



The Significance of Ubuntu Pedagogy: Transforming Teaching and Learning at the University of the Free State in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper aimed to draw attention to the significance of Ubuntu pedagogy in promoting a transformative teaching and learning environment for undergraduate second-year political science at the University of the Free State, South Africa. Thus, the paper employed qualitative inquiry by adopting Participatory Action Research (PAR) to interact and engage students actively in their learning processes. To make this study successful and address the aim/objective, a focus group of 8-12 students, referred to as co-researchers across different educational levels in the political science learning environment, was utilized as a means of conducting tool. This was done to ensure the credibility of the research process. Furthermore, the centrality of students and their direct involvement in the research process is important for their voices and the effectiveness of coordinated learning that can enhance students' analytical abilities and collective learning. PAR could also help reveal students' perspectives and perceptions on coordinated learning that aligns with the aim of the study. This paper found that a coordinated team among political science students expressing Ubuntu application and deep-rooted humanization in a learning environment is limited. In this regard, the non-existence of a coordinated team that reflects Ubuntu principles of solidarity and cooperation in learning environments contributes negatively to the effectiveness of education. Moreover, the interpretation of the results where the Ubuntu pedagogy would foster more inclusive, communal learning environments among political science students utilized the lens of Ubuntu to understand the perspectives of students from the viewpoint that truly human beings create a relationship with other persons, revealing true identity through community interaction.

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INTRODUCTION

Ubuntu is a rich African philosophical approach that provides transformation and humanization of pedagogical practices that embrace the reconnection of students in their diverse social backgrounds in the learning environment. However, such potential alternation to the current Eurocentric pedagogies that draw from traditional teaching and learning approaches tend to be ignored in South African higher learning institutions, with specific reference to political science at the University of the Free State.

Some ignorance is influenced by the inability to recognize the potential of learning and working together in research as a shared and empowering tool that leads to emancipation. Within this context, this paper argues that Ubuntu Philosophy, with its principles of Ubuntu pedagogies, can transform and cultivate Ubuntu social values of solidarity, co-existence, respect, and cooperation among political science students in their learning environment. The University of the Free State is a single case study used in conducting the research, and the participatory action research method is used in the data collection from across different political science educational levels.

The objective of the paper is to identify a strategy that could respond to students' cultural competencies and embrace the lived experiences students bring to the classroom for learning. This paper aims to draw attention to the significance of Ubuntu pedagogy in promoting a transformative teaching and learning environment for undergraduate second-year political science students using a coordinated team learning approach. Literature reveals that Universities, globally and in South Africa, continue to be confronted with demands for transformation, humanization of pedagogical practices, and embrace of social justice.¹ Hence, the fourth industrial revolution has influenced a shift in learning and teaching in higher learning institutions globally.² In South Africa, the National Plan for Higher Education was developed to restructure and transform education in higher learning institutions and universities to confront and address historical inequities, promote social justice, and enhance inclusivity in the education system.³ Central to this goal, the White Paper has compelled high-learning institutions to produce new knowledge driven by transformative pedagogies that challenge traditional,⁴ often Eurocentric teaching methods and create a more culturally responsive, inclusive learning environment in teaching and learning programs.⁵ This is because Eurocentrism perpetuates dynamics that undermine inclusivity and marginalize students' cultural identities.⁶

Within this context, the University of the Free State has developed the Free State Action Plan for 2024 for its teaching and learning approaches in addressing teaching and learning challenges. This plan can be better achieved through Ubuntu-inspired practices. This indicates the need to transform teaching and learning, particularly in the political science discipline at the University of the Free State. Hence, the university still faces challenges, including issues such as historical inequalities, social tension, cultural diversity, and the decolonization of education, in addressing these challenges, this paper argues for the adoption of new pedagogical approaches like Ubuntu to foster community, mutual respect, and more connected teaching and learning experiences, particularly in the political science discipline.

