Higher Education and Community Engagement: The Cultivation of Humanity

Editors: Savathrie Margie Maistry, Claire McCann & Diana Hornby



RUCE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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Where leaders learn

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Dedication

To the universal consciousness that binds us in our diversity – the spirit of Ubuntu.

For this is a reflection on our common humanity: on interdependence and interconnectedness, on love and harmony. It is an invitation to embrace holism and humanism alongside pragmatism and rationalism, and to recognise that, through both thought, word and action, new and shared pathways in education and in life can emerge.

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The making of this book, like the work it advocates, has been a profoundly relational endeavour, reminding us that we come into being through others, and that the cultivation of humanity is always a shared undertaking.

Savathrie Margie Maistry & Claire McCann

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Foreword

Professor Sizwe Mabizela
Vice-Chancellor, Rhodes University

Throughout history, higher education has been understood to serve a dual and profound purpose: the cultivation of the intellect and the cultivation of humanity. Higher education institutions are not only sites of advanced learning but also the arenas in which humanity's enduring quest to understand itself and the world it inhabits is pursued. Their mission however extends beyond the generation and transmission of knowledge – they are places where humanity learns not only *about* the world, but also how it might *shape* that world responsibly and ethically.

In his seminal work, *The Idea of a University*, Cardinal John Henry Newman articulates this vision with clarity and conviction. For Newman, the university's essential purpose is not confined to professional training or the acquisition of technical knowledge. Rather, it lies in the cultivation of the intellect *and* the formation of character. Education, in his view, is not about producing narrow specialists, but about forming well-rounded individuals – those equipped with clarity of thought, critical judgement, balance of mind and breadth of understanding. While he championed knowledge for its own sake, Newman also recognised that intellectual cultivation was itself a profoundly moral and humanising process. It shaped one's capacity for empathy, responsible engagement in society, and a lifelong commitment to truth-seeking.

This conception of education as an intrinsically moral enterprise resonates deeply with what Martha Nussbaum, much later, would describe as *the cultivation of humanity* – the development of the capacities that make individuals humane, rational, and ethically responsive members of society. In both Newman's and Nussbaum's visions, education is inseparable from the moral imagination; it is as much about who we become as what we know.

In our present age, an age marked by rapid technological advancement, growing social fragmentation, and profound existential uncertainty, the

question of the higher purpose of higher education has never been more urgent. This sense of urgency is further intensified by globalisation and the ascendancy of free-market neoliberalism, both of which have fundamentally reshaped the landscape of higher education. These forces have not only reconfigured institutional priorities and practices, but have also introduced and, in many respects, entrenched, a fundamental tension between two competing conceptions of the purpose of higher education. On the one hand, higher education, understood as a public good, an essential societal institution dedicated to the advancement of citizenship, the promotion of social development, and the cultivation of critical, ethical, and reflective human beings. On the other hand, higher education, framed as a private investment, primarily oriented towards enhancing individual employability, driving economic growth, and maximising personal financial returns.

Beyond the imperatives of employability, economic growth, research output, and innovation lies a deeper and more enduring mission: the education of the whole person, the nurturing of empathy, compassion, critical discernment, moral reflection, and a shared sense of responsibility for the human condition. To cultivate humanity, in this sense, is to educate not only the mind but also the conscience; it is to awaken the capacity to care, to question, and to contribute meaningfully to the common good.

This book takes up that vital challenge through the platform of community engagement, exploring how higher education institutions can embody and enact their humanistic mission in tangible ways. It offers a range of philosophical and theoretical reflections on the role of community engagement as a powerful and enabling vehicle for the intentional and purposeful cultivation of humanity. One such philosophy is *Ubuntu*, the time-honoured African ethical framework which affirms that an individual's humanity is inextricably bound to the humanity of others, emphasising the relational nature of human existence situating the individual within an interconnected framework that encompasses the collective and the natural environment. Within this philosophical tradition, our own humanity reaches its fullest expression not in isolation, but through the recognition, affirmation, and advancement of the humanity of others.

The essays and reflections gathered here do not idealise the past, nor do they ignore the complexities and crises that confront higher education today. Instead, they illuminate how higher education institutions might renew and recover their humanistic mission, how they might once again become spaces where learning serves life, and where scholarship is animated by compassion, justice, and civic imagination.

To engage with this book is to be reminded that education, at its best, is an act of hope. It is an affirmation that humanity can be *cultivated*, not merely *inherited*, and that higher education institutions, when true and faithful to their highest ideals and purpose, remain among the most powerful instruments for that cultivation of humanity.

May this work inspire students, scholars and citizens alike to see the university not only as a site of instruction and research, but as a living, evolving project in the making of a more thoughtful, just, equitable and humane world. Above all, may it serve as a source of inspiration to meaningfully transform both pedagogy and institutional culture, fostering an environment that intentionally nurtures and advances the cultivation of humanity among students, staff, and the broader society.

My humanity is bound up in yours
for we can only be human together.
– Desmond Tutu

✦

If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time.
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up
with mine, then let us work together.
– Lilla Watson

1. Introduction

Savathrie Margie Maistry, Claire McCann, Kanya Padayachee, Amey Deshpande and Diana Hornby

There have been many efforts in recent years to reimagine the university as an institution relevant in our time. When the world was brought to a standstill by COVID-19, which demonstrated the uncertainty and fragility of life, online discourses and webinars by academics and institutional leaders often asked questions about the purpose and relevance of higher education. Moments of global crises, especially those that showcase our dependence on one another, heighten our concern for humanity, and make it difficult for us to ignore life's uncertainty and precarity.

Yet in the silence that followed the pandemic, higher education systems quickly resumed their old rhythms. Shallow changes, mainly described as "insubstantial" and "performative" (Zhao & Watterson, 2021) emerged, but these were insufficient to unseat past legacies of systemic inequities and the dehumanisation that persists structurally, epistemically, interpersonally and culturally, in and through the academy. In communities, the pandemics of violence, corruption, socioeconomic injustice and inequality, among others, continue to prevail. We have once again settled into a false assuredness of the *certainties of life and a living* and resumed preparation of students for the labour market and producing knowledge for the economy as the purposes of higher education. The question of the higher purpose(s) of higher education is often buried beneath the criteria for 'excellence' that dominate contemporary university rankings, shaped by market logic, measured by global metrics, and justified primarily in terms of economic impact (Brink, 2018; McKenna, 2024).

Yet questions of university purpose(s) exist not only at the system-or-institutional level. They also surface in quieter, more intimate ways: by students searching for meaning in their learning; by educators rethinking their roles; and by communities questioning the relationship between higher education institutions and their own lived realities.

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This book seeks to amplify these emerging questions and the voices that carry them. It grows out of the online dialogue on 8-9 May 2025 entitled *Higher Education Community Engagement: The Cultivation of Humanity*, hosted by the Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) division and featuring voices from across the globe. In his opening remarks on the first day of the dialogue, Professor Sizwe Mabizela commented that "the *higher purpose* of higher education is to transform individuals and society, and to create a more just, humane, compassionate and inclusive future" (RUCE Dialogue, 2025). The dialogue that followed was premised on the notion that higher education has the responsibility: i) to educate students not only for a living but for life itself and ii) to help shape the future we want to see through an educative process that genuinely educates rather than merely trains a workforce. The foundation for both purposes of higher education is rooted in what we refer to as the *cultivation of humanity*.

