Ubuntu pedagogy: Lessons from Paulo Freire

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Abstract: Education has long been regarded as a fundamental pillar of societal development and human empowerment. Recognizing this, African scholars, and Africans more broadly, have consistently questioned whether the education provided on the continent fulfills this promise. In particular, some scholars have advocated for a teaching approach rooted in the values of Ubuntu, commonly referred to as Ubuntu pedagogy. They argue that this approach can bridge the gap between education and both societal and human empowerment, a gap that must be addressed for education to hold meaningful value in Africa. Over time, the core principles of Ubuntu pedagogy have become clearer. However, one crucial aspect is often overlooked, the influence of Paulo Freire's educational philosophy in shaping Ubuntu pedagogy into not only a humanizing but also an insurgent teaching practice. This paper seeks to explore that influence, highlighting how Freire's ideas contribute to the transformative potential of Ubuntu pedagogy.

Keywords: Paulo Freire, Pedagogy, Ubuntu

Introduction

Ubuntu is a Southern African moral philosophy centered on the ethical principle of treating one another with respect and recognition. In this region, Ubuntu is not merely regarded as a morally praiseworthy way of life but as an intrinsic aspect of being. This is evident in the way an individual's Africanness is often questioned when they fail to embody Ubuntu, implying that a true Southern African person should naturally uphold these values without the need for external reinforcement.

Ubuntu is commonly encapsulated in the maxim *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which loosely translates to *a person is a person through others*. This expression underscores the idea that human existence is fundamentally relational, one does not exist in isolation but rather within a community of others. As such, respecting and recognizing others is not just a moral obligation but a necessity for the collective survival and wellbeing of all. In Africa, particularly Southern Africa, Ubuntu is widely regarded as a fruitful and morally commendable way of living.

Recognizing the centrality of Ubuntu in Southern African societies, scholars have questioned the rationale of looking beyond this framework when addressing challenges faced by Southern African communities. If Ubuntu is an inherent characteristic of Southern African identity, then it seems counterintuitive to analyze and resolve social issues without taking it into account. From such discussions, scholars have begun to explore the role of Ubuntu philosophy in education, particularly in shaping both curriculum and pedagogy.

This paper focuses on pedagogy, specifically the conceptualization of Ubuntu pedagogy, sometimes referred to as Ubuntugogy. Ubuntu pedagogy is a teaching theory and practice that embodies the principles of Ubuntu, offering an educational approach that aligns with Southern African culture and lived experiences. As Barbara Nussbaum [1] states, "Ubuntu is a social philosophy, a way of being, a code of ethics and behavior deeply embedded in African culture". In this sense, Ubuntu pedagogy is more than a theoretical framework, it is an educational practice rooted in the everyday philosophy of Southern African communities. By bridging the gap between education and societal wellbeing, Ubuntu pedagogy has the potential to reaffirm the meaningful value of education in Africa, particularly in its role in fostering human and social development.

While the concept of Ubuntu pedagogy has been extensively discussed, one crucial aspect is often overlooked, the influence of Paulo Freire's educational philosophy in shaping this framework. This paper explores the nature and extent of Freire's influence, arguing that a comprehensive understanding of Ubuntu pedagogy requires an examination of its intellectual foundations. To achieve this, the study is structured as follows: first, it outlines the nature and key

elements of Ubuntu pedagogy, second, it discusses Paulo Freire's educational philosophy, and finally, it examines how Freire's ideas have influenced the development of Ubuntu pedagogy.

Understanding Ubuntu pedagogy

Ubuntu pedagogy is a teaching theory and practice rooted in Ubuntu philosophy. To fully understand Ubuntu pedagogy, one must first grasp the essence of Ubuntu philosophy. As previously mentioned, Ubuntu is a Southern African moral philosophy centered on the ethical principle of treating others with respect and recognition. Accordingly, Ubuntu pedagogy is founded on the values of viewing and teaching others with dignity and recognition. This approach fosters an educational environment where teachers see and treat students as fellow human beings, deserving of the same respect and consideration they would expect for themselves. In other words, teachers acknowledge students as equal producers of knowledge rather than passive recipients awaiting the transfer of information for later retrieval, particularly through assessments.

