"You Can't Solve a Problem Until You Ask the Right Question": Positioning Afrocentric Learning Communities in the Post #FeesMustFall Context

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Abstract

Higher education in South Africa is in an era that demands a new lens and theoretical clarity to inform how we grow the collective identity of 21st century African students with a framework that is grounded in the following two questions, "Who am I/are we in this context and how can I/we contribute to the knowledge base in higher education?" Through this paper, we would like to position the conversation by addressing theoretical aspects of a humanising pedagogy, Afrocentricity and Ubuntu, within South African higher education learning communities. We argue in this positional paper that a Relational Centred Framework for Afrocentric Learning Communities will add to the complexity of the search for our African identity, also referred to as African ways of being, in higher education, especially for South African students in the post #FeesMustFall context.

Keywords: Afrocentric; framework; global; higher education; humanising pedagogy; identity; learning communities; social justice; South Africa; Ubuntu

Introduction

In every journey, there is a point of departure. The point of departure for this paper is one of questioning where all learning begins. In our current post #FeesMustFall (FMF) context within higher education in South Africa, students too are confronted with this critical but universal question, which is fundamental to our humanity: "Who am I?" Posing this question uncovers the deeper underlying probing in our own becoming,

which can speak to our identity, our being and searching across our life's journey. Hence, questioning can be perceived as a seed that is planted in our neurological thought processes, which in turn nurtures our sense of meaning as well as our identity as human beings. Therefore, our thoughts are part of a bigger schematic framework in our search for meaning and being. For those of us living on African soil this fundamental questioning often extends to "Who are we?" which is then posed to the collective and speaks to our collective identity. This collective identity is strongly rooted in an African philosophy and value system. Ubuntu, for instance, is often translated as "humanism," and is thus the core to an ontological paradigm that is based on the experience of a person existing in a web of interrelations (Geber and Keane 2013). Ubuntu is further frequently expressed as *umuntu ngumuntu abantu* ("I am because we are") (Geber and Keane 2013, 10). Mbiti (1970, 141) asserts his strong conviction in Ubuntu as "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." Should higher education institutions in South Africa, and Africa at large, not then be underpinned by this deep ontological value, Ubuntu, towards embedding a more indigenous framework of educational psychology in our search for becoming? As a result of the complexity of higher education, it demands a different lens. Thus, the work of Paulo Freire (1970) must be considered, specifically his work on humanising pedagogy. In this manner, we may be able to connect the work we do with the African lived experience. The humanising pedagogy framework must therefore include the value of Ubuntu as an expression of self in relation to other. In transforming the teaching and learning agenda within higher education, when we refer to Ubuntu as an expression of our humanity it is inevitable that social justice be the vehicle towards action. Social justice must, for that reason, be the tangible enactment of a humanising pedagogy. Thus, this paper takes us on a journey down the Western pathways of being and becoming towards a more Afrocentric (Asante 1980) way of learning as well as knowing.

Historical Underpinnings: Western Seed Planted on African Soil

In locating ourselves through the lens of Western pathways, we need to recognise and consider where higher education was historically located before we can accept that this history no longer has a place for further growth.

Cardinal John Henry Newman, an Oxford academic, in 1852 defined the idea of the university as a vessel for the teaching and learning of universal knowledge, with its primary mandate being intellectual and pedagogical as opposed to moral and religious (Newman 1996). We need to further consider that German higher education, based on the Humboldtian model developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt, influenced the European soil that regarded universities as "the home of the highest and best form of scholarship and science" (Rothblatt 2009, 195).

However, Smith and Webster (1997a) made us aware within the 20th century already that universities are too varied, ruptured and segregated for there to be a shared, or common, perception of what the concept of university represents. Thus, within a postmodern era, Smith and Webster (1997b, 104) make it clear that we have to consider

the "multiplicity of differences." These authors remind us that we must go beyond the traditional, singular purposes of higher education and consider the multitude of thinking about higher education and try to identify numerous "ideas of higher education" (Smith and Webster 1997b, 104). Therefore, today's contemporary university and the university of the future is known as a "multiversity" (Kerr 2009, 309).

Menkiti (1984, 172) states clearly the distinction between the Western and African view of humanity in relation to community:

> A crucial distinction thus exists between the African view of man and the view of man found in Western thought: in the African view it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory.

