Rethinking Higher Education for Social Responsibility in South Africa: Considering Synergies between Gandhian Principles and Ubuntu

Kanya Padayachee, Darren Lortan and Savathrie Maistry

Abstract

This chapter proposes that the current dualistic system in universities is inadequate to discharge their mandate to narrow the gap with communities. In contrast, the Gandhian model, rooted in the life of its people and Ubuntu, with community building at its core, present potential opportunities to develop social responsibility.

Keywords

community engagement – social responsibility – transformation – dualism – holistic approach – Ubuntu

1 Introduction

The African National Congress' Reconstruction and Development Programme (1994), intended to redress the inequalities of the apartheid legacy, included a higher education transformation plan. Inarguably, this sector was strategically positioned, as one of the producers of knowledge practitioners, to play a significant role in unravelling the structural problems of apartheid. As such, the Education White Paper 3 (Republic of South Africa DoE, 1997) correctly identified one of the primary challenges facing the sector as:

An unmatched obligation, which has not been adequately fulfilled, to help lay the foundations of a critical civil society, with a culture of public debate and tolerance which accommodates differences and competing interests. It has much more to do, both within its own institutions and

in its influence on the broader community, to strengthen the democratic ethos, the sense of common citizenship and commitment to a common good. (Republic of South Africa DoE, 1997, p. 4)

Thus, the pivotal role of higher education institutions in the broader transformation agenda of the state was made abundantly clear. Although that role was not supported with government funding nor clear directives on implementation strategies, the unequivocal policy mandate from the government was that universities should become more responsive to the socio-economic issues/development of the country (Thomson et al., 2010). Accordingly, it identified community engagement, community-university partnerships (CUP) as an integral and core part of higher education to, “promote and develop social responsibility and awareness amongst students of the role of higher education in social and economic development through community service programmes” (Republic of South Africa DoE, 1997, p. 10), “demonstrate social responsibility of institutions and their commitment to the common good by making available expertise and infrastructure for community service programmes” (ibid., p. 11) and, consequently, initiate the process of narrowing the gap between universities and communities.

The authors of this chapter, however, question whether in South Africa the current dualistic education system, which trains primarily for entry into the marketplace, may be adequate to the purpose of meaningful community building for the common good. Reddy (2004) argues that the post-1994 policy position of the state regarding the role of universities and social transformation can be read in two opposing ways:

The state demands that universities contribute towards economic and socio-political transformation, yet the nature of the transition from Apartheid to a democratic regime, its macro-economic state policies, and the constraints of globalisation have led to two opposing tendencies. In the first, universities are expected to perform as viable “corporate enterprises” producing graduates to help steer South Africa into a competitive global economy. In the second, universities are expected to serve the public good and produce critical citizens for a vibrant democratic society. (p. 5)

He concludes that, while these two tendencies need not be inherently contradictory, with the deep divisions of class, race and gender in South Africa, there exists the possibility of pulling in opposite directions. Avoiding this potential “tug-of-war”, therefore, seems to point to the urgency for universities

to meaningfully integrate social and civic responsibility through community engagement.

2 South African Context

South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994 was preceded by a terrible history of dispossession, oppression, and subjugation. A 25-year review of the country described pre-democratic South Africa as 300 years of colonial rule, 84 years of the racist Union of South Africa and 46 years of grand apartheid, underpinned by patriarchal relations, during which generations of the oppressed majority waged struggles for liberation against successive illegitimate and repressive regimes (Republic of South Africa Review Report, 2019, p. 10). It would seem that, by comparison, the challenges faced by Europe at the end of World War II or the Soviet Union after communism, pale. Is it any wonder, then, that the country remains largely riddled with such degradations as poverty, inequality, underdevelopment, unemployment, violence and more? These globally dismal profiles of developing countries are not new. What is also not new in developing countries is the recognition of the essential contribution of knowledge to economic competitiveness and social welfare, hence the role of universities as producers and disseminators of knowledge (Sutz, 2005).

In South Africa, specifically, with the consequential damages of its history, the higher education sector has an unmatched obligation to play a significant role in community and society building. Alarming, seven years after the 1997 Education White Paper (Republic of South Africa DOE, 1997), a report released by the Council on Higher Education in 2004 indicated that, "the role of higher education institutions in social change during Apartheid is more obvious and clearly visible than its role in the ongoing transformation of contemporary South African society" (Reddy, 2004, p. 6). Almost a decade later, the 2013 White Paper on Post School Training referenced a study commissioned by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) which indicated that "many of the community engagement initiatives conducted by universities have been of an *ad hoc* nature, fragmented and not linked in any way to the academic project" (Republic of South Africa Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013, p. 39). Thus, while a fair number of universities in South Africa may be implementing the various forms of community engagement, such as service learning, volunteerism and engaged research, to varying degrees and sometimes giving priority to one form over another, there appears little evidence of a strong and forceful presence, generally. This seemingly sluggish take up

of community engagement in South Africa, despite clear policy mandates (Republic of South Africa DoE, 1997), is deserving of urgent redress to give meaningful effect to the State's transformation agenda.