The discourse on Ubuntu philosophy gained prominence during South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy. Ubuntu was perceived as a tool for achieving justice and equality, with the hope of creating a South Africa free from racial prejudice and institutionalized oppression. Discussions of Ubuntu must acknowledge the history of colonialism and apartheid, during which Western values and beliefs were imposed on African people, leading to the erosion of their cultural identity. Ubuntu emerged as a remedy to heal the wounds inflicted by apartheid and colonialism, serving as a foundation for unity in Africa by emphasizing interdependence. The maxim *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* encapsulates this communitarian ontology, affirming that one's sense of being is inextricably linked to the broader society. Ubuntu values inclusivity, collaboration, and community, advocating for a society where individuals function as part of a collective rather than as isolated, individualistic beings.

The decolonization of education in South Africa requires dismantling Eurocentric ideologies and Western epistemologies that have long dominated academic institutions. Decolonizing education creates space for African knowledge systems. Stein and Andreotti [2] argue that higher education institutions continue to perpetuate an epistemological hierarchy in which Western knowledge is regarded as universally relevant, while non-Western knowledge is either trivialized as *local culture*, commodified for Western benefit, or dismissed altogether. This ongoing hegemony of Western epistemologies necessitates the emergence of Ubuntu pedagogy as a response to the need for educational decolonization. Decolonial pedagogy seeks to challenge imperialistic Western epistemologies and promote African epistemologies.

The marginalization of African epistemologies, such as Ubuntu, in higher education remains a pressing issue for indigenous Africans [3]. These scholars argue that Ubuntu philosophy not only restores indigenous values and heritage among students but also fosters co-existence and social cohesion. The connection between Ubuntu and social justice is significant. Sibanda [4] defines Ubuntu social justice as the way in which people relate to each other, their environment, and the spiritual world in an interconnected and interdependent manner. Since Ubuntu values interconnectedness and interdependence, it serves as a conduit for achieving social justice in education. Ngubane and Makua [3] highlight the challenges students from diverse backgrounds face in forming relationships, particularly when some are privileged while others are disadvantaged. This underscores the necessity of Ubuntu pedagogy in bridging differences and fostering social cohesion. Through Ubuntu pedagogy, social justice can be realized by cultivating respect, unity, and mutual recognition among students of varying racial and socio-economic backgrounds.

Ubuntu pedagogy has the potential to unify students, shaping them into individuals who respect one another as equals. When educators embrace Ubuntu principles, they are better equipped to combat exclusion and implement pedagogies that cater to all students. The principle of interconnectedness involves fostering positive relationships between students and teachers. Ubuntu pedagogy provides a framework for creating a peaceful and harmonious learning environment. Collaborative learning promotes solidarity and mutual respect, enhancing teamwork and knowledge-sharing, which in turn contributes to a more effective educational experience. Trust is built through these relationships, fostering collaboration and reciprocity [5]. This creates an environment where students and teachers feel empowered to support one another, reinforcing the principle of solidarity, a cornerstone of Ubuntu philosophy. Solidarity entails the collective effort of individuals for the survival and well-being of their community. Ubuntu pedagogy grants both teachers and students the opportunity and responsibility to contribute to the growth and survival of their academic and social communities.

Blackwood [6] defines Ubuntu pedagogy as, "a humanizing approach to teaching and engaging students in the learning process". This humanizing aspect ensures that no student or teacher is treated in a way that undermines their dignity. Just as teachers deserve humane treatment, so do students. An Ubuntu-centered educational environment is one in

which all individuals are treated with respect, regardless of social class or race. Ubuntu pedagogy recognizes learners as active participants who bring diverse backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge that teachers can build upon to develop new understandings. This underscores the element of equality in Ubuntu pedagogy, where knowledge from diverse backgrounds is integrated, allowing all participants to learn from one another.