In summarising the presentations, Emeritus Professor Peter Clayton highlighted the following common themes emanating from the dialogue:

i) That the university is more than just about equipping graduates with skills or acting as a gatekeeper of knowledge; it needs to produce empathetic citizens.

ii) That to be successful, an institutional culture that promotes the cultivation of humanity needs to emanate from the institution. It must be embedded into the institution's values and practices and promoted at every level of the institution.

iii) That community engagement can be a powerful mechanism to elevate historically excluded knowledge and voices.

iv) That institutional culture is still in many ways unsupportive of the goals of community engagement and consequently the cultivation of humanity, and that much work remains to be done.

v) That knowledge co-production and ownership is a key issue in university-community partnerships.

vi) That the philosophy of Ubuntu and universal human values have much to offer as a framework to address the inadequacies of the university system.

In conclusion, Emeritus Professor Clayton stated that:

> We need to challenge ourselves to make use of our individual networks to get a wider range of colleagues and students involved in this conversation about the cultivation of humanity. I have found the last two days inspiring and have no doubt that this conversation will continue, given the passion we have witnessed in the last two days, and I also hope that it will spread into our institutions more broadly, so that those pillars of humanising institutional culture become everyday recognisable features of higher education (RUCE Dialogue, 2025).

We, as the authors of this introduction, propose that the cultivation of humanity is an educational imperative which community engagement, in its various forms such as service learning, engaged research or volunteerism, among others, is uniquely positioned to support. The glossary of the Higher Education Quality Committee's Framework for Institutional Audits provides a rudimentary definition of community engagement as:

> [I]nitiatives and processes through which the expertise of the institution in the areas of teaching and research are applied to address issues relevant to the community. Community Engagement typically finds expression in a variety of forms, ranging from informal and relatively unstructured activities to formal and structured academic programmes addressed at particular community needs and some projects might be conducive towards the creation of a better environment while others might be directly related to teaching and learning and research (HEQC, 2004, p. 19).

Over the years, each university has conceptualised community engagement in accordance with its specific context, and the due regard it affords community engagement as a core function of higher education together with learning, teaching and research. The chapters in this book build on the ideas shared during the May 2025 dialogue. Together, they seek to answer the following question: *How can higher education community engagement promote the cultivation of humanity?* This question is deeply connected to the broader purposes of higher education in the twenty-first century. If modern universities are meant not only to generate knowledge but also develop socially responsible, empathetic citizens, then community

engagement becomes a central pathway through which this larger purpose is fulfilled.

Before turning to the outline of the rest of the book, the following introductory pages weave together the conceptual background for this idea of the cultivation of humanity in higher education, reflecting on the role that community engagement may play in orientating universities towards this higher purpose.

1.1 Contested Ideas of Higher Education's Purpose in the Twenty-First Century

1.1.1 From a Neoliberal Perspective

Neoliberalism refers to a social imaginary, mode of government and/or institutional logic that prioritises the accumulation of private economic capital, and within which social relations in education and other sectors are imagined in terms of the forms of organisation analogous to those of the market in a capitalist economy (Marginson, 2016; Marginson, 2018). As the dominant social imaginary of our time, it has given rise to what is now referred to as the "neoliberal university" (Le Grange, 2023, p. 43).

Neoliberal rationality increasingly frames higher education as a competitive enterprise operating within a global knowledge economy, in which knowledge replaces traditional inputs of labour and capital as an engine for growth (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Giroux, 2014). Under this framework, the value of teaching and research are increasingly based on their potential to generate growth, and global ranking systems reinforce this emphasis (Hlatshwayo, 2022; McKenna, 2024). University education becomes a private investment into one's future employment prospects.

In a context like South Africa, in which unemployment and poverty remain prevalent concerns, this positioning of the purpose of universities as institutions that may stimulate economic growth and contribute to national competitiveness is understandable and, in many ways, compelling. At the same time, however, reducing the value of higher education primarily to its contribution to economic productivity risks narrowing its public, civic, and

epistemic purposes, and may obscure alternative imaginaries of the university. Badat (2010) argues that post-apartheid higher education faces the dual imperatives of global competitiveness and social redress. However, neoliberal reforms risk privileging the former while undermining the latter, thereby reproducing structural inequalities under the guise of efficiency and excellence. Importantly, as Hlatshwayo (2022, p. 7) confirms, "it frustrates and denies the possibilities of achieving [...] 'critical humanism', which continues to be sacrificed on the altar of corporatization."

In addition, universities are recontextualised from institutions designed to serve the public to corporates adopting the language and practices of the private sector, and the identity of students shifts from *learners* to *customers* (Hlatshwayo, 2022; Levin & Greenwood, 2008). The commodification of knowledge, positioning students as consumers, and requiring academics to adopt a 'publish or perish' mentality, diminishes collegial and communal values, thereby undermining the emancipatory potential of higher education as a space for critical reflection and social transformation (Bawa, 2021; Brown, 2015).

Nussbaum (2009, p. 6) describes this framework as "education for economic enrichment" which may enhance technical skills and socioeconomic mobility but often fails to address educational inequality, or nurture students' critical thinking capabilities or sense of social responsibility. A consequence of the market logic adopted by universities is the erosion of public trust in higher education institutions (Shapiro, 2005) which manifests as declining public confidence and growing scepticism about the social value of universities and the legitimacy of their authority as knowledge producers. Over time, this disconnect can weaken democratic life, as universities retreat from their role as spaces for critical inquiry, ethical reflection, individual and institutional transformation, and the cultivation of engaged, socially responsible citizens, especially in the South African context.

1.2 Towards a Broader Vision and Purpose of Higher Education: Emerging Counter-Hegemonic Discourses Centring the Cultivation of Humanity

1.2.1 The Reparative University

The pervasiveness of neoliberalism combined with the legacies of colonialism continue to influence and shape the epistemic and ontological orientations of higher education not only in South Africa, but the African continent and the Majority World. South Africa carries the added burden of its apartheid history. Emergent challenges to neoliberalism in higher education may be found in movements advocating for the decolonisation of knowledge, the democratisation of governance, and the protection of public education. Student activism, such as Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall, provides an example of attempts to counter the colonial heritage and commodification of higher education institutions (Martinez-Vargas, 2020).

The idea of a reparative university has emerged in educational scholarship. It asks how universities can acknowledge and address historical and ongoing oppression to imagine and enact more just futures. Reparative futures theorists argue that the construction of more humanising and inclusive futures requires learning with the past and lived experiences of oppression (Sriprakash et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2023). They ask universities to commit to identifying pathways for material, epistemic, and relational repair (Stein & Andreotti, 2025) and to address historical injustice through institutional structural and cultural change, curriculum reform, and community engagement, among other approaches. This reframes purpose beyond productivity toward healing and development, restitution, and social repair (Calitz, 2018).

This idea of a reparative university is not only about enacting repair for harm done in the past and present. It also serves as a regenerative opportunity to enact deeper forms of individual, social, and institutional transformation for collective well-being. Epistemic repair involves undoing unjust social imaginaries to create new ones. It is about "wandering into lesser known corners" to resuscitate suffocated histories and social imaginaries, whilst undoing and amending belief systems that may distort,

erase, and disfigure these (González Stokas, 2023, p. 142). Here, communities must be actively engaged as equal partners by any institution seeking genuine repair, rather than tokenistically consulted. Relationship building must therefore move at the speed of trust, rather than be determined by the usual institutional imperatives of expediency and predetermined timelines and outcomes (Stein & Andreotti, 2025).

