

A surfeit of irony:

University of Natal (Durban) in the 1960s

by Dan Remenyi

Education is an admirable thing. But it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught — Oscar Wilde

In my teens in Durban, I regularly complained about the awful science teachers I had at school. In response to this my father would say ‘don’t let poor teaching get in the way of your learning’. I didn’t really understand this and it was not until thirty years later when I was reading for my doctorate that I was able to learn entirely independently of the guidance/instruction I was being offered during my degree programme. It took even longer, until quite recently, which is nearly 65 years after my father’s advice that the penny finally properly dropped. Translating what he was saying into modern academic language the message is that learning is essentially independent of the quality of the teaching.

University of Natal (Durban) in the 1960s

When I arrived at the University of Natal (UND) as an 18-year-old in the 1960s I was expecting interesting, engaging, inspiring contact with lecturers. I was expecting them to have a genuine interest in facilitating my learning. Initially I saw my attendance at UND being for the purpose of learning and that the obtaining of the degree would be the natural result.¹ But this was not what I experienced. What I found was a collection of lecturers, some of whom had very little interest in how their lectures were received.² I expect that top prize for lack of interest in student reaction to the material being presented should go to the Department of Mathematics.

Mathematics 1 was taught to a group of about a hundred and something first-year students made up largely of would-be engineers but with a few science and even social science and arts students. The lecturer arrived promptly, greeted the class civilly, and then turned his back to the students and hand wrote a set of notes (words and formulae) he had prepared for himself on the blackboard. This constituted the totality of staff-student contact for Mathematics 1. There was no

opportunity for any questions or comments from the class. The students sat and wrote furiously for the full duration of the lecture period. After the 45 minutes expired, the lecturer turned to bid the class good day and walked away. The only function of the so-called lecture was for the class to copy down what the lecturer had written on the blackboard. Then the students were expected to explore those words and symbols.

There was no question of any but the most talented students understanding what was written as the notes were often cryptic. The education task was for the students to work out what the subject was about in their own time. Although this was not quite an autodidactic experience, it had a distinctive degree of similarity as learners were left very much on their own. This so-called lecture process was repeated three or four times a week. A tutorial was held each week and involved the students being given a list of problems based on that week’s notes. The tutorial was self-run in that students worked on these problems alone and if they needed any help, they could come to a room in which some senior students were being paid to answer any questions they raised.

The whole *modus operandi* of the lecturer writing the notes on the blackboard and the students copying them was so obviously unnecessary manual labour. There was in the 1960s relatively straightforward text copying technology available, and not overly expensive, so the notes could easily have been handed out. One of the more serious objections I have to what was going on was the fact that this process was being referred to as teaching.

The effect of this so-called teaching was to communicate to the students in a loud clear voice that the Department of Mathematics did not give a tinker’s curse if the students understood what was being delivered in

class. It was simply not the department's responsibility to facilitate the students' learning process. Clearly the pass rate for this course was not what it could have been. It is hard to see any duty of care being exercised by the university. Of course, there was no procedure for students to register their opinions on any aspect of this teaching or the tutorials.

Granted that the situation in the Department of Mathematics described above was an extreme case of a lack of duty of care. Other departments in the university were generally better, but some only marginally so. In the 1960s, first-year student lectures were not infrequently delivered by younger and less experienced members of staff.³ There was no question of a member of staff being given instruction in lecturing, never mind teaching.⁴ And tutorials were often conducted by senior students whose level of interest in undergraduates was variable. Remarkably there was no protest from the students. Whatever skills in critical thinking that were being developed in the students by the university were being mostly pointed away from the institution itself which had many inadequacies and shortcomings.

In general, the lecturers at UND I encountered lacked the ability to convey much enthusiasm for their subjects. I do not recall any sense of expectation from anyone that the subject matter being addressed was in any real way exciting. With regard to the subjects I took, the lectures seemed to be a bore for both the lecturer and the student. I am sure this was not the case for every subject taught at UND. For me it was only years later that I met individuals who were able to bring true interest and excitement to their subject in the lecture theatre.⁵

There are a number of other ways in which the educational experience at UND was inadequate; in fact, there are too many to offer a comprehensive list here. However, I think that the general examination process, which in the 1960s was one examination at the end of the year, is certainly worthy of specific mention. In the first place, to pass the examinations all that was required appeared to be to repeat the information supplied in lectures. For the subjects I studied, there was very little need to show any real or deep understanding of the material. Second, the examination questions were to a large extent repeated year after year. Indeed, this is not surprising as it is a demanding task to set original, interesting and challenging examination questions. Furthermore, there was no opportunity to acquire an understanding or appreciation of the methods used to grade the examinations or the results awarded. Perhaps the best way to understand the attitude employed by the

university is to say that it appeared that its staff could not see any value in entering into discussion with the students as to how knowledge was offered or evaluated. This in itself was also demotivating.