This paper defines Ubuntu as an African philosophy that emphasizes interconnectedness, community, shared humanity, and mutual care. The core principle of Ubuntu is often summarized as "I am because we are", highlighting the collective nature of human existence. In this regard, Ubuntu pedagogy is a teaching approach that integrates the values and principles of Ubuntu into the educational settings and process. This pedagogy promotes dialogue, collaboration, and a deep respect for students' lived experiences. Hence, Ubuntu pedagogy seeks to transform hierarchical teacher-student relationships into more participatory, inclusive, and empathetic interactions. In this regard, the University of the Free State is committed and focusing more on transforming teaching and learning practices to address social tension and social injustices. This could even contribute to addressing issues

¹ Sinethemba Mthimkhulu, "Ubuntu pedagogy as a Viable Pedagogical Construct in African Education: A Literature Review," *Journal of Culture and Values in Education* 7, no. 1 (March 31, 2024): 83–98, <https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2024.6>.

² Tankiso Moloi and David Mhlanga, "Key Features of the Fourth Industrial Revolution in South Africa's Basic Education System," *Journal of Management Information & Decision Sciences* 24, no. 5 (2021).

³ Temwa Moyo and Sioux McKenna, "Constraints on Improving Higher Education Teaching and Learning through Funding," *South African Journal of Science* 117, no. 1/2 (January 29, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2021/7807>.

⁴ Department of Public Service and Administration Republic of South Africa, *White Paper on Human Resource Management for Public Service: Managing People in a Transformed Public Service* (Pretoria: Government Printers, 1997).

⁵ B. M. Akala, "Challenging Gender Equality in South African Transformation Policies—a Case of the White Paper: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 32, no. 3 (2018): 226–48.

⁶ Bekithemba Dube et al., "Creating Sustainable Learning Environments in the Era of the Posthuman: Towards Borderless Curriculum," *Journal of Curriculum Studies Research* 5, no. 1 (2023): i–x.

of historical inequalities in ensuring cultural diversity that could lead to inclusive education for all students.

Several researchers have reported the importance of Ubuntu pedagogy, decolonization, and transformation in education settings and processes, and this has become louder, stronger, and clearer⁷ along with this growth of Ubuntu, an African philosophy that underpins strategies of learning-centeredness, caring, inclusiveness, flexibility, and quality. However, there are limited empirical studies on how Ubuntu pedagogy is applied in political science university settings. This is evidenced by the slow implementation of new teaching strategies and the lack of awareness of the different learning styles of learners in the political science learning environment. In addition, the University of the Free State committed itself to social justice and pursued diversity among its students and staff, as well as epistemic diversity of ideas, perspectives, and methodological approaches.⁸ Thus, its role in South Africa's higher education system is to promote and enhance an inclusive learning environment. However, incidents of social tension, challenges in addressing cultural diversity, or broader efforts to decolonize the curriculum and pedagogy are still challenging the educational landscape of the university.

Furthermore, Ubuntu is a transformative pedagogical learning approach that can encourage humanity, cooperation, and respect in all teaching and learning processes. It is a pedagogical approach that usually offers people-centered transformation and development. As far as Ubuntu philosophy is concerned, its principles inspire and perpetuate learning together and sharing of ideas for the development of and life changes in the community. As a result, in a learning and teaching environment, Ubuntu strengthens caring and sharing to achieve set common learning goals, which show a collective and integrated form of knowledge that is driven by aspects of humanity.⁹ This paper seeks to answer the question: how can we draw attention to the significance of Ubuntu pedagogy in promoting a transformative teaching and learning environment for undergraduate second-year political science students using a participatory coordinated learning approach?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ubuntu Pedagogy for Promoting a Transformative Coordinated Learning Environment for Political Science Students

In pursuance of the aim of this paper, Sechaba Mahlomaholo, in his article titled, *Learn Together and Work Together for a More Reasonable, Unbiased, Acceptable, and Morally Righteous Nation*, draws attention to collaborative learning and teamwork as effective strategies that could contribute meaningfully to the goals of education among others employability skills which include the promotion of critical thinking and social practices for societal development.¹⁰ In other words, Mahlomaholo highlights the need for committed academics in research to transform educational practices for more sustainable learning environments and solutions to the real problems facing the nation. In a similar vein, a large and growing body of literature has shed light on the transformation of educational