Significantly, these ongoing theoretical developments reflect a larger struggle over the epistemological and ethical future of the university. The ideas that we explore in this book, which may be seen as aligning with counter-hegemonic ideas, are university social responsibility and the cultivation of humanity. Here, we look beyond the overt purposes of higher education in the current age – knowledge production, career building, degree-granting, and research outputs – towards a higher purpose, namely, to transform individuals and society and to create a more just, humane, and inclusive future, in which multiple forms of knowledge are validated and celebrated. We propose that educating students for a living is necessary, but it is an insufficient and incomplete purpose of universities. Students must be educated for a life of meaning, one grounded in the cultivation of humanity.

1.2.2 Ubuntu, Universal Human Values, and the Cultivation of Humanity

We propose that the philosophy of Ubuntu, one variety of African humanism that comprises the intricate relationship between people, country, environment and spirituality, and which is integrated with widely endorsed human values (such as love, peace, integrity), offers a framework for understanding this broader purpose. Ubuntu names a relational ontology and moral grammar that understands personhood as made and remade through relations. Dandala (1996, p. 70) writes that Ubuntu is "a statement of being, about fundamental things that qualify a person to be a person...Being human is achieved as a person shows characteristics that qualify him or her to be so regarded. Hence, it is quite possible to refer to a person as a 'non-person'." He further claims that Ubuntu becomes a fountain from which actions and attitudes flow. The way one relates to other people and the surroundings becomes a critical factor to one's *beingness*:

> Greeting or not greeting people, and how this is done, becomes a critical factor-not merely to demonstrate how sociable one is, but rather how human one is. Consciousness of what one is able to give and\or receive becomes equally important. The saying '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*' (a person is a person because of others) becomes a statement that levels all people. It essentially states that no one can be [totally] self-sufficient and that interdependence is a reality for all...Ubuntu is not an abstract term separated from other things that happen in life; it is buttressed and nurtured by them. In other words while *ubuntu* finds its most vocal expression and is inherent in African culture, it is not an exclusive possession of Africans...*ubuntu* is not something that people are born with, it can be cultivated and nurtured by anyone. (Dandala, 1996, p. 70–71)

The question then arises: How do we recapture Ubuntu for our society, particularly in our higher education institutions where it has largely been excluded or marginalised in the knowledge creation process and curricula? In this book, Ubuntu functions as an ethical and pedagogical anchor for community engagement: it recasts engagement not as charitable service but as mutual belonging, co-learning and co-liberation – a practice through which universities cultivate more humane ways of being, doing, and knowing.

It is in this integral and interdependent relationship between the individual and the collective that human values, also embedded in the philosophy of Ubuntu, contribute to the cultivation of humanity. Human values enable people to act thoughtfully and ethically, moving beyond basic impulses and reactions, as "values are guiding principles in people's lives" (Schwartz, 2012, p. 3). In this way, values shape behaviour that respects dignity, peace, and the wellbeing of others, forming the ethical infrastructure that sustains freedom, justice, and the pursuit of the common good.

While we are careful not to oversimplify or romanticise Ubuntu and human values, they nevertheless deepen our understanding of what a university that seeks to cultivate humanity looks like. The emphasis placed on interdependence and relationality, underpinned by human values, suggests that engagement with those beyond the boundaries of the university is not merely outreach, but integral to how we know, learn, and live ethically (Waghid, 2023, p. 106).

The conceptual understanding of humanity that derives from Ubuntu can be aligned with Nussbaum's idea of the cultivation of humanity, emerging from an alternative Western liberal tradition. In her seminal work, *Cultivating Humanity*, Nussbaum (1997, pp. 9–11), argues for three capacities essential to the cultivation of humanity in today's world: (i) the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's traditions for living a life that questions all beliefs and accepts only those that survive reason; (ii) an ability for citizens to see themselves not simply as citizens of some local region or group but as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern; and (iii) the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have.

In the first instance, the critical examination of traditions and beliefs needs to be grounded in the development or flourishing of the individual within a community (Banda, 2019). In this vein, Garrison (2015, pp. 11-12) argues that:

> Critical thinking is more than self-reflection and is invariably socially situated. It is a form of disciplined inquiry that moves the individual beyond autonomous thought [...] To think is to question; to question is to inquire. Most importantly, to think is to question one's own thoughts and this requires intervention.

The second and third principles align with the tenets of Ubuntu in the interconnectedness the worldview promotes, and the empathy fostered by relational and communal values and practices. Importantly, Nussbaum's ideas on the cultivation of humanity also incorporate the characteristics of the four worlds integrated model, described below as the theoretical framework for the book. Read alongside universal human values and Nussbaum's capacities for cultivating humanity, Ubuntu reorients higher education towards the formation of persons who can think critically, feel empathetically, and act responsibly within communities. When community engagement is underpinned by Ubuntu, it becomes a site of mutual recognition and co-creation: students, staff and community partners learn from and with one another, thereby cultivating the relational virtues that sustain humane societies.

In the discourse on reparation, a university grounded in the cultivation of humanity requires acknowledgement of ways of knowing beyond university walls in surrounding communities (Calitz, 2018). As we recognise this reality, we begin to integrate *knowledge for the economy* and *knowledge democracy,* combining the building of individuals' marketable skills and cultivating capabilities to build, transform, and apply knowledge for inclusive human development (Hall & Tandon, 2017). The concept of knowledge democracy, put forward by Hall and Tandon (2017), seeks to affirm multiple epistemologies, knowledge created and represented in multiple forms (e.g. storytelling, art and drama), knowledge embedded in social movements, and the knowledge of those historically marginalised and excluded. Knowledge democracy, therefore, implies a society in which a diverse group of actors hold relevant knowledge to address societal issues, and all of these are significant as we aim to use knowledge to advance social and epistemic justice (Hall & Tandon, 2017, p. 13). It calls for research *with* communities rather than *on* communities and requires researchers and academics to approach their work with care and humility. By embracing knowledge democracy and the relational ethics of *Ubuntu*, universities may move beyond the instrumentalism of the knowledge economy. In doing so, they may begin to arc themselves, gently but deliberately, towards the cultivation of humanity.

1.2.3 Reconceptualisation of Higher Education

A shift towards education for the cultivation of humanity entails an inclusion of social, political, and ethical responsiveness together with economic responsiveness. The purpose of higher education institutions is after all multifaceted, spanning economic, civic, cultural, and ethical dimensions. Their legitimacy and impact therefore depend on how well they balance academic excellence with moral and civic responsibility. When we recognise that universities have multiple purposes, we need to reimagine our higher education institutions not as self-contained units, but as deeply embedded in and accountable to the local and national context in the first instance, followed by the global context.

This reimagining finds resonance in more recent extensions of innovation systems theory, with the development of the quintuple helix model

(Carayannis et al., 2012; Johnson & Hlatshwayo, 2025). Emerging as a critique of the market-oriented triple helix of university-industry-government relations, the quintuple helix explicitly incorporates civil society and the natural environment as co-equal spheres in knowledge production and social transformation. In doing so, it foregrounds the cultural, ethical, ecological, and relational dimensions of knowledge that are routinely marginalised in economistic accounts of higher education purpose.

Read through the lens of Ubuntu and knowledge democracy, the quintuple helix offers a useful heuristic for understanding universities as participants in a living social ecosystem rather than as isolated engines of innovation. Knowledge, in this view, is not produced *for* communities or environments, but *with* them, through reciprocal, value-laden relationships that recognise interdependence between people, place, and planet. Such a framing aligns closely with the cultivation of humanity. It insists that higher education's legitimacy rests not only on economic contribution, but on its capacity to sustain social and epistemic justice, human dignity, and ecological wellbeing.