Interestingly the students didn't complain. Maybe students were too busy thinking about themselves and how they were coping with the material to have the time or energy to offer criticism about how the subjects were being presented and examined.⁶ For me, I was stunned by the novelty of the university experience. In some way it could be described using the opening words in Charles Dickens' famous novel, *A Tale of Two Cities* as 'the best of times' and 'the worst of times'. It was the best of times in the sense of leaving school, experiencing the freedom of the university, and then becoming financially independent of my parents. It was the worst of times in the sense that I had no idea what career to pursue; there was so much choice presented to me; and I had little or no money and thus I had to earn my own way through university.

Looking back on that period today, I had virtually no time and no emotional space to evaluate what was happening or for that matter any reflection on what I really wanted to do with regard to a career. Now I can see quite clearly just how inadequate the whole university educational experience was. Leaving the academic aspect of the university to one side for a moment, there was a completely different dimension of university life with which to come to terms.

In the early 1960s UND seemed like an oasis in a sea of prejudice with which the apartheid government was working hard to contaminate all aspects of South African life. There was some sort of feeling that the lies of apartheid had not fully seeped into the university. This perception was, of course, the view of an 18-year-old naïve undergraduate student. But then it was only a very small number of white people who did not directly or indirectly support the apartheid government. Engaging in a rational political conversation was not easy at that time. Although many Natal residents did not openly support the National Party government there was no real appetite among the general population for any attempt at political reform that might lead to some movement towards social justice.

The university was somewhat different. On the campus there was virtually no obvious support for apartheid. And this was certainly important to me. Of course, students and staff operated under apartheid and directly benefited from it but in general, and with very few exceptions, apartheid received no direct advocacy

from either staff or students. However, the campus was not apolitical. Almost immediately on arrival at the university, students were informed of the issue of academic freedom. Within days every new arrival was briefed on the subject of the University Extension Act (1958). This Act of Parliament made it illegal for universities to admit students of any race other than white, unless they obtained explicit permission from the minister of education. Thus, at UND one saw perhaps a dozen black faces out of maybe 1 500 students. The restriction on academic freedom was considered by many if not most of the staff and the students to be an extraordinary affront to the university tradition.

By being explicitly anti-government, at least on the academic freedom issue, the hierarchy of the university was able to pass itself off as being in some way a liberal and caring institution and the resulting comfort this gave some of the students was a major contributor to the feeling that the university was above apartheid. In reality there wasn't much evidence to support this oasis idea. In fact, the university's true mission seems to have been just to sustain itself in the way universities had done from time immemorial. From the beginning universities were institutions whose sole purpose was to prepare young men (with most universities only formally allowing some women to participate in the twentieth century) to play important roles in their country and thus be elevated to its elite. And by the second half of the 1960s a conservative student association had sprung up and of course the university had appointed a notoriously apartheid-sympathetic vice chancellor.

I found the political environment on the campus highly distracting. What was needed was someone to say out loud that our learning should not be interfered with by the political issues going on around us. But the university authorities were silent.

Universities and students as consumers

Of course, a university is much more than a mere provider of an environment in which to learn with the view of acquiring knowledge to pass an examination. Particularly for undergraduates a university is an ecosystem that facilitates young people's ability to grow up and create themselves. Provided a student has access to the necessary funding a period of study at a university can encourage development from the immaturity of school days to a state where an individual can take on the responsibility of life with some degree of confidence. This type of development seems to occur somewhat naturally in a relatively safe environment



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when a group of young people are brought together with similar objectives. Of course, the extent to which this happens is quite personal to the individual. In this respect some individuals excel, while others may not quite achieve the progress required. My impression is that, given the limits imposed by apartheid, UND did well enough in this respect.

Almost everyone would agree that the system I describe above needed reform. It is not obvious if there was a trigger that initiated universities reappraising their relationship with their students.⁷ There was a growing attitude in society that movements like Ralph Nader's Consumerism had some value.⁸ Although Nader's interests were in the safety of consumer products it soon became apparent that the voice of all consumers should be heard, and it was realised that in a sense a student was a consumer of education. This led to the conclusion that students were clients or customers of the university. The drivers of this attitude are complex if not obscure. Maybe students became more discerning about which university they should attend, maybe it was to do with increasing tuition fees or maybe it was increased competition among universities. I doubt if it was primarily due to the university experiencing a guilty conscience for former poor service. But during the latter

decades of the twentieth century student care became a real and somewhat urgent issue and the opinions of students began to count as they never had before.

