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UCT lecture unpacks how South African classrooms reinforce inequality



Prof Ursula Hoadley

Photo: Lerato Maduna

In a compelling inaugural lecture that combined decades of research with personal insight, University of Cape Town (UCT) Professor Ursula Hoadley exposed the entrenched inequalities in South African classrooms, highlighting how education continues to mirror – and perpetuate – social and economic divides.

Hoadley is a scholar in curriculum studies in UCT's [School of Education](#). She recently delivered a lecture titled: "Life in the classrooms: Understanding interruption and enhancement through pedagogy."

Two key ideas

Hoadley began her lecture by outlining two central ideas that have shaped her scholarship over the past thirty years.

"We have for a long time been aware of the reproductive function of schooling; that an education a person receives is strongly tied to their social and economic circumstances. Schooling reproduces social inequalities and largely fails to provide enhanced life opportunities to those who need them most."

She said that in a neoliberal world, this understanding becomes largely normalised. Learners get better teachers, teaching and knowledge if they are able to pay more. Therefore, pushing "your way to the front" of the opportunity line is much easier.

"In education there have been numerous attempts to critique and counteract these ideas, and these are generally focused on the importance of teacher agency, student agency, identity and representation," Hoadley said.

Observing Grade 1 classrooms

As part of her research into classroom practices during the early years of South Africa's democracy, Hoadley and two colleagues conducted observations in Grade 1 classrooms at schools in Khayelitsha. They found that a significant portion of the school day was spent waiting, eating and singing, with oral interactions dominated by call-and-response routines and chanted rhymes in response to low-level questions posed to the whole class.

This collective chanting and call-and-response approach was a defining feature of the classrooms. According to Hoadley, this pedagogical approach offered learners little opportunity to engage with perspectives beyond those already familiar from their homes and communities.

"Not once during the long days of observations were learners exposed to or required to handle books. We saw two teachers read from the Bible. And [by] October around a quarter of the learners we observed couldn't write their own names," she said. "Here was stark evidence of a reproductive pedagogy that failed to provide learners with the means for organising their world in new ways."

Different classroom processes

Hoadley noted that the classroom practices observed in Khayelitsha stood in stark contrast to those in more affluent Cape Town schools, a realisation that laid the foundation for her PhD research. She selected schools in both Khayelitsha and Rondebosch to examine how classroom processes vary across distinct social contexts.

She deliberately selected classrooms from opposite ends of the social class spectrum to clearly highlight the contrasts. Her aim, she explained, was to develop a theoretical understanding of the extent and nature of the pedagogical differences.

Two key pedagogical differences emerged in the early grade maths and reading lessons. The first, Hoadley noted, was the nature of the knowledge being taught. In Khayelitsha, teachers primarily drew on content that learners were already familiar with, such as rhymes and songs, what she referred to as everyday knowledge. In contrast, classrooms in Rondebosch were characterised by the transmission of school knowledge, including abstract skills, general definitions and conceptual understanding.

"The differences can be seen starkly in this example of student work. On the left, Rondebosch students were given a formal method of number decomposition to solve 54-7 – producing highly regular, correct responses," she said. "On the right, we see the excruciating

attempts of Khayelitsha learners [trying] to solve $313+12$ by drawing individual concrete counters and then counting them up – a highly inefficient strategy leading to many errors.”

Who’s beating the odds?

Over the years, Hoadley spent significant time in classrooms where effective learning was often hindered. This experience led her to a pressing question: were there classrooms that managed to break the relentless cycle of social reproduction? This inquiry became the focus of her next major research project, which aimed to answer two critical questions: What was happening in schools and classrooms that were defying the odds? And were there schools in disadvantaged communities where teachers and learners were achieving strong outcomes despite the challenges?

Together with a team of researchers, Hoadley identified a selection of schools to investigate these questions. While they observed some variation in management practices, particularly in more remote schools, they found relatively little difference in teaching methods across classrooms. In addition, she said, researchers found structure in lessons and subjects were clearly demarcated, which meant maths was distinct from reading time. There was also a lot more text available in classrooms. However, the pace at which teachers taught remained slow, learners also spoke very little and asked few questions. This research was conducted between 2012 and 2014 and took place at the time government implemented the national Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS).

“Teachers lacked the subject knowledge and instructional expertise needed to teach reading and early maths. Efforts to upskill teachers since the end of apartheid had been completely insufficient and it was apparent that changes in curriculum alone could not produce a significant shift,” Hoadley said.

Interrupt, intervene, transform

As she drew her lecture to a close, Hoadley reminded the audience that she started off by touching on how education is fundamentally about the specialisation of consciousness and about developing an abstract orientation to making sense of the world.

“But how can communal activity in the classroom result in the development of these individual capacities? How do we attend to internal individual cognitive processes while maintaining regard for the collective or the affiliative social function of chorusing [and] call and response in the classroom?” she asked. “Can we find a calibration between a communal social form and individualised knowledge orientation and what might it look like?”

As she continues her research, she said she hopes to find ways of understanding the relation between the theory of the world and the experiential world itself and how to engender a sense of belonging to both, and establish the capacity to interrupt, intervene and transform those worlds.

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