Brink (2018) provides a compelling framework for reconceptualisation of higher education. He invites us to think of universities not as siloed entities but as part of an "academic ecosystem" or a "landscape" recognising that they exist within and are dependent on a broader context. This recognition gives rise to "engaged" universities with "a sense of place, a sense of people, and a sense of purpose'" that exist "not just *in* [their communities], but [are constitutive] *of* [their communities]" (Brink, 2018, p. 298). These universities connect to the demands of broader society and are thus better positioned to generate knowledge linked to place and societal purpose.

1.3 Higher Education Community Engagement and the Cultivation of Humanity

Based on this discussion, we explicitly propose that universities' core function of community engagement, underpinned by the philosophy of Ubuntu and universal human values, has the potential to serve as a platform for educating students, specifically for life, and for the cultivation of

humanity through its various forms of expression. Engagement encompasses a range of reciprocal and collaborative activities that connect universities with external communities (local, national, and global) in ways that generate mutual benefit and contribute to the public and common good. Community engagement is understood as a scholarly and socially responsive practice that integrates teaching, learning and research with community-based experiences, fostering both student development and societal transformation (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002).

In South Africa, the White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education (DoE, 1997, p. 4) charges the higher education sector to do much more within its own institutions, and in the broader community, "to strengthen the democratic ethos, the sense of common citizenship and commitment to a common good". Community engagement was subsequently identified as an integral part of higher education, exhorting universities to "demonstrate social responsibility [...] and their commitment to the common good by making available expertise and infrastructure for community service programmes" (DoE, 1997, p. 11). Explicit in this developmental role of universities and in "common citizenship", "commitment to a common good", and "social responsibility" is the conception of humanity. These terms collectively signal values such as compassion, empathy, and kindness, all of which are grounded in a notion of care.

Hall (2010) emphasises that this form of engagement represents a transformative partnership rooted in principles of reciprocity, Ubuntu, and knowledge co-creation between universities and communities. Strong, healthy community-university partnerships are key to effective community engagement. Keeling (2020, p. 49) points out that to have humanity is to be humane, to care, to notice and respond to others thoughtfully and with kindness. Thus, the critical component of humanity in community-university relationships necessarily precludes the patronage implied in providing a service or charity to those less fortunate, as a sort of gift, in a transactional relationship (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). Instead, community engagement involves partnerships with communities to collectively and equally meet the needs, hopes and desires of both parties. This mutual exchange results in the revelation of new knowledge, the promotion and application of learning and further knowledge of self. A recognition of the

interconnectedness of universities and communities enables a powerful perspective: communities and universities may serve one another in mutually empowering and transformative ways.

Similarly, Favish and Simpson (2016, p. 241) affirm that community engagement can, and does, result in benefits for communities while simultaneously enhancing the academic project, through enabling access to information and drawing on different forms of knowledge. More importantly, student participation provides opportunities for nurturing critical and democratic citizenship, *development of self*, and helps build a commitment to shaping an equitable social order through reflection on the socio-economic realities that characterise South African society. Vulnerable communities in South Africa face a plethora of problems daily, including poor or no delivery of basic services, extremely high levels of crime and violence, severe hunger and deprivation and mounting inequality. While all sectors have a social responsibility to contribute to societal development, the higher education sector has 'an unmatched obligation' to play a significant role in community and society building (DoE, 1997).

Community engagement, as noted, encapsulates in word (*and spirit*) the concept of humanity, which resonates deeply with the philosophy of Ubuntu and universal human values. Thus, the cultivation of humanity for the practice of community engagement in the South African context can accommodate an eclectic and dynamic process, but its inclusion should be mandatory in the interests of both students and the communities with whom they work. Students should be prepared in such a way for community engagement that they are able to comprehend the philosophy of Ubuntu and enact the human values not only in their interaction with others in the university arena, but to be able to incorporate these values post-university, as an integral part of their lives. As mentioned earlier on in the chapter, community engagement has evolved over time, with its practice developing incrementally across institutions. While its forms and expressions have varied in both past and present contexts, this book foregrounds the critical importance of placing humanity and the holistic development of students at the centre of engagement.

As a summary, in exploring what it means to cultivate humanity specifically through community engagement, the book draws on the worldview of Ubuntu, universal human values, and Nussbaum's three essential capacities. Importantly this framework affirms that the cultivation of humanity is inseparable from the ways in which humans relate to and care for the natural environment. At the same time, this book recognises that community engagement is not without its shortcomings. In some instances, the ways in which it is currently conceptualised and implemented may themselves be dehumanising, reinforcing hierarchies, extractive logics, or superficial partnerships. As such, this work is equally concerned with unearthing and critically examining these limitations.

By acknowledging where and how community engagement may fall short, we aim to deepen our understanding of what is required for best practice: approaches that genuinely cultivate humanity within and beyond the university. In doing so, we are reminded of Desmond Tutu's call to recognise our shared humanity and interdependence, and James Yoonil Auh's (2019) powerful question: *What do we truly value in society, and what kind of world do we wish to build?*

1.4 Theoretical and Philosophical Perspectives Framing the Book

1.4.1 Introducing the Four Worlds Integral Development Model

To give effect to the central premise of this book – higher education as a means for the cultivation of humanity-insights are drawn from two seminal works. First, Lessem and Nussbaum's *Sawubona Africa: Embracing Four Worlds in South African Management* (1996, pp. 38-44), originally developed for business management in post-apartheid South Africa. Second, Schieffer and Lessem's *Integral Development: Realising the Transformative Potential of Individuals, Organisations, and Societies* (2016). Building on these works, an adapted Four Worlds Integral Development Model offers a powerful framework for understanding community engagement and the role of higher education in cultivating humanity. The model suggests that global

knowledge traditions can be interpreted through four interconnected "worlds", each aligned with distinct philosophical orientations:

i) North-Rationalism (Mind): Emphasises intellectual reasoning, analytical thinking, and scientific knowledge. It is strongly associated with European philosophical traditions, particularly the ideas of Descartes ("I think, therefore I am"). Rationalism dominates modern universities and academic knowledge systems.

ii) West-Pragmatism (Body): Focuses on action, practical experience, and learning through doing. Rooted in Western empirical traditions influenced by philosophers such as Hobbes and Locke, pragmatism values knowledge gained through experience and application.

iii) East-Holism (Heart): Emphasises interconnectedness, unity of matter and spirit, the ideal and the real, and the integration of opposites into a higher whole. Every condition of thought or of things, every idea and every situation in the world, leads irresistibly to its opposite and then unites with it to form a higher or more complex whole. The dominant thought is that everything, every life and person, always form a whole. Such whole-making is dynamic, evolutionary and creative. Two main forces operate in all existence: one growing and developing (evolution), and the other formative and binding (holism). Between the interaction of the two, the patterns of life are shaped by ever higher forms. Where the west is about doing, there is a quality of 'undoing' about the east. Undoing is seen as a positive feature; it is about getting rid of the old to form the new. Eastern traditions focus on process, balance, and transformation, highlighting that life evolves through dynamic relationships.

iv) South-Humanism/Ubuntu (Soul): Grounded in African philosophical traditions, especially Ubuntu, this perspective emphasises community, reciprocity, shared humanity, and collective wellbeing. Morals, emotions, and the spoken word are significant; wisdoms are carried forward in the form of metaphors and stories. The object of humanism is the community, duly evolving in its structure through the family into a fully-fledged socio-economic network. Individuals

> emerge from and are sustained by their relationships with others and their communities.