Whatever drove this new policy it was and is still often regarded by many to be a great mistake. Acquiring an education is profoundly different from any type of commercial transaction one can imagine and therefore this analogy is highly problematic.⁹ A university cannot educate its students. It can do nothing more than create the environment in which students can learn and when it does this well it has done more than enough to justify its existence. Learning is something that only the learner can experience and at the very best a lecturer or teacher or tutor can only be a facilitator of this process. It is true that the quality of the facilitation can be of considerable importance, but the essence of good facilitation does not lie in the quality of facilities or equipment, or the number of staff-student contact hours provided, but rather in understanding the learning challenges and the sincerity of encouragement, evaluation and advice given to students. And furthermore, sometimes these intangible dimensions only come from the motivation of the learner.

Nonetheless universities conscious of having been neglectful of their students over some decades, if not much longer, decided to introduce a student service philosophy which in some cases was reminiscent of the retail clarion call 'the customer is always right'. This of course was and still is nonsense. It has had a number of most unsatisfactory outcomes which in some cases resulted in lowering standards and specifically in a strong reluctance to fail students who had not made the grade.¹⁰ And this puts the whole university system in great danger of losing its credibility.

Akin to this notion of students as clients is the idea that a university education should be measured in terms of its return on investment. According to Scott Galloway from New York University, education has been subject to the highest rate of inflation in the past thirty years.¹¹ It is certainly true that in many countries a university education has never been more expensive, and many students struggle to find the money to fund this experience.¹² This has led to an expectation that holding a degree has to lead promptly to a job offer carrying a salary that will immediately justify the expense of the education. This of course is problematic as many degrees simply represent an opportunity for self-improvement, which will not necessarily result instantly in more money.

To add to this problem, prospective employers have

complained that universities do not ensure that their graduates are work-ready and this may reduce student job offers and even reductions to salaries offered to graduates; and thereby their earning capacity. I do not find it easy to understand what really could be meant by the expression work-ready. It might be that those who express this view are actually asking for graduates to spend some time in the organisation becoming familiar with how things are done before being taken on to the organisation's payroll. Maybe this is about employers looking for more free internships or what were called in the United Kingdom sandwich degrees where students worked in organisations as well as studied.

It is hard to know how work-ready could really fit into an academic syllabus. In any event anyone who has ever given the slightest thought to the question 'What is the purpose of education?' will easily come to the conclusion that education is not just about a preparation for employment. Of course, in the twenty-first century universities need to have a more instrumental attitude than Seneca, the Roman philosopher. He argued that education should liberate the mind enabling individuals to achieve tranquillity and wisdom; and equip one to face adversity, practice self-control, and prioritise what is within one's control. In truth the purpose of education is different for everyone and should never be labelled like a pot of jam.

Of course, there are no easy answers to the problems behind the issues of student as client, the return on investment and the work-ready notions. At best they represent misunderstanding of the nature of education. Most crucial of all, education is just too important to be understood only through a simple commercial lens. Education drives society in a number of quite different ways, many of which are not easily reducible to slogans or numerical analysis. And clearly a higher level of education produces positive outcomes in society felt by all citizens. Furthermore, education is by far the most important way to empower individuals to make the most of their lives and the contribution they can make to society. Any society which turns its back on higher education or makes it more difficult for its citizens to acquire education, does so at its peril.

And the true route to education is not always well understood. Today there is a deep irony inherent in higher education, which is illustrated by a supposed conversation between a person with a number of university degrees talking to someone who is clearly well-educated but has no degree. The university scholar says, 'So you are an autodidact', to which the non-degreed

person replies, ‘Yes. Isn’t everyone?’¹³ Those who are enthusiastic about careful use of definitions might object to the word autodidactic here, but I am using it in the sense that ultimately everyone teaches themselves irrespective of whether or not they have obtained some guidance from a formal programme of learning with or without the help of a university. Irrespective of the quality of the institution, the teachers and the facilities available, the learners’ ability and motivation is overwhelmingly the most important factor in acquiring educational development. If the quality of the institution, the teachers and the facilities is good then learning may be easier, quicker and maybe more comprehensive. But even when the quality of the institution, the teachers and the facilities is not good, or even poor, a highly motivated learner can achieve just as much. In fact, some might argue that in this case the learner will have achieved more by being able to overcome the disadvantage inherent in the poor environment.