Ubuntu pedagogy also values respect and care. For effective learning to take place, students must first respect and care for one another. A learning environment infused with love and empathy enables students and teachers to express themselves freely, without fear of dehumanization or unjust treatment. One of the core components of Ubuntu pedagogy is cooperation, which entails recognizing that every individual holds equal importance. This approach facilitates the sharing of knowledge, reinforcing the notion that teachers are not the sole sources of wisdom, students, too, contribute to the learning process. Allowing students to share their knowledge illustrates that Ubuntu pedagogy is both a humanizing and transformative approach to education. Ubuntu pedagogy acknowledges that students are human beings who deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

Another vital element of Ubuntu pedagogy is the nurturing of learners' minds [3]. Beyond merely imparting knowledge, teachers must provide emotional support through love and empathy. Teachers have a responsibility to motivate and encourage students. By teaching from a position of love and care, educators foster a welcoming atmosphere that enhances student engagement. A learning environment infused with love not only promotes academic development but also nurtures students holistically. To affirm the humanity of others, teachers must demonstrate love, empathy, kindness, reciprocity, and humility [6]. These qualities reaffirm the teacher's role as a compassionate guide in the learning process.

Ubuntu pedagogy also creates space for African languages in education. Since many students come from multilingual backgrounds, the dominance of foreign languages in teaching and learning often hinders their ability to fully express themselves. Recognizing and integrating indigenous languages into education aligns with decolonization efforts. Ngubane and Makua [3] emphasize that students bring their home languages to educational institutions, making many classrooms bilingual or multilingual. These languages should not be disregarded, as they are vital mediums through which students can engage meaningfully with their education. Thus, in the broader context of educational decolonization, Ubuntu pedagogy emerges as a crucial tool for fostering inclusivity, respect, and social transformation.

Paulo Freire's educational philosophy

Education has long been regarded as a neutral tool for societal development and human empowerment. However, Paulo Freire, in his educational philosophy, deconstructs this myth by demonstrating that education is rarely neutral. He critiques the dominant *banking model* of education, which he argues reinforces systems of oppression. In its place, he advocates for *problem-posing education*, rooted in dialogue and critical consciousness. This paper explores Freire's critique, his alternative educational model, and the philosophical themes arising from his work, highlighting its significance for liberation and social justice.

Freire's banking model presents education as a transactional process in which *teachers deposit* knowledge into passive students. Within this framework, the teacher is the sole arbiter of knowledge, while students are reduced to mere receptacles [7]. Learning becomes a one-sided process, where students memorize and repeat information without questioning its relevance. Freire critiques this model as mechanistic and dehumanizing, as it strips students of agency and creativity. The hierarchical structure of this model enforces power imbalances, perpetuating the status quo and discouraging critical thought. In this model, the teacher dictates what is worth knowing, leaving little room for student engagement or independent inquiry. Consequently, education ceases to be a means of empowerment and instead functions as an instrument of control, reinforcing systemic inequalities and alienating students from their own intellectual development.

Conversely, Freire champions problem-posing education, which prioritizes dialogue, critical inquiry, and mutual learning. In contrast to the banking model, which treats students as passive objects, problem-posing education views them as active agents in the learning process. Learning is not about passively receiving information but engaging in a dynamic search for knowledge through discussion and reflection. Freire argues that this form of education fosters critical consciousness, enabling individuals to question and challenge the sociopolitical structures shaping their realities. Problem-posing education, therefore, serves as a vehicle for liberation, empowering students to interrogate and resist oppressive systems.

Freire underscores the importance of dialogue in education, advocating for an interactive process where both teachers and students contribute to knowledge creation. This approach dissolves the rigid teacher-student hierarchy, fostering a collaborative learning environment. By prioritizing inclusivity and active engagement, problem-posing education

cultivates empathy, solidarity, and a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives. Freire's vision is particularly relevant in contexts of marginalization, where traditional pedagogical approaches fail to acknowledge the lived experiences of oppressed communities. Through critical dialogue, students gain the confidence to challenge power dynamics and envision alternative futures.