The notion of reciprocity, a central tenet of the concept of Ubuntu, is also the essence of both the holistic and humanistic perspectives. Reciprocity between individuals, communities and organisations is important for development of self as a human being and for building emotionally healthy and committed entities, whether family, community, organisation or the nation (Lessem & Nussbaum, 1996, p. 187).

Higher education globally is dominated by northern rationalism and western pragmatism, which has reinforced positivism, individualism, dichotomous thinking, competition, and hierarchical knowledge systems, among other characteristics, that have caused much harm to the majority of the so called 'developing' world (now referred to as the Global South). These dominant paradigms have often marginalised perspectives and worldviews from and of the Global South. *How then is the Four Worlds Integral Development Model significant for higher education and community engagement?* We propose, without negating the need for rationalism and pragmatism, that the world needs a different framework for human life and living and specifically for education at all levels, not only higher education. A new way of thinking, of consciousness, requires the centring of humanism and holism, and together with rationalism and pragmatism, an integral worldview or model for the reimagination of universities, for the reconstruction of society and for the development of ethical and compassionate human beings. Humanistic and holistic approaches call for an envisioning of higher education that emphasises equality, public good, and human flourishing *which includes a caring relationship with nature* (Giroux, 2014).

Figure 1 shows the more recent ideas on integral development by Schieffer and Lessem (2016, p. 129), which we adapted as a model for reimagining higher education and community engagement for the cultivation of humanity.

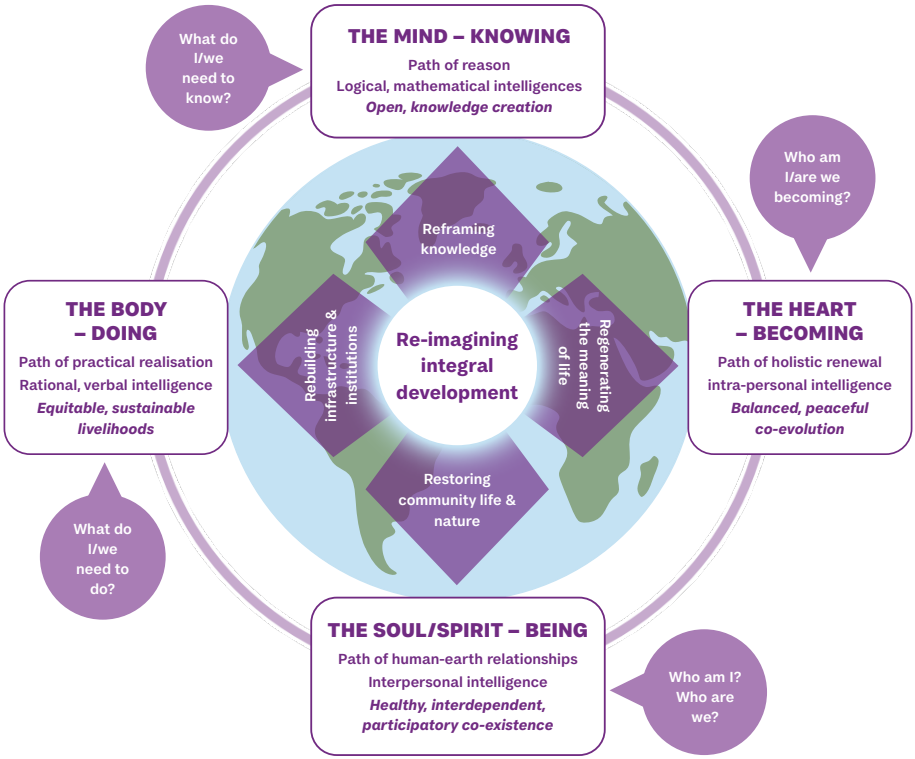


Figure 1: Illustration of Schieffer and Lessem's (2016, p. 129) integral development model adapted for this book by Margaret Irvine

1.4.2 Integrating and Expanding the Integral Development Model: The Critical Humanism and Holism of the (Wider) South

The schema provided by Lessem and Nussbaum's (1996) Four Worlds Model and Schieffer and Lessem (2016) Integral Development Model remain incomplete without critical attention to relations of power, coloniality (Quijano, 2007), and resistance that shape our ways of being and knowing in the world. Attention also needs to be paid to movement in this model, or the dynamic process through which individuals, communities, and institutions may travel among and integrate these worlds.

We therefore propose an expansion of the humanism and holism of the wider South to one of critical humanisation. Such an approach – drawing on writing and experiences of resistance not only on continental Africa but also of Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and marginalised communities in the west and north (amongst other geographies) – connects the current conceptualisation of the cultivation of humanity grounded in unity and reciprocity (holism and humanism) to resistance (against oppression), transformation, and hope.

Lugones (2003) draws on the idea of pilgrimages, or movements that loosen oppressive institutional structures, as a means of cultivating humanity. She argues that this potential lies in travelling between worlds, or epistemic pilgrimages that require witnessing faithfully and making space for multiple visions and forms of sense-making (Lugones, 2003, p. 16). This idea of "world"-travelling is not what is generally understood from the Western, leisurely sense of the word, as these movements typically do not necessarily entail movement between epistemic and spiritual as well as physical worlds. Genuine "world"-travelling allows us to think about multiple knowledges and knowledge as relational and dynamic, an integrative process based on creative tension.

This idea of "world"-travelling is not only an acknowledgement of relational forms of knowledge but could also be an act of relational ways of loving and being (therefore spiritual), as we recognise and witness those who have historically been constructed as different to us. Lugones (1987, p. 8) argues that it is "world"-travelling and recognising the 'other' that enables us "to *be* through *loving* each other". The recognition is about more than identifying with the 'other'; it is also about recognising the self, and specifically the self in the 'other's' world (Kelland et al., 2024, p. 60). This idea comes through strongly in Lugones' statement that "I am incomplete and unreal without other women [human beings]. I am profoundly dependent on others without having to be their subordinate, their slave, their servant" (1987, p. 8). The interdependence brought forward in this statement highlights that our ways of being are also relational and connects strongly to the philosophy of Ubuntu*:* that my humanity is bound up with the humanity of those around me.

Love, in this case, is deeply connected to the politics of resistance. In this world, the cultivation of humanity is inseparable from the struggle for justice. Love and resistance are not opposites but mutually sustaining forces. "Loving perception" is simultaneously a humanising and decolonial act: to see the other compassionately is to resist the colonial logics of domination, fragmentation, division and objectification (Lugones, 1987).

In this expanded interpretation, the *Four Worlds Integral Model* adopted for this book becomes less a static map and more a field of relational movement. The cultivation of humanity is not merely harmony among fixed worlds, but the capacity to move between them, to engage difference critically, lovingly, and reflectively. Each world offers a vital dimension of being, but it is through *travelling between them*, between mind and soul, between action and reflection, between body and heart, that genuine learning, integration, and transformation occur. This world does not stand apart from the others but rather infuses them with criticality and conscience. It interrogates the rationalism of the North (whose reason?), challenges the pragmatism of the West (toward what ends?), deepens the holism of the East (whose wholeness?), and politicises the humanism of the South (whose humanity?).

This approach is connected to praxis: the intersection and congruence of thought, feeling, and doing, or the action and reflection of individuals upon their world to transform it (Freire, 1970, p. 79). If pragmatism is the body, rationalism is the mind, holism is the heart, and humanism is the soul, then perhaps this attention to praxis is best symbolised by the hands. It is through the hands that thought, heart, soul, and action in pursuit of collective liberation are connected. In other words, "we cannot say that in the process of revolution someone liberates someone else, nor yet that someone liberates himself, but rather that human beings in communion liberate each other" (Freire, 1970, p. 106).