Being 21st century thinkers, in a post #FMF context, how do we infuse learning with an African philosophy in the light of dominant Western systems? Through grappling we want to take hold of how to adopt an Afrocentric (Asante 1980) theoretical framework within a learning community in higher education whilst also keeping in mind the person, which is central to this movement.

From (Eastern) Cape to Cairo: Global Implications for South Africa and Africa

Much like the Cecil John Rhodes Cape to Cairo dream (Frost and Shanka 2001), the adoption of this theoretical framework proposes implications for other higher education institutions in South Africa and Africa at large.

Cape to Cairo is an imperialist idea, which is associated with power and the expansion of British imperialism. It did not merely involve the invasion and stealing of land but also the invasion of thought and thus identity too was stolen. By framing ourselves within our thoughts, we want to remap our neurological thought processes, which have mental implications and consequent blockages regarding how we see ourselves and how we expand and explore ourselves with knowledge. Therefore, adopting an Afrocentric approach (Asante 1980; Mazama 2001) provides a path towards emancipating us, who we are, and how we acquire our systems of thought. This begs the question, "Will an African conceptual or theoretical framework enable us to invade our own place, our own space and therefore our thoughts which can be linked to our own emancipation or our conceptualisation about self and identity within the communities we find ourselves in?" Moreover, "Can this take us on a deep significant journey that can influence our own becoming and interrelations with others?" It is key to understand the deep ontological philosophy of my humanity with yours towards our own awareness of our own becoming and our deep significance of self that influences how we frame our own becoming. Further to these elements of humanity is the notion of a humanising pedagogy as "a pedagogy in which the whole person develops and they do so as their relationships with others evolve and enlarge" (Price and Osborne 2000, 29). In addition, a humanising pedagogy is a deep-seated pedagogy and "its humanising interest is linked

to focusing on both structural and psycho-social dimensions of human suffering and human liberation" (Keet, Zinn, and Porteus 2009, 113).

This is further reinforced by the well-known African proverb, which says, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." It calls for thinking, rethinking and other metacognitive processes around an Afrocentric (Asante 1980; Mazama 2001) orientated conceptualisation, which can then serve as the foundation of higher education institutions in Africa. This vital part of the transformation and curriculum transformation agenda is pertinent to develop the next generation of African scholars and can no longer be perceived as being any other business. A collective way of thinking, teaching, learning and knowing may further break down the silo mentality (Cilliers and Greyvenstein 2012) that is evident in higher education institutions. This further may imply that although a growth mindset (Dweck 2006) is encouraged, an African growth mindset may be needed in the current context of higher education in Africa, which requires further exploration.

A rapid decomposition of Western neuropsychological pathways will bring upon the decolonisation of knowledge that is required for student success. Student success is beyond the predominantly Western notion that is largely associated with throughput rates. Social justice is student success; student success is social justice. The distinguished university professor, Vincent Tinto (a theorist in the field of higher education, particularly concerning student retention and learning communities) and his proponents believe that, "student success is indeed everyone's business" (Tinto and Pusser 2006, 8). Therefore, social justice must be everyone's business too. Fraser (2009) "summarises two main approaches to social justice. The first focuses on redistribution of resources and goods, whilst the second focuses on politics of recognition" (cited in Gormally 2012, 17). The struggle for recognition lies in voice and identity and thus the idea of recognition is actively providing space "for voice, for involvement and for genuine inclusion" (Gormally 2012, 18). Furthermore, through Ubuntu we can give a more human face (Biko and Stubbs 1978) to social justice in South Africa. Leaf's (2008) "science of thought" describes a process that begins with the thought, then contributes towards the pattern of behaviour, which results in the output. This is related to the reality of human behaviour being a manifestation of conscious and subconscious intentions. Therefore, the current context may require indigenous educational psychology to recognise the role of these neuroscientific elements within the thought process of the current and future African as well as South African higher education student. Thus, we must challenge our traditional, singular concept of what is known as the curriculum, which is influenced by dominant Western thought. Hence, we argue that supporting students is just as much part of the curriculum as content is. Therefore, learning communities comprise the classroom experience and any other form of learning and belonging in whatever space, place, and time we find ourselves within the teaching and learning agenda.