The contrast between the banking model and problem-posing education reveals a fundamental philosophical divide. While the banking model instills a static concept of knowledge and enforces a vertical power structure, problem-posing education promotes a participatory, transformative learning process. At its core, the banking model perpetuates oppression by discouraging critical thought, whereas problem-posing education fosters freedom, encouraging individuals to challenge and reshape oppressive systems. Freire's vision of education extends beyond the classroom, positioning it as a catalyst for societal change.

Freire's ideas remain highly relevant in contemporary education. Traditional teaching methods, often centered on standardized testing and rote memorization, mirror the banking model and inhibit creativity and critical thinking. Problem-posing education, by contrast, offers an alternative framework that embraces collaboration, empathy, and social responsibility. In an increasingly globalized world marked by deepening inequalities and cultural diversity, Freire's pedagogy provides a powerful means of addressing educational disparities. By fostering critical consciousness, problem-posing education equips learners to navigate complex social realities and advocate for justice.

The practical application of Freire's pedagogy is evident in educational initiatives that emphasize experiential learning, community involvement, and participatory teaching methods. Approaches such as storytelling, group discussions, and problem-solving exercises exemplify the principles of problem-posing education. These methods not only enhance knowledge acquisition but also encourage students to engage with real-world challenges, transforming education into an empowering and transformative force.

Ultimately, problem-posing education challenges fatalism, the notion that reality is unchangeable, by inspiring learners to view the world as dynamic and malleable. This perspective aligns with the human potential for growth, encouraging students to envision and work toward a more just society. Freire critiques the banking model as dehumanizing, arguing that it fosters conformity rather than critical thinking. By reinforcing oppressive power structures, this model conditions individuals to accept the status quo rather than question it. In contrast, problem-posing education promotes liberation by developing critical consciousness and equipping learners with the tools to challenge oppression and create a more equitable future.

Freire's critique of traditional education calls for a fundamental reimagining of teaching and learning. His philosophy underscores the transformative power of education, emphasizing dialogue, critical thinking, and empowerment. Education, he argues, is not merely a process of knowledge transmission but an act of humanization. As societies continue to grapple with systemic injustices, Freire's vision remains profoundly relevant, offering a model of education that informs, inspires, and transforms.

The influence of Paulo Freire on Ubuntu pedagogy

Ubuntu pedagogy is heavily inspired by Paulo Freire's educational philosophy. One could even argue that it is modeled after his problem-posing education approach, mirroring his rejection of the banking model of education. The primary lesson Ubuntu pedagogy derives from Freire is a roadmap, a guide on what to promote in education and on what basis. Specifically, Ubuntu pedagogy advocates for dialogue, critical inquiry, and mutual learning as essential elements of education, while rejecting the prevailing practice of treating students as passive recipients of knowledge. This shift aligns with the broader purpose of education, societal development and human empowerment.

Ubuntu pedagogy, like Freire's critical pedagogy, seeks to subvert oppressive educational practices and replace them with liberatory teaching methods. Instead of treating students as passive depositories of information, it values their creativity and potential, fostering knowledge rather than mere information retention. The colonial education system, for example, thrived on maintaining an illusion of education while failing to conscientize those it educated. Ubuntu pedagogy, by contrast, emphasizes a humanizing and liberatory approach to teaching and learning.

Freire argues that oppression dehumanizes both the oppressor and the oppressed, and education should serve as a means to reclaim humanity. Ubuntu pedagogy aligns with this view, emphasizing that education should foster mutual recognition, dignity, and respect. Rooted in the Ubuntu principle that *a person is a person through other people*, this pedagogy advocates for an education system that acknowledges and nurtures the intrinsic worth of individuals and their communities.