3 Gandhi and Ubuntu

In contrast to the “corporate imperative” attached to higher education, Gandhian philosophy is grounded in the belief that human values, underpinned by civic mindedness and social responsibility, should govern life, not the marketplace (Thakkar, 2011). Gandhi believed that education should be non-dualistic and, as such, rooted in the culture and life of the people, and should ensure all-round development of personality and character formation. Similarly, African indigenous knowledge systems are community-based knowledge systems that members of a culturally specific community have developed and used for centuries, for shared livelihood and sustainability. They differ from dualistic Western knowledge systems due to their holistic and communal approach to knowledge development, use and sharing (Kaya & Padayachee, 2013). Intrinsic to both these perspectives are interdependency and interconnectedness, unlike the modern, fragmented, and linear Western concept based principally on individualism, financial compensation and without reciprocity.

According to this holistic paradigm, the creation of a better society entails developing the individual along natural and ethical lines within the context of the collective, a vision embodied in the spirit of Ubuntu. Tutu (1999, cited in Odora Hoppers, 2004, p. 4) explains:

A person is said to have Ubuntu if they are caring, generous, hospitable, and compassionate. It means that my humanity is caught up with and inextricably bound with yours. In other words, we belong in a bundle of life. A person is a person through other people. It is not ‘I think therefore I am’, but rather ‘I am human because I belong’. Harmony, friendliness, and community are the greatest good.

The philosophy of Ubuntu, therefore, advocates a fundamental respect in the rights of others, as well as a deep allegiance to the collective identity. It serves to regulate the exercise of individual rights by emphasising sharing and co-responsibility and the mutual enjoyment of rights by all (Mabovula, 2011, p. 40). This integrated way of life, reflecting the fundamental principles of social responsibility, necessitates the integration of the inner qualities of human life with the outer physical, social world. Higher education institutions in South

Africa have a critical role to play in nurturing this value system alongside the 'business' of knowledge transmission. In this regard, Nkondo (2007, cited in Letseka, 2012, p. 56) argues that the education system needs to play a more effective role in the political, social, and economic reordering of the state and society. What is needed, he believes, is for education to articulate a methodology for developing an Ubuntu social disposition. An Ubuntu-oriented framework, according to him, could be the engine and elixir for transformation, particularly if a clear methodology existed for the integration of its principles into a national system of education and training.

Although, Gandhi did not develop any theory or paradigm in matters relating directly to education, his holistic perspective on life extended to this field. Education had to develop integrally the head, hand and heart toward its ultimate objective of self-development for community development, which in a current context would be a transformative approach. According to Singleton (2015), this model shows the holistic nature of transformative experience and relates the cognitive domain (head) to critical reflection, the psychomotor domain (hands) to engagement and the affective domain (heart) to relational knowing (Singleton, 2015). So too, African indigenous knowledge systems are predicated on coherence and harmony. Malan (1997, cited in Odora Hoppers, 2004, p. 3) explains that:

The relationship between people, the knowledge and the technologies for its application are undergirded by a cosmology, a world view. In the African context, the relationship with and to nature, human agency, and human solidarity, for instance, underpins the knowledge system and the human existence around it. Relationships between people hold pride of place, expressed in the various philosophies across Africa, and this is best captured by the African concept of Ubuntu – a human-trophic philosophy, a turned toward-ness.

Thus, the synergies between an interpretation of Gandhi's views on the human and humane collective and its parallels with that of the African indigenous ethic in Ubuntu can be useful in rethinking higher education for social responsibility through community engagement in South Africa.