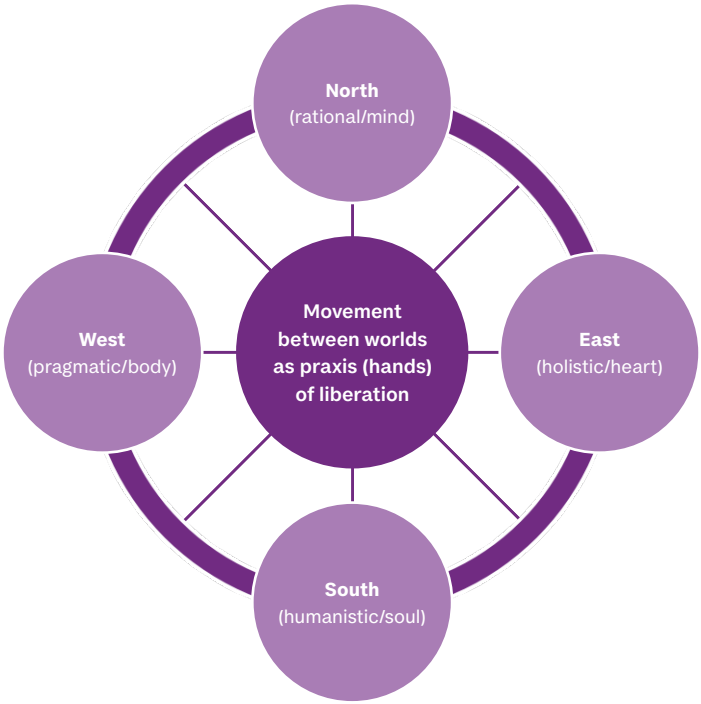


Figure 2: Four Worlds Integral Model with movement between worlds

In this respect, higher education and community engagement have an important role to play. Freire (1970) reminds us that education is never neutral: it either domesticates or liberates. True education, he argues, is an act of humanisation, or the process through which people become more fully human by recognising and transforming the conditions that dehumanise them and the people around them. The cultivation of humanity is thus also the cultivation of the capacity to act in solidarity with others.

The expanded framework that we propose repositions community engagement as an act of critical love and hope. It moves engagement beyond service and\or partnership towards co-liberation, where universities and communities engage in mutual processes of learning and unlearning together. It invites students, educators, and community partners to become co-creators of humanity rather than passive recipients of knowledge.

Community engagement thus has a significant role to play in establishing this new way of thinking. Johnson and Hlatshwayo (2025) write that community engagement must be conceptualised and theorised in a manner that ensures that it becomes central to the functioning of a university, not just as a third mission, something that they believe has contributed to its marginalisation. We propose that there is an urgency, and that the time is now for genuinely transforming and reimagining higher education nationally and globally. The centring of community engagement as a core function of higher education becomes critical and urgent. Community engagement becomes the process by which we can enact and live this transformation and reimagination, serving as the platform for the cultivation of humanity in students, community partners and academics underpinned by Ubuntu philosophy and universal human values.

Ultimately, to educate and to engage is to love, to love is to resist, and to resist is to cultivate our shared humanity.

1.5 Outline of Chapters

This book comprises two sections. The first includes theoretical contributions and reflections on community engagement and the cultivation of humanity. The second offers methodological, empirical, philosophical, and practical insights into how community engagement for the cultivation of humanity may be imagined and enacted in diverse higher education settings.

Chapter 2, by Sharli Anne Paphitis, reframes the cultivation of humanity in higher education as a lived, relational, and institutionally situated practice. Drawing on Martha Nussbaum's three capacities, namely critical self-examination, global citizenship, and narrative imagination, Paphitis argues that the humanities provide an important normative foundation but that these capacities remain abstract unless embedded in ethically structured practice. Grounded in over a decade of community-engaged teaching and justice-oriented work in South Africa, the chapter positions community engagement not as an add-on but as a foundational pedagogy through which students rehearse critical reflection and develop accountable relationships with others. Paphitis shows how critical service-learning and dialogical

partnership cultivate both social and epistemic justice: they redistribute institutional resources, validate marginalised knowledges, and make moral imagination action-oriented. Crucially, she insists that such pedagogies will not take root without aligned institutional cultures that reward collegiality, mentorship, and ethically robust research practices. The chapter closes with a prescriptive note: cultivating humanity requires visible relational practices among academics, the embedding of mentorship and reflective structures in teaching, and institutional incentives that afford justice-orientated engagement practices.

Chapter 3, by Savathrie Margie Maistry, Amey Deshpande and Monica Canca, advances a transformative vision for higher education centred on the cultivation of humanity through community engagement. Moving beyond economistic and cognitively driven models of education, the authors argue for a holistic and relational approach that integrates Ubuntu philosophy, universal human values, and the ethics of care. Central to the chapter is the Integral Reparative Education Framework (IREF), which reconceptualises education as a process of relational, ethical, and epistemic transformation. By foregrounding community engagement as a site of mutual learning, healing, and becoming together the chapter reimagines higher education as a humanising and transformative project.

Chapter 4, by Vhonani Netshandama, explores how South African higher education can reframe community engagement as a practice for cultivating humanity. Drawing on Ubuntu philosophy, reflexive scholarship, and lifelong lessons from academic elders, Netshandama illustrates how transactional approaches in higher education have hindered the development of humane, empathetic, and inclusive practices. Against this backdrop, community engagement is positioned as a unique space within higher education institutions where the cultivation of humanity may be realised. Yet, despite its potential, community engagement as a transformative and relational practice faces challenges of legitimacy. The chapter concludes by proposing the integration of relational modes of being within higher education institutions, along with scholarly contributions and mentorship, urging institutions to embrace humanity as a core value in their engagement with communities.

Chapter 5, by Grey Magaiza and Brenda Muchabveyo, examines the cultivation of humanity through an interrogation of the social construction of race. The chapter explores race through a decolonial and ethical lens, situating South Africa as a critical site where the contradictions between liberal equality and the persistence of racial inequality are most visible. Building on the theoretical work of earlier chapters, the authors position Ubuntu as a foundational African moral philosophy that redefines personhood through interdependence and relational ethics, offering an alternative to individualist and competitive modes of human association. Drawing comparative insights from global traditions such as Confucian ren, Western liberal humanism, and Latin American Buen Vivir, the chapter argues that Ubuntu advances a distinctive yet globally resonant paradigm for confronting racism. Ubuntu thus provides an ethical framework for restoring co-being and shared humanity, inviting a reimagining of human relations grounded in reciprocity, dignity, and collective flourishing.

In Chapter 6, Kanya Padayachee continues in this vein by exploring the cultivation of humanity in community engagement within South African higher education institutions through the application of an integral education and Ubuntu approach. The chapter reimagines community engagement by demonstrating the compatibility of integral education and Ubuntu with the philosophies of holism and humanism that underpin community engagement. It further incorporates rationalism and pragmatism through the relationship between community engagement, teaching and learning, and engaged research. The chapter argues that this reimagined paradigm has the potential, alongside intellectual development, to cultivate in students an awareness that human beings are not merely individuals, but are interconnected, interdependent, and interrelated with everyone and everything in the world.

Following Chapter 6, the second section turns to the practices and pathways that enable us to imagine and enact community engagement for the cultivation of humanity.