Discussion: The Call for Afrocentric Learning Communities

It is explicitly evident that there is an increasing demand for higher education institutions in South Africa and Africa at large to develop more culturally congruent, caring, relational support for students. In addition, it is clear that Western, British and European knowledge had its time, place and era within Africa. Research in Africa needs to reclaim its indigenous knowledge and then ground itself in a rebirth on African soil. Africa needs to restore its indigenous ways of knowing and becoming and rethink its ways of acting on a thought, not a one-size-fits-all duplication of alien, or non-native, knowledge. We have to move beyond the rhetoric of the philosophy.

We are aware of and acknowledge the dominant Western knowledge systems and educational practices, which maintain a strong presence in the ever-changing educational systems; thus, because of our dominant thought processes we realise that we need to position ourselves in our own thinking around Afrocentricity. Looking at the "access to success" agenda within higher education, it challenges the support given to students in a South African context and reveals that new lenses are needed for learning to occur in communities. Zeleza (2016, 2) states the crucial significance of the massification of higher education and the implications thereof for social mobility in higher education communities:

> Massification had a profound impact on the organization, role, and purposes of higher education. It offered unprecedented opportunities for higher education and social mobility for previously marginalized social groups of low income or racial and ethnic backgrounds, as well as for women. But social inequalities based on gender, class, ethnicity, race and nationality persisted, and higher education became a powerful force for reproducing old structures of inequality and producing new forms of marginalization.

Learning communities are living organisms. Facilitating learning is a transformative act of kindness. If we take on the perspective that the student is at the heart of the matter, then we can argue for how we create a sense of belonging for the student within the community that the student finds themselves in. This sense of belonging can translate to the notion of a Relational Centred Framework, which is essential for creating Afrocentric learning communities. This speaks to interrelatedness and can never be singular. It gets its formula from the heart of the African value, Ubuntu, which was also valued by Nelson Mandela. A Relational Centred Framework must be holistic, integrated, and inclusive in creating a culture of care for all to feel a sense of belonging and to participate. You cannot harvest what you do not plant. If we do not plant thoughts of Afrocentricity and collective identity, then we cannot harvest collective action.

bell hooks speaks about "ways of knowing with habits of being" (1994, 43). Social mobility is vital to create learning communities of care. Considering the demographic profile of our students, for instance socio-economic conditions, first-generation status etc. within a post #FMF context is of significance to our teaching and learning practices.

As we position ourselves in this framework, we are aware of the dominant Western theories of learning and living communities. In this vein, Vygotsky (1978, 87) states that "to demonstrate that what is in the zone of proximal development today will be the actual developmental level tomorrow—that is, what a [person] can do with assistance today [they] will be able to do by [themselves] tomorrow." If we look at learning theory and at Vygotsky's (1978) theory specifically, it highlights that the work that we do collaboratively can enable independent learning. In this way, learning communities can then promote independent thinking. Whitehead's (2006) living educational theory asserted that individuals generate their "educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of social formations" (cited in Whitehead 2009, 89). Wenger (2000, 226) underlines that the "three structuring elements of social learning systems are: communities of practice, boundary processes among these communities, and identities as shaped by our participation in these systems." Wenger (2000) advocates further that learning is a social practice and that learning always occurs in a community. He elaborates and says that since the beginning of history, human beings have formed communities that share cultural practices reflecting their collective learning (Wenger 2000). Thus, participation in these communities of practice is essential to our learning. It is at the very core of what makes us human beings capable of meaningful knowing.

As Tinto (2007 as cited in Bueschel 2008, 8) points out,

> Students will get more involved in learning, spend more time learning, and in turn learn more when they are placed in supportive educational settings that hold high expectations for their learning, provide frequent feedback about their learning, and require them to actively share learning with others.

If our identity is ignored in the learning space we find ourselves in, when does meaning occur? Through adopting an Afrocentric philosophy in our current learning communities, we can possibly lead ourselves closer to a more meaningful experience of inclusive space in place. If we want to be relevant in the way in which we express ourselves and the expression of Ubuntu, adopting an Afrocentric view around supportive learning communities can be our way of being and becoming and can help us to be true to ourselves in how we earnestly seek authentic meaning. Therefore, the seven principles of Nguzo Saba can be the tangible articulation of the lived experience of African students. Mazama (2001) puts forward that Afrocentricity (Asante 1980) within the academic context is best comprehended as a framework.