Gandhi's ideas of social reconstruction, which had already started forming in the last few years of his stay in South Africa, echo the White Paper's equity and redress goal "to harness the social commitment and energy of young people to the needs of the Reconstruction and Development Programme" (Republic of South Africa DoE, 1997, p. 17). Implicit in this is the Gandhian belief that the individual and the society are contributory to each other's happiness and

that the individual is regarded not as a separate entity but as a constituent unit of society. Gandhi visualised a society of diverse people based on mutual understanding, cooperation, and respect (Srinivasan et al., 1999). This concept of social welfare – *Sarvodaya* – was based on a healthy give-and-take between the individual and society, with each contributing to the other's moral, spiritual, economic and social progress, prosperity and happiness, unlike the modern dualistic and dichotomous Western concept based principally on individualism, economic redress and excluding mutuality (Srinivasan et al., 1999). According to this holistic paradigm, the creation of a better society emphasises the interdependent relationship between the individual and community/society, a vision encapsulated in the spirit of the Higher Education White Paper (1997) and echoed in the Ubuntu way of life. As Pityana (1999, cited in Odora Hoppers, 2004, pp. 4–5) explains, “Ubuntu is an organising principle of African morality, a unifying vision, a spiritual foundation and a social ethic. It defines the baseline for a morality of compassion, communalism and concern for the interests of the collective”.

The Gandhian model of a truly collective and participatory society for the mutual and reciprocal happiness between the individual and the society necessitated a change in the individual to change the society (Srinivasan et al., 1999). Accordingly, moral education was a priority for which he proposed a methodology to reshape human character. Gandhi held strongly to the view that a child's character was greatly influenced, affected, and determined by the education received and inculcated during the formative years. As such, every child ought to be educated and trained for the realisation of her or his ethical goal of a just social order (Srinivasan et al., 1999). The social system, therefore, built upon the tenets of nonviolence and democracy, is to give a guarantee for the maximum development of the individual's character, a vision shared with that of the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which includes caring for one another's well-being in the spirit of mutual support and social solidarity. According to Ntuli (2002, quoted in Odora Hoppers, 2004), education, like religion, in pre-colonial Africa, was an integral part of everyday life and linked to morality and material production. Group learning and group solutions for problems were the norm in educational programmes, which emphasised horizontality rather than verticality in the learning process. Learning was outcome-based, and the outcome carried with it the prize of a well-rounded person who was people-centred. The ethos was ‘I exist because I belong; I belong because I exist’. It is this re-enforcement of inter-dependence that marks traditional African educational models (Ntuli, 2002, quoted in Odora Hoppers, 2004, p. 61), which have long been eroded through successive eras of colonialism and apartheid. These models could be instructive in developing appropriate and relevant

programmes to focus on social responsibility in higher education institutions in South Africa.

4 Reimagining Universities

Heritage, traditions, culture, customs, beliefs and value systems are deeply embedded in both Gandhian and Ubuntu ways of life. In South Africa:

The colonial and apartheid projects were founded on identity and social constructs that deliberately undermined and treated African culture, heritage, religion and identity as inferior. In order to prop up superiority, it was necessary to, on one hand, neglect the further development of African spirituality, identities, values and culture, whilst on the other hand, developing and investing substantially in old and new Western-oriented values, cultures and identities. (Republic of South Africa, Review Report, 2019, p. 28)

This persistent marginalisation and negation of one culture and the dominion of another has been the unfortunate history of South Africa and the colonised world.

Gandhi was vociferous on the incompatibility between foreign and indigenous education models and declared that much of the education in the arts, offered in the colleges, was pointless and resulted in unemployment among the educated classes. Worse still, it destroyed the mental and physical health of those subjected to the grind in colleges. He maintained that the medium of a foreign language through which higher education was imparted in India has caused incalculable intellectual and moral injury to the nation (Gandhi, 1938). Of course, his chillingly prophetic rejoinder, “We are too near our own times to judge the enormity of the damage done” (Gandhi, 1938, p. 7), speaks volumes in these times!

In this context, Restrepo (2014), argues that the hegemonic university, forged on coloniality and colonial difference, seeks to undermine the lives of indigenous communities and those of all groups that oppose capitalism. As such, she proposes that the intercultural university could be an alternative, where intercultural learning and the pursuit of knowledge are used as elements that contribute to “the construction of a world other, a world which many worlds can fit into” (Restrepo, 2014, p. 142). In support of her position, she cites the example of Unitierra (Universidad de la Tierra) in Chiapas, Mexico, an autonomous intercultural institution that does not seek official recognition, but instead strives for the legitimisation from communities and indigenous peoples. Its work seeks

to build a different kind of knowledge, of politics and of economics, based on a community orientation that pursues 'living well' which leads to the celebration of natural and cultural diversity and to the political structuring of society from below (Restrapo, 2014).