Chapter 7, by Pedro Tabensky and Lindsay Kelland, introduces IiNtetho zoBomi (Conversations About Life), a service-learning course run by the Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics (AGCLE) at Rhodes University, South

Africa. Rooted in a conception of ethical leadership as self-leadership or personal sovereignty, the course engages students as whole persons in a process of ethical and existential self-formation. Drawing on their previous work, *A Pedagogy of Being* (Kelland et al., 2024), the authors extend their exploration of service learning as a response to the fragmentation between thought and action, and to the epistemic and existential marginalisation students often experience in contemporary higher education. They argue that service learning holds transformative and humanising potential, while acknowledging the systemic constraints that limit this potential within institutional contexts.

Chapter 8, co-authored by Lizole Jalajala, Nwabisa Nkani, Zanoxolo Nyangiwe, Zandile Valela, and Claire McCann, explores what the lived experiences of Makhanda's 'local students', young people from the Makhanda community who go on to study at Rhodes University, reveal about the humanising capacity of higher education community engagement. The inquiry takes the form of a collaborative digital storytelling process. The digital stories illustrate how local students navigate belonging and marginality, recognition and erasure, across the socially constructed boundaries that divide 'university' and 'community'. The chapter shows how community engagement can be both humanising and alienating, holding potential for connection and recognition while also surfacing unresolved dynamics of power and exclusion. Ultimately, it argues that cultivating humanity in higher education requires not only institutional commitments to community engagement, but also the creation of spaces where lived experience is recognised and valued as knowledge.

Chapter 9, by George Ladaah Openjuru, David Monk, and Robert Jjuuko, focuses on Gulu University in Uganda and examines the critical role of healthy community-university engagement in fostering transformative development and enhancing institutional vitality. The authors argue that universities must move beyond transactional outreach to embrace reciprocal and sustained partnerships with communities. Such engagement enriches experiential learning and research relevance, while positioning universities as co-creators of knowledge and catalysts for inclusive change. The chapter conceptualises 'healthy engagement' as a dynamic process rooted in mutual

respect, shared goals, and epistemic justice, where community voices shape academic inquiry and institutional priorities.

Chapter 10, by Victor Paul and Melvin Victor, presents Christ University (India) as a case study in the institutional cultivation of humanity. Grounded in the philosophy of integral humanism and its vision of 'Excellence and Service', the chapter illustrates how ethical formation and social responsibility are embedded across curricula, governance, and campus life. Through initiatives such as the Centre for Social Action (CSA), Service Learning integration, Parivarthana (waste management), rural immersion programmes, and centres focused on life skills and sustainability, the University institutionalises community engagement as a core educational practice.

Homing in on humanising methodologies, Chapter 11, by Shilohna Phillanders, introduces echo-autoethnography, a narrative methodology that integrates wholeness into research and practice. Building on autoethnography, it advances a relational and humanistic co-creation of knowledge that recognises the intersections of self, community, and history in learning and transformation. Emerging from the author's journey as a Caribbean practitioner-scholar navigating global academic spaces, echo-autoethnography captures the layered interplay of power, place, and positionality in educational research and practice. It reframes the researcher not as a solitary producer of meaning, but as a resonant site of community voices, collective memory, and ethical tension. Through the metaphor of 'echoes', it illuminates co-created meaning across positionalities and lived experiences. Rooted in postcolonial and diasporic contexts, it connects Caribbean and African histories, underscoring shared legacies and the humanising threads that unite communities across borders.

Finally, the concluding chapter, Chapter 12, seeks to weave together the preceding threads. It synthesises insights from the earlier chapters to reflect on the possibilities and constraints of community engagement as a humanising force in higher education in South Africa and beyond.

The contributions of this book do not offer a map of settled answers, but rather an invitation to ongoing inquiry and change. We offer these

perspectives to spark questions, unsettle assumptions, and encourage practices that recentre interdependence and humanity.

Our final question is this: If the purpose of the university is to cultivate humanity, how might our institutions, organisations, teaching, research, and partnerships look different tomorrow from what they are today?

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2. Higher Education Community Engagement and the Cultivation of Humanity

| Sharli Paphitis

Abstract

In this paper I explore what it means to cultivate humanity in higher education as a lived and institutional practice. Drawing on Martha Nussbaum's account of cultivating humanity, the paper reasserts higher education as a moral project concerned with ethical development. Unlike Nussbaum, I argue that while liberal education, viz. the humanities, provides an important normative foundation, the capacities required for cultivating humanity remain abstract unless embedded in relational and structurally supported practices. Building on over a decade of experience in community-engaged teaching and research, work shaped by justice-oriented practice in South Africa, I argue that community engagement is not peripheral but foundational to cultivating humanity. Through structured reflection, dialogical partnership, and critical service learning, students undertake activities that enable the kind of ethical self-scrutiny and relational practice that cultivates their humanity. However, I also argue that neither the humanities curriculum nor community engagement alone can sustain this work without supportive institutional cultures. Without institutional alignment, even the most compelling pedagogical efforts will struggle to take root. I conclude that cultivating humanity requires ethical and visible relational practices among academics; embedding transformative pedagogical relationships with students into our teaching; and the development of ethical research cultures within our institutions. Universities and those who work there must model the values they seek to instil.

Key words: *Cultivating humanity; Higher education; Community engagement; Critical service learning; Institutional culture*

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2.1 Introduction

I am writing this paper out of a long-held conviction that universities can be more than sites of knowledge transmission, they can be places where *people* are *shaped*. In my current academic role, largely shaped by the logics of clinical trials and the pressures of contemporary research systems, I do not often get to speak about this conviction directly. Yet, it remains central to how I understand higher education and my place within it.

I have argued elsewhere that universities can be sites of transformation (Paphitis & Kelland, 2016), but that claim only matters if we are willing to ask what kind of transformation we mean. When I use the phrase cultivating humanity, I am reaching for something deliberately ordinary but also something quite demanding at the same time. So, what is humanity and what do we mean when we say we cultivate it? Following Nussbaum (1997, 2010), I think that humanity is not a vague celebration of 'being human', but a moral orientation. It is the capacity to recognise others as fully human, to live with concern and accountability in a diverse world, and to remain attentive to suffering, power, and difference without turning away. Cultivating names the way this orientation is formed. It is not a moment of insight, and not a set of values we simply proclaim, but something practiced into being through repetition, through habits of attention, and through the slow shaping of character in relationship with others. It is the daily work of becoming the kind of person, and building the kind of institution, for whom dignity, care, and critical thought are not aspirational add-ons but a way of life. In this sense, I am drawing here on an Aristotelian understanding of moral formation, where we become just or courageous not by declaration but by repeatedly acting justly and courageously (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1999, Book II).

I begin this paper by briefly engaging Martha Nussbaum's influential account of cultivating humanity and her insistence that higher education has a moral and democratic purpose beyond economic utility. Her articulation of three capacities, critical self-examination, global citizenship, and narrative imagination, offers a compelling vocabulary for what we might hope education can do in a world marked by resurgent nationalism and entrenched inequalities.

At the same time, I suggest that these capacities risk remaining abstract if we treat them as outcomes of exposure to ideas alone, even within the humanities, and that cultivating these capacities requires contexts in which these capacities can be enacted, tested, and held to account. The paper therefore turns to community engagement as a foundational practice through which the ideals of cultivating humanity become embodied and relational. Drawing on traditions of critical service learning (Mitchell, 2008, 2015; Ash & Clayton, 2009) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 2000), and grounded in my own experience, I show how engagement, when ethically structured, creates the conditions for reflective accountability and the co-production of knowledge that can disrupt inherited assumptions. I develop community engagement as both a social justice practice, responding to material and structural inequality, and an epistemic justice practice, challenging who gets to be seen as a knower and what counts as knowledge.