Dei (1994, 4) argued, "the most important factor in talking about Afrocentricity in this context is to realize that there exists an emotional, cultural, intellectual, and psychological connection between all Africans, wherever they may be." Ten years later Maathai (2004 cited in Geber and Keane 2013, 8) said, "Without culture, a community loses self-awareness and guidance and grows weak and vulnerable. It disintegrates from within as it suffers a lack of identity, dignity, self-respect and a sense of destiny." In our current context, 15 years later, our search is to possibly adopt an Afrocentric framework

and align it with a so-called Western learning community concept in creating a culture of care towards the transformation agenda in higher education. Through this concept via Ubuntu we therefore enter a "relation[al]-centred [framework]" which is core to our quest as humans (Geber and Keane 2013, 10).

Voice and touch have to match; therefore, we propose that in a practice approach towards a humanising pedagogy, Ubuntu and African heritage are the components of a Relational Centred Framework. A Relational Centred Framework must make us mindful of how we look at meaningful learning experiences through the lenses of transformation in creating a sense of belonging. Fabian (1969) urged us to adopt an African notion of gnosis, which means seeking to know, inquiry, and methods of knowing, investigation and even acquaintance with someone. Is this perhaps how we can give face to and hold humanity as the core towards our own search for knowledge in Africa?

From an Afrocentric framework then, it calls for us to ask ourselves, "How can the theory of learning communities gear us towards adopting a more humanising pedagogical approach in how we support students towards achieving success and creating Afrocentric learning communities which embody a culture of care?"

Ginwright, Cammarota, and Noguera (2005 cited in Gormally 2012, 19) "advocate that the way to foster praxis with young people is to address three key levels of awareness," namely self-awareness, social awareness and global awareness. Keeping in mind self-awareness, we must be aware of self, self and other, and that Africa is part of a bigger global picture. We propose that through our daily practices, we have to consider the statements of awareness of a humanising pedagogy (Zinn and Rodgers 2012), which encompass the teaching and learning agenda at the Nelson Mandela University. Afrocentricity (Asante 1980) may then be the tangible commitment to care within the higher education arena, universities, academics, and the entire institutional body.

Table 1: Elements of a Relational Centred Framework

Statements of awareness of a humanising pedagogy (Zinn and Rodgers 2012)	Principles of Ubuntu (Malunga 2006)	African heritage: Seven principles of Nguzo Saba (Karenga 1998)

Students' humanity—its existence and expansion—is at the heart of a humanising pedagogy.	Sharing and collective ownership of opportunities, responsibilities and challenges.	*Umoja* Unity
Teaching is a political act.	The importance of people and relationships over things.	*Kujichagulia* Self-determination
Teaching requires awareness: listening closely, being present, communicating, and paying attention.	Participatory decision-making and leadership.	*Ujima* Collective work and responsibility
Ubuntu, connectedness, relationship, and community—feeling a part of something larger than oneself is central to the purposes of education.	Patriotism	*Ujamma* Cooperative economics
Learning requires teachers and learners to have respect for, a genuine interest in and curiosity about themselves as learners and the act of learning.	Reconciliation as a goal of conflict management.	*Nia* Purpose
Learners need to be recognised, appreciated, acknowledged, and seen.		*Kuumba* Creativity
A safe space for student voice/student self, and the teacher's genuine voice/teacher self must be created.		*Imani* Faith
Teaching and learning are courageous acts of discovery.		
Teaching and learning require health (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual) and freedom from fear.		

Conclusion

This positional paper is intended to attract the attention of authors who share our knowledge concerns. These will include researchers studying other dimensions of identity and knowledge as well as higher education. The global link is grounded in our humanity and personhood. People must be expressed in their context, not in content or literature. Stories are written in a certain context; therefore they have a certain meaning. The people in the context interpret the theory and make the decisions which inform how the theory is put into practice. A good practitioner knows their theory. If a theory cannot be practised, how good is that theory really? We are bound to seek meaningful significant encounters in how we relate to one another in that moment of the lived experience. Therefore, it is an inclusive, collective space that promotes the equality of thinking, the equality of being and hence the equality of our becoming.

Remapping history onto the future, therefore understanding the discourse on negritude as a movement in Africa in the 1960s, can emancipate our identity, thus creating new pathways and consequently letting our history speak for itself. With this paper, we plant and position our multiversity thinking around a Relational Centred Framework for Afrocentric Learning Communities.

Acknowledgements

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