UND in retrospect

Looking back at my time at UND, the experience I had there was good enough in a number of senses. But it was not a fulfilling experience. It was clear that the system had no interest in me or any other student, except perhaps for the real academic stars. We took what was dished up to us and we made of it what we could. If one wasn’t totally uninterested it was hard to fail. I had become only interested in acquiring a degree certificate. I wasn’t really resentful towards the university, but had nothing good to say about it. I had not yet realised, and I wouldn’t become aware of it until I was reading for my doctorate, that all education is completely my responsibility.

Albert Einstein said that ‘education is what remains after you have forgotten what you have learnt at school’ and I have forgotten much of what I learnt while at UND. Noam Chomsky says that the sign of a well-educated person is someone who asks the right sort of penetrating questions and who knows how they could be answered. I was always good at asking questions and my ability to ask better questions was undoubtedly enhanced by my time at UND. And finally, and perhaps the most important of all aspects, especially of higher education, is what John Dewey said: ‘the goal of education is to enable individuals to continue their education’. UND certainly helped me along that path, which is evidenced by my going on to complete both masters and doctoral degrees.

I have always found the term ivory tower used to describe a university to be somewhat silly. And describing the world outside of the university as the real world is even sillier. This is not to deny that there was a difference between how universities and other institutions operated. But what could be unreal about the collection of human, intellectual and emotional resources that drives a university? What could be unreal about the physical environment required to bring these human elements together? What could be unreal about the enormous amount of money required to ensure that a university continues to deliver on its mission?

The above is obviously a personal reflection on my time at UND. A few years after graduating with a B.Soc. Sc. from UND, I enrolled for an MBA at the University of Cape Town (UCT). The manner in which the students were treated on that degree course was in some ways even more problematic than my experience at UND, but those who stuck to the programme and graduated benefited greatly. In my own case having a UCT MBA completely changed my working life.¹⁴ Reflecting on my UCT experience today, I understand that education is not simply the acquisition of knowledge, but really the development of a conceptual lens through which the world is understood or interpreted.

Although UND in the earlier years of the 1960s was definitely a mixed bag with not much in the way of either facilities or support, it did help facilitate the development of a number of fine graduates and, indeed, scholars. Every individual makes of the institution what they will and drives their own education accordingly; that is, in a way that could be seen as having some characteristics of autodidacticism. And the irony is that the success of UND was achieved despite the lack of consciousness of the need for student care and maybe this achievement was greater than it is typically today with student client care, return on investment and work-ready being primary foci at some universities.

Thus, I see the situation as possessing a surfeit of irony!

NOTES

- 1 Increasingly the purpose of attending a university is primarily to obtain a degree that offers credentials for a certain level of employment; and in many cases what is actually learnt has become secondary to this.
- 2 No doubt in other parts of UND there were gifted lecturers who performed as lecturers/tutors/teachers much better than the people I encountered.
- 3 Looking at this irresponsible teaching attitude from another perspective, the Applied Maths department delegated a class of more than 100 rowdy engineering first years to a young,

nervous, highly strung female junior lecturer in her early 20s. She asked them to list their names on a sheet of paper, which she then used as a class register. Someone in the class decided to create a fictitious student whose surname was Niss and whose given names were Albert Peter. For months someone ticked a box indicating the presence of this student named A.P. Niss until the young woman lecturer found out what it meant and burst into tears.

- 4 Instruction in lecturing might have been seen as antithetical to the principle of academic freedom.
- 5 I am not sure if this is the same even today.
- 6 In general, student complaints about the university were minimal and if any were made, they were not acted on. The Horwood fiasco can be seen as a result of student complaints (see Daniel Remenyi, 'Horwood the vindictive: an absurd fracas' *Natalia* 54 (2024): 50–54).
- 7 Numerous reasons have been proposed including competition among the universities and an increase in potential student knowledge as to what might be expected from a university experience.
- 8 https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3351.
- 9 The fact that money is paid by the student does not make the student-tutor relationship a commercial one. In the first place the payment is most indirect; and second the complexity of the relationship goes beyond any simple categorisation.
- 10 The cry in some universities was 'pass one, pass all'.
- 11 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scott_Galloway_\(professor\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scott_Galloway_(professor)).
- 12 The average ticket price for fees for Ivy League universities in the USA for a three-year degree is over \$25 000.
- 13 Someone who is self-taught has taught himself or herself a particular skill: a self-taught musician/furniture maker/cook. Most of these artists are self-taught; https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/self-taught#google_vignette.
- 14 Dan Remenyi, *An MBA Voyage of Discovery: Deep Down the Rabbit Hole* (Kidmore End: Academic Conferences and Publishing International, 2014).