Education should not merely offer an alternative to oppressive systems but actively dismantle them. Freire's pedagogy promotes critical consciousness, the ability to analyze and challenge unjust structures. Similarly, Ubuntu pedagogy problematizes traditional education that stifles curiosity and creativity, advocating for a system that inspires critical thinking and innovation. It seeks not just to reform, but to radically transform educational practices so that they empower learners to challenge existing power structures.

Both Freire and Ubuntu pedagogy emphasize the importance of dialogue in education. Freire envisions learning as a reciprocal process between teachers and students, rather than a one-way transmission of knowledge. Ubuntu pedagogy shares this perspective, viewing knowledge as collective wisdom that emerges from shared experiences rather than the possession of an individual. This approach fosters an inclusive and participatory educational environment where students are active contributors to their own learning.

Ubuntu pedagogy builds upon Freire's educational philosophy by localizing it within a Southern African context. While Freire advocated for an education that is liberatory and just, Ubuntu pedagogy goes further by grounding this liberatory effort in African philosophical principles. In this region, a just and liberatory education must be rooted in Ubuntu, as this framework shapes how reality is understood and engaged with in Southern Africa.

Ubuntu pedagogy is not merely a localized expression of Freirean thought, it is also shaped by historical and social factors unique to Southern Africa. Its legitimacy as a pedagogical practice emerged in response to movements like #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, which highlighted the urgent need for a decolonized education system that resonates with African experiences and identities.

On March 9, 2015, Chumani Maxwele, a Black student at the University of Cape Town, smeared the statue of Cecil Rhodes with human excrement—an act that ignited the #RhodesMustFall movement. Maxwele and fellow students sought to challenge the glorification of colonial figures and demand an education system free from colonial legacies. As Murris [8] notes, Maxwele's act reflected the humiliation and alienation Black students felt under an education system still steeped in Western-centric narratives.

Similarly, the #FeesMustFall movement emerged in response to a proposed 10.5% increase in university fees at the University of the Witwatersrand. The protests quickly spread to other universities across South Africa, with students, predominantly Black, demanding free, decolonized higher education. As Fataar [9] highlights, these movements were ultimately struggles for recognition, a call for education that is meaningful, accessible, and relevant to African realities.

These student-led movements revealed a void in the current education system, a need for an alternative pedagogical approach that resonates with African identities and lived experiences. It is from this context that Ubuntu pedagogy emerges as a legitimate educational model for Southern Africa. While it draws heavily from Freire's liberatory framework, it adapts and extends it by embedding it within an African philosophical and historical framework.

Ubuntu pedagogy and Freirean philosophy share a commitment to education as a tool for social transformation. They both reject authoritarian, oppressive models of education in favor of collaborative, human-centered learning. However, Ubuntu pedagogy goes beyond Freire by grounding itself in Southern African experiences, struggles, and values. It is not merely an adaptation of Freire's thought but a distinct educational paradigm that addresses the historical injustices and socio-political realities of the region.

Conclusion

While the concept of Ubuntu pedagogy has been widely explored, one crucial aspect that is often overlooked is the influence of Paulo Freire's educational philosophy in shaping this framework. This paper examined the nature and extent of Freire's impact, arguing that a comprehensive understanding of Ubuntu pedagogy necessitates an analysis of its intellectual foundations. To achieve this, the study was structured as follows, first, it outlined the key principles and defining features of Ubuntu pedagogy, second, it explored Paulo Freire's educational philosophy, and finally, it examines how Freire's ideas have contributed to the development and evolution of Ubuntu pedagogy.

We firmly believe that examining Ubuntu pedagogy alongside Freire's works on education provides a deeper understanding of its nature and transformative potential. In particular, this comparison highlights its ability to redefine and humanize the classroom experience. It becomes clear that Ubuntu pedagogy is not merely another proposed educational model, but an insurgent practice, one that fundamentally challenges traditional approaches, rejecting them as unproductive and advocating for a complete departure from conventional, authoritarian modes of teaching to the one that is dialogical, critical, and collective.

Acknowledgements

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