⁷ Mthimkhulu, "Ubuntugogy as a Viable Pedagogical Construct in African Education: A Literature Review"; Dube et al., "Creating Sustainable Learning Environments in the Era of the Posthuman: Towards Borderless Curriculum"; Lulama Mdodana-Zide and Tafirenyika Mafugu, "An Interventive Collaborative Scaffolded Approach with a Writing Center on ESL Students' Academic Writing," *Journal of Culture and Values in Education* 6, no. 2 (2023): 34–50; Ali A. Abdi, "Freireian and Ubuntu Philosophies of Education: Onto-Epistemological Characteristics and Pedagogical Intersections," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 54, no. 13 (November 10, 2022): 2286–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2021.1975110>; Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Learning Environments at a School through Validation of Its Community Cultural Wealth," *International Journal of Arts & Sciences* 5, no. 3 (2012): 429.

⁸ University of the Free State, "UFS Vision 130 Strategic Intent for 2034," n.d., <https://www.ufs.ac.za/vision-130>.

⁹ M. P. Choane, "Employing the Ubuntu Approach as a Lens to Enhance Risk Management Skills at a Municipality," *Administratio Publica* 31, no. 3 (2023): 131–45; Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Gender Differentials and Sustainable Learning Environments," *South African Journal of Education* 31, no. 3 (2011): 312–21; Mthimkhulu, "Ubuntugogy as a Viable Pedagogical Construct in African Education: A Literature Review"; Nomlaungelo Ngubane and Manyane Makua, "Ubuntu Pedagogy—Transforming Educational Practices in South Africa through an African Philosophy: From Theory to Practice," *Inkanyiso: Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 13, no. 1 (2021): 1–12; Gessler Muxe Nkondo, "Ubuntu as Public Policy in South Africa: A Conceptual Framework," *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies* 2, no. 1 (2007): 88–100.

¹⁰ Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Learning Environments at a School through Validation of Its Community Cultural Wealth."

practices through power-leveling critical pedagogy platforms that function well with Ubuntu's notion of interdependence and humanity and intentions that refuse to detach the learning subject from the context of learning.¹¹ For this reason, this paper claims that considering practices such as deliberate engagement in learning processes Ubuntu pedagogy could play a significant role in transforming education. Thus, the cultivation of the social values of Ubuntu for coordinated learning is critical for teamwork among political science students. In essence, Sechaba Mahlomaholo offers a critical engagement on a dominant social viewpoint that holds that some learners, among others, are bound to perform poorly in all facets of life.¹²

According to him, the theory of reproduction of inequality supports this view. According to this theory, Mahlomaholo makes us aware that academic performance at college and university, for instance, is scrutinized by poor, underprivileged, socially disadvantaged learners who have been socially shunted aside and almost always register at the bottom of any league table.¹³ For this reason, Mahlomaholo suggests that "What we all seem to yearn for, is a society characterised by choice and social justice, we are committed both to education for transformation and to the transformation of education."¹⁴ This commitment and reflection require us to engage critically on, among others, dominant social viewpoints."

Consequently, this view continues to be supported by Ngubane, who writes that pedagogical practices in South African higher learning institutions are still dominated by Western philosophies, and as such, these approaches do not culturally appeal to the majority of disadvantaged learners in the classrooms.¹⁵ As Mahlomaholo argues, "Research also indicates that socially shunted aside learners are exploited and marginalised; they are under-paid, under-employed and even among the never-employed. They are often denied access to decent education, housing, health, jobs, skills and services. They are denied social justice, their legitimate share in the country."¹⁶ For this reason, the decoloniality of education and a perpetual need to transform education is critical and significant because the research indicates that to enhance the learning of undergraduate students, there is a need to find new ways to resolve real-life problems in teaching and learning environments.¹⁷ Thus, this paper argues that Ubuntu pedagogy is a transformative teaching approach that inspires a learning and teaching environment that positions love and caring and promotes inclusion and social justice.¹⁸ In democratic South African higher learning institutions, Mahlomaholo believes that for learners to be truly free and emancipated beyond merely one locality of our being, it is significant to encourage cooperation in spaces of solidarity that enable empowerment in the learning environment.¹⁹ In achieving new goals in teaching and learning, Mahlomaholo maintains interaction among the research team to create sustainable learning environments and new ways of resolving real-life problems.²⁰

