



Reflections on Teaching Africa in South Africa

Sally Matthews

Rhodes University

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Abstract

This article draws on the author's experience of teaching African Studies to non-graduate South African students in order to reflect on some of the key challenges facing teaching of African Studies, both in South Africa and beyond. In particular, it discusses challenges relating to teaching a field as contested as African Studies, looking at whether teaching African Studies to mainstream African politics is helpful and at whether and how one can teach Africa in a way that encourages and develops critical thinking. The article also explores how the racial politics of the context in which one teaches African Studies inevitably affects the way in which students engage with the content of the course. While the article discusses these issues in relation to the South African higher education context in particular, implications for other contexts are also highlighted.

Keywords

African Studies, international studies, teaching Africa

Introduction

African Studies is, as Thandika Mkandawire (1997, p. 26) notes, a 'contested terrain'. There is little agreement about how Africa should be studied and much discomfort, indeed outrage, about how it has been (and still is) studied. The many disputes about how Africa ought to be studied raise several challenges for anyone who seeks to teach African Studies. In the South African context, these challenges are further deepened by particular debates around the country's position in Africa and the transformation of education in the wake of apartheid. As a university lecturer who teaches African Studies, I have wrestled with these questions for several years. This article draws together some of my reflections with a view of contributing to the rather limited literature on how university students should be taught about Africa and, in particular, the question of how Africa should be taught to African students. The first part of the article explores some challenges that arise when teaching African Studies. I look at the question of how to teach against the 'backdrop' of the various problematic ways in which Africa is represented in the media and in academia. I go on to explore some problems that arise when one tries to teach 'African

Corresponding author:

Sally Matthews, Rhodes University, UK.
Email: s.matthews@ru.ac.za

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