfortable space populated by middle class people who looked like us, were predominantly male and, at least publically, heterosexual. It was the high noon of apartheid. In 1980 half of my honors class were detained under the Terrorism act, some for months of detention without trial. It was the time of the United Democratic Front, of trade union militancy and nation-wide resistance to apartheid. But it was also a time of repression, of state violence, even assassination. The assassination of our

colleague and dear friend, David Webster, is a dramatic illustration of those times.

The release of Mandela in 1990 and the 1994 new democratic government was an event that profoundly changed the classroom. This – the 1994 generation - were quite different from the previous generation.

The most obvious change was demographic. A large number of our students now came from the sprawling working class townships of Gauteng. For many, the classroom was an opportunity to escape the poverty and political turmoil of the townships for a career in the private sector. Their approach to knowledge was more instrumental; they were aspiring to become the new black professional class. By and large they sympathised with the new government but many kept clear of party politics. As one successful product of the nineties observed. “My mother said to me when I came to Wits, stay out of trouble. Keep away from party politics. I did, and I was able to pay back my loan”, she proudly observed when I interviewed her.

But Wits was a strange and alien “white “space to most of this first generation of black students. In 1998 we introduced an academic internship programme into our research entity the Society, Work and Development Institute (SWOP). Honors students were given the opportunity of working closely with a staff member on a research topic. They received a very modest stipend in return and were required to produce a research paper and present it at a conference.

These so-called “disadvantaged” students took off. They started producing first class work. Reflecting on why these students succeeded, I was reminded of a well-known response in research situations where individuals modify an aspect of their behavior in response to their awareness of being recognised and feeling included. Put simply, these students

had developed a sense of belonging. Their performance dramatically improved. It was, I believe, because they were now recognised as partners in the production of knowledge, as serious scholars.

By the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, around 2009, you could sense a new assertive spirit in the corridors of the humanities faculty at Wits. A new generation was in the making, a third generation. It was to culminate in the Fees Must Fall movement of 2015/2016. In February 2016 when, in my discussions with my new black female masters interns on what they wanted to research on in their theses, they announced; “We are tired of white people studying blacks; we want to study whites”. No more of the rainbow nation myth; this generation had found its voice and the language to express their feelings of discomfort and sense of racial injustice in a world where knowledge production is still dominated by whites.

The decolonisation of knowledge was their aim and post-colonial theory their guide. Edward Said and Franz Fanon, and African intellectuals such as Steve Biko and Ngugi Wa’ Thiongo, were now the key theorists. What is striking about this, the third generation, is the leading role played by black female students. Black feminism, the black body, sexuality, had now become the dominant discourse of this generation. This third generation had found their voice. They were now comfortable in their skin and proud of their identity.

I have spoken in this brief talk of the three generations I have taught at Wits. But teaching is an interactive process. While the teacher educates the student, the student educates the teacher too. As Friedrich Nietzsche is quoted as saying:

“One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil.”

In a recent opinion piece in the *Business Day* Jonny Steinberg suggests that this vital relationship has broken down. He argues that a “generational estrangement deeper than we have acknowledged” has emerged between the Fees Must Fall generation and their “scorn for almost everyone over the age of 40”.

At times it may seem that a generation has emerged that has disowned the past. But generational rebellion is an enduring feature of all societies; indeed it is the dynamic through which societies renew themselves and move forward.

I have stressed in this lecture the importance of the chalk face – the teacher student relationship - and the need to recognise the dignity of the student, their material needs, their distinct family and cultural backgrounds, and of course their language. But the generational rebellion that Steinberg refers to is not simply about the need for better communication. It is a demand that goes back many generations, indeed it was a demand made by Robert Sobukwe when he was a tutor at Wits over fifty six years ago. It is a demand to change the content of the curriculum, so that South Africans, especially black men and women from all over Africa, can become the producers of knowledge.

Of course this does not mean that we drop Shakespeare from our curriculum; as Jonathan Jansen persuasively argues in *The Times*:

“The Bard’s messages are universal, having to do with human nature, human passions and human failings .... themes that speak across time and space”. Nor does it mean that black scholars are not producing cutting edge global scholarship.

Indeed, increasingly Wits social scientists are recognised as being at the frontiers of their respective fields internationally.

What it does mean is that if we are to build trust and mutual respect between the generations we need to make our classrooms places where our students are not only the consumers of knowledge produced elsewhere. This is the challenge for the class of 2016. In the memorable words of Frans Fanon, “ Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it.’ (Fanon, 1965) Your mission is to become the authors of the books the next generation of students read, the articles they cite, and the theories that shape their thinking.

This is the journey I embarked on when I joined Wits more than forty years ago. It is a journey that is not yet over. <sup>2</sup>It became a journey, to borrow from the Egyptian-Greek poet Constantine Cavafy, full of surprises, of discovery, of adventure, of things to learn. Now that I am old, rich in all that I have gained on the way, but not expecting that Wits will give me wealth. Wits has given me a splendid journey, without it I would not have set out. I have acquired such wisdom, so much experience. Thank you Wits and the generations of students I have had the privilege to teach.

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<sup>2</sup> I have drawn pieces of this last paragraph from the famous Greek poet Cavafy and his celebrated poem, Journey to Ithaca.