Similarly, Hall and Tandon (2015) draw attention to two further examples of universities that emerge out of communities who are their own sources and disseminators of knowledge. A village-based institution of higher education and research in Uganda, known as the Mpambo Afrikan Multiversity, is a place for the support of mother-tongue scholars of Afrikan indigenous knowledge. Its founder, Paulo Wangoola, realised that continued dependence on Western knowledge systems was retarding African progress and that the African way forward had to be linked to the recovery, replenishment and revitalisation of their thousands of years old indigenous knowledge (Hall & Tandon, 2015). In pursuit of this, he has been working closely with a team of deep thinkers trained in indigenous ways of knowing and devoid of any influences from Western educational schools and systems of thought (Hall, 2013).

Equally inspiring is the case in South Africa of a social movement that created their own university for knowledge production about resistance, survival, hope, and transformation. *Abahlali baseMjondolo* (shack dwellers) is a grass-roots movement that grew out of a road blockade organised by residents of a shack settlement in the city of Durban in 2005. The University of Abahlali baseMjondolo, where the shack dwellers are the scholars, the professors and the teachers, eschews formal and conventional education methods in favor of lifelong 'living learning', a praxis-based approach using discussions in meetings, innovations in song and other popular media forms. According to the movement, an academic university precludes daily life learning experiences by "just theorising and talking about the people" (Butler, 2009). As such, it cautions that this form of education could destroy their struggle. They are vigilant, too, of the appropriation by "competing elites in the state and the institutionalised left" on the assumption that "the poor should not think their own politics" (Zikode, 2006), and jealously guard their independence and autonomy, as well as their sources and production of knowledge.

In the preface to his book, *Holistic Education: Pedagogy of Universal Love*, Nava (2001) points out that we are embarking on an age of interdependence in the 21st century and, therefore, we need a new kind of education in line with the new needs and dilemmas of emergent cultures. In the African continent, a new kind of education would mean one that is based on the philosophy of Ubuntu, which has interdependence as its foundation for human relationships and life as opposed to the current predominant trend in most higher education institutions, which is based on the mechanistic science and philosophy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Nava, 2001). According to Nava, this

creates a vision of reality that is rooted in four philosophical untruths: objectivism, reductionism, positivism, and determinism, which has a tremendous influence on knowledge and knowledge production.

In the African context of decolonisation, the reimagining of higher education and its institutions would require the transformation of the attitude of academia towards envisioning a reality that encompasses a philosophical attitude of Ubuntu, which will include as its main features: human engagement that allows for critical thinking, non-domination, the interconnectedness of human beings and the optimal development of human relationships (Lefa, 2015) as displayed in the above examples where other forms of knowledge and knowledge production are being legitimised. The philosophy of Ubuntu deserves a more prominent position in the curriculum for students and in the knowledge framework of academics for understanding the value of interdependency. Restrepo's (2014) words have relevance here, when she asserts that for radical transformation in structures of higher education, and not just change in content and curriculum, we need a mental liberation process; rethink fundamental questions about knowledge from an indigenous perspective; denounce injustices including epistemic injustice and be productive in generating alternative proposals, including many that are not confined to academia; and initiate radical epistemological and social transformation (p. 140). To this, we add the need to critically examine current philosophies that dominate higher education as part of the process of decolonisation and the reimagining of an interdependent university for the 21st century and beyond.

5 Concluding Thoughts

Community engagement in the form of community-university partnerships is, according to the 1997 White Paper, an integral and core part of higher education within its broader transformation agenda. These partnerships, in a range of forms and programmes, and at both student and institutional levels, are driven by the development and demonstration of social responsibility. As South Africa grapples with the ongoing consequences of centuries of oppression, social responsibility is obviously a critical ethic to mitigate the spiraling social ills. We need to build a citizenry of committed, empathetic and socially conscious members to "strengthen the democratic ethos, the sense of common citizenship and commitment to a common good" (Republic of South Africa DoE, 1997, p. 4). While this vision resonates loudly and clearly in the legislative policy to transform higher education institutions in this direction, implementing these policies has been largely ineffectual, with the prospects of success – without urgent interventions – looking bleak.

The authors of this chapter, therefore, reiterate their initial proposal of rethinking higher education for social responsibility based on a non-dualistic, holistic model, better suited to meaningful community engagement and participation and created from the ground up. Both the Gandhian and Ubuntu ways of life are premised on the development of the individual along natural and ethical lines to create a better society. In addition, they are undergirded by the interdependency and interconnectedness of human society, with the understanding that people should treat others as part of the extended human family. Intrinsic to this education approach is the integral and holistic development of the head, hand and heart, depicting the human capacities of reflection and awareness, experience and caring. These socially responsible qualities seem like firm grounding for young people in whose heads, hands and hearts reside the mammoth responsibility of shaping the quality of South Africa's democracy.

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