¹¹ Choane, "Employing the Ubuntu Approach as a Lens to Enhance Risk Management Skills at a Municipality"; Mthimkhulu, "Ubuntu pedagogy as a Viable Pedagogical Construct in African Education: A Literature Review"; Zulfqar Ahmed Iqbal et al., "Impact of Authoritative and Laissez-Faire Leadership on Thriving at Work: The Moderating Role of Conscientiousness," *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education* 11, no. 3 (2021): 667–85.

¹² Mahlomaholo, "Gender Differentials and Sustainable Learning Environments."

¹³ Mahlomaholo, "Gender Differentials and Sustainable Learning Environments."

¹⁴ Mahlomaholo, "Gender Differentials and Sustainable Learning Environments."

¹⁵ Ngubane and Makua, "Ubuntu Pedagogy—Transforming Educational Practices in South Africa through an African Philosophy: From Theory to Practice."

¹⁶ Sechaba M G Mahlomaholo and Dennis Francis, "Learn Together and Work Together for a More Reasonable, Unbiased, Acceptable, and Morally Righteous Nation," *South African Journal of Education* 31, no. 3 (2011): 295–97.

¹⁷ Choane, "Employing the Ubuntu Approach as a Lens to Enhance Risk Management Skills at a Municipality"; Dube et al., "Creating Sustainable Learning Environments in the Era of the Posthuman: Towards Borderless Curriculum."

¹⁸ Ngubane and Makua, "Ubuntu Pedagogy—Transforming Educational Practices in South Africa through an African Philosophy: From Theory to Practice."

¹⁹ Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Education Researchers as Bricoleurs in the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments," *Perspectives in Education* 32, no. 4 (2014): 171–83.

²⁰ Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Indigenous Research and Sustainable Learning," *International Journal of Educational Sciences* 5, no. 3 (2013): 317–22.

METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to draw attention to the significance of Ubuntu pedagogy in promoting a transformative teaching and learning environment for undergraduate second-year political science students using a participatory coordinated learning approach. In achieving the study aim a qualitative approach with the adoption of Participatory Action Research (PAR) was employed as a methodology and source data from the sample drawn from the University of the Free State and discussion meetings, workshops, and observations as techniques to collect data, in which taking notes and recording using voice recording machines with consent from the co-researchers used. To date, various methods have been developed and introduced to measure ineffective methods in teaching and learning. PAR is one of the approaches to a qualitative research method considered democratic, equitable, liberating, and life-enhancing.²¹

This paper argues that a democratic approach to research informs the processes, and investigation reveals participants' feelings, views, and patterns out of control or manipulation by the researcher. Therefore, this paper presents PAR because PAR involves researchers and participants, also referred to as co-researchers, working together to understand a problematic situation and change it for the better. A coordinated team consisting of 8-12 students across different teaching levels in political science was established, covering both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, aiming to make credible and informed decisions in the research process.

This paper adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an analytical tool and approach for data analysis and interpretation of the result. CDA is a more relevant analytical tool for analyzing participants' written and spoken words. In essence, it captures and interprets the sociocultural practices within a framework of formulation on the strategy to promote a transformative teaching and learning environment at a university.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

A group of eight members met and established a coordinated team to identify problems experienced in teaching and learning for undergraduate second-year political science students to propose solutions. In the meeting team, members identified components of the Ubuntu pedagogical practices, which include collective learning, respect for students' prior knowledge, and community-building as strategies in teaching political science. However, the current political science teaching methods fail to promote Ubuntu values. For example, the current teaching techniques identified in classrooms as part of the problem that leads to ineffective teaching and learning is the teaching method, which tends to be teacher-centered and Eurocentric pedagogy. This method is a traditional approach to teaching based on 'top-down' dissemination of knowledge. It does not encourage Ubuntu principles towards collective learning among political science students. It discourages learners from contributing and participating in most education and learning activities. The empirical data shows the failure to promote Ubuntu values and principles in teaching political science at the University of the Free State before the intervention of this study. The latter became evident during our first discussion meeting after establishing a collaborative team to draw attention to the Ubuntu principles in and outside the classroom. One of the team members (with a pseudonym), Kenya, made it clear in his statement that there is an absence of teamwork that could encourage students to work together to achieve the common goals of their learning settings. Kenya said:

“Before I became a member of this group discussion team, I did not know about collaborative learning and its contribution to sharing my experience with other students. I also noticed that working as a group for some assessments expresses Ubuntu values and changes our thinking toward others in learning”

Furthermore, during observation at a research site, Zambia, a student at the university, including expressions of Congo and Tanzania (fake names) university postgraduate students,

²¹ Angela Dwyer et al., “It’s Always a Pleasure: Exploring Productivity and Pleasure in a Writing Group for Early Career Academics,” *Studies in Continuing Education* 34, no. 2 (2012): 129–44.

demonstrated the non-availability of collaborative learning encouragement in the political science learning environment:

“It is the first time we are seeing this kind of intervention in a political science learning environment. We wish collaborative learning could be encouraged at other levels like the first-year level. This is because these sessions teach us to respect each other as learners work together towards our common learning activities.”

The above statements show that teaching methods in political science are still based on traditional teaching approaches and do not encourage group work that could promote collective learning and community engagement for political students. Students feel isolated and are not allowed to do teamwork and share ideas that could contribute to their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, thus improving their analytical thinking and ability to share ideas on real-world issues. As a result of students’ feelings of isolation from each other and inability to work as a coordinated team, it indicates a failure to promote new pedagogical approaches like Ubuntu to foster community, mutual respect, and a more connected teaching and learning experience.

Some authors of Ubuntu philosophy have speculated that Ubuntu pedagogy is a transformative approach. When embraced with understanding and dignity, it deserves and has the potential not only to reconnect students with their Indigenous values, heritage, and cultures but also the capacity to cultivate Ubuntu social values of solidarity, co-existence, respect, and cooperation among students.²²

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study sought to identify a strategy that could respond to students’ cultural competencies and embrace the lived experiences students bring to the classroom for learning. The study recommends Ubuntu principles such as interconnectedness, community, and shared knowledge, that could enhance the political science curriculum. For improvement and future research, it is crucial to accommodate and include perspectives from both students and academics, specifically regarding their experiences with the current pedagogical practices in political science. Their voices could highlight specific areas where Ubuntu pedagogy would foster more inclusive, communal learning environments. Such a culture of teaching and learning will contribute to interconnectedness, community, and shared knowledge that could enhance the political science curriculum.

“Long live the spirit of Prof Sechaba Mahlomaholo long live.” This paper contributes to remembering the saddening loss of our father, scholar, and hero, “Ntate” Prof Sechaba Mahlomaholo. Prof Sechaba’s legacy will always be remembered. He promoted humanity and teamwork, influenced by the values and principles of Ubuntu, the best practices in our teaching and learning environments. He kept on maintaining and emphasizing transformation in education and academics, recommending doing research as a team towards impact and changing the lives of other people with specific reference to disadvantaged and poor communities. He will be remembered for building a concrete and sustainable foundation under his postgraduate supervision with the sophisticated idea of empowering Africans and, among others, African women. This author is one of the African women he supervised during her doctoral degree in higher education studies. Sechaba advocated for paradigm shifts and advice to consider and transform teaching and learning approaches towards African-based theories and philosophies. He empowered and introduced various scholars to new methods like Participatory Action Methodology in research processes. His passion for supervision and encouragement in research left a bold mark that will never be erased in the lives of many, this author included. In his research supervision, Sechaba will always emphasize building and treating others with respect and improving their capabilities, which will transform and improve people's lives.

²² Ngubane and Makua, “Ubuntu Pedagogy–Transforming Educational Practices in South Africa through an African Philosophy: From Theory to Practice.”

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