Finally, I argue that neither the humanities nor community engagement can sustain this work if institutional culture is hostile or extractive (Giroux, 2014; Collini, 2012). I locate cultivating humanity in the everyday conditions of academic life: the relational practices we model with colleagues, the pedagogical relationships we build with students, and the research cultures we normalise and reward. My central claim here is a simple one, but one that is not easily achieved by imperfect people operating within a very imperfect world: cultivating humanity is not possible without a university culture that nurtures it, and that culture is made, moment by moment, in how we choose to show up in everyday academic life.

2.2 Cultivating Humanity

Martha Nussbaum's account of cultivating humanity provides a compelling normative starting point for thinking about the moral purpose of higher education. In *Cultivating Humanity* (1997), she argues that universities should not merely transmit technical knowledge or cultural inheritance, but should form human beings capable of thoughtful and compassionate participation in a diverse and democratic world. Nussbaum identifies three capacities as central to this project: critical self-examination, the ability to see oneself as a 'global citizen', and narrative imagination. In *Not for Profit*

(2010), she extends this argument in response to the increasing instrumentalisation of higher education. She warns that when higher education is reduced to economic productivity, democratic life is weakened. A 'flourishing world society', she argues, requires not only technical expertise but citizens capable of critical thought, resistance to unreflective authority, and compassion for the vulnerable (Nussbaum, 2010).

I find Nussbaum's framework persuasive and generative. She rightly insists that education is a moral project and that the humanities, in particular, play an indispensable role in nurturing critical reflection, global awareness, and imaginative identification. Yet I also want to extend her account as I discuss it here and in the sections that follow. The first capacity Nussbaum advocates is critical self-examination, "the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's traditions" (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 9). Here Nussbaum discusses critical self-examination in terms of the ability to question one's inherited beliefs, traditions, and authorities rather than accepting them uncritically. For her, we need to cultivate in students the ability to critically reflect on their own beliefs, traditions and practices. This includes challenging inherited views and thinking for themselves.

I think that this is fairly uncontroversial. Yet, the conditions under which such examination becomes possible are more fragile than Nussbaum's account suggests. In practice what this really requires is both institutional permission to dissent and opportunities to practice this kind of thinking. Ask yourself honestly: *How often do our classrooms, or indeed universities, truly allow for this*? Too often, I think, self-examination is contained within the boundaries of higher education classrooms rather than environments in which questioning carries real consequences beyond symbolic approval. Students may be invited to 'think critically', yet only within parameters that leave institutional norms, disciplinary hierarchies, and assessment regimes largely intact. Criticality, in my experience, is too often reduced to an intellectual exercise rather than being given room to be developed and expressed as the disruptive force it really ought to be. If critical self-examination is to be more than an academic competency, it must be cultivated in contexts that allow discomfort, disagreement, and reflexive vulnerability.

The second capacity that Nussbaum advocates is the ability to see oneself as a citizen not only of a particular nation, but of a broader and interdependent world. Nussbaum argues that students need to understand their place in a broader global context, and learn to view their own community as part of "a complicated world order in which issues of many kinds require intelligent transnational deliberation for their resolution" (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 26). They need to grasp issues beyond their immediate community *and* appreciate the interconnectedness of all humanity. At the heart of her argument is the claim that people must learn to see themselves not only as members of a local community or nation, but "above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern" (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 10). Humanity, in this sense, is an ethical orientation toward shared vulnerability and mutual responsibility.

This capacity is particularly urgent in a world marked by global inequality, forced migration, ecological crisis, and resurgent nationalistic chauvinism. Yet here, too, there is a risk of abstraction. When global citizenship is confined to curricular content rather than enacted relationship, it may cultivate informed observers rather than accountable participants. If this capacity is to be more than an intellectual disposition, it must be grounded in experiences that situate students within systems of interdependence rather than positioning them as detached analysts of these situations. And this must involve proximity, not only perspective (in many ways I think this *contra* Singer 1972).

The final capacity Nussbaum advocates is narrative imagination. According to Nussbaum this "means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself" (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 11). She argues that the "capacity for sympathetic imagination will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us" (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 85). The capacity for narrative imagination is, for Nussbaum, the ability to imagine the inner lives of others and to recognise them as subjects rather than objects. Through literature, history, and the arts, Nussbaum suggests that students are invited to enter worlds other than their own and to develop the empathetic capacities necessary for respectful coexistence in a diverse society.

Nussbaum's emphasis on narrative and moral imagination is undoubtedly one of her greatest contributions to this area of thought. Yet imagination alone is surely insufficient. The capacity to imagine another's experience does not guarantee ethical accountability. It is possible to feel empathy without relinquishing power, or to appreciate stories without altering one's own position within unjust structures. When imagination is detached from embodied encounters and *relational experiences*, it may deepen sensitivity yet fail to influence future action. A useful illustration here comes from moral philosophy itself. Singer, in his influential essay "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" (1972) argues that those living in affluent societies are morally obligated to prevent suffering caused by global poverty whenever they can do so without comparable sacrifice. The argument has been widely taught and discussed for decades, and many readers report finding it deeply compelling. However, it is clear that the scale of redistribution implied by Singer's reasoning has not followed from the widespread recognition of its moral force. Sontag (2003) makes a related point in her reflections on representations of suffering. Exposure to stories or images of injustice can deepen awareness and compassion, yet this awareness does not reliably produce the actions necessary for addressing the conditions that generate that suffering.

If narrative imagination is to contribute to the cultivation of humanity, it must move beyond identification toward relationship and action. But I also think it must move us to more criticality. We must interrogate whose stories are told, who gets to tell them, and how those narratives are received. In my experience, narrative imagination becomes truly powerful when paired with critical action and accountability.

Overall, Nussbaum offers us aspirational and profoundly necessary capacities. The three capacities she outlines are necessary, yes, but not without limitations and critiques. Exposure to philosophical texts or literary narratives does not automatically produce critical self-examination or ethical concern. Nor does intellectual engagement with global issues necessarily translate into accountable forms of solidarity, or most crucially, *action*. When these capacities remain confined to the level of ideas, they risk becoming abstracted, affirmed rhetorically but thinly enacted. While the humanities undoubtedly create space for empathy and critical thought, they

can also remain elitist and disconnected from lived experience. As someone who has taught in humanities classrooms, I've seen how abstract discussions about justice often fail to translate into genuine understanding, *that is*, into action or transformation. This tension is not new. Writing in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) argued that democratic habits cannot be cultivated through the transmission of ideas alone. They must be formed through participation in practices that require cooperation, reflection, and responsibility. In this sense Dewey echoes a much older insight, present already in Aristotelian thought, that moral dispositions develop through habituation and practice rather than through intellectual assent alone. It is in following this that I suggest that cultivating the capacities Nussbaum sees as essential requires pedagogical contexts beyond what even the humanities can provide. Otherwise, they remain abstract ideals rather than transformative practices.

My critique and extension here is not a rejection of Nussbaum's vision; indeed, I hope to build on and extend this vision through this paper. If cultivating humanity is, as I am suggesting, a matter of practice and formation, then we must ask not only what capacities students ought to possess, but through what kinds of experiences, relationships, and institutional structures those capacities are formed. Critical reflection must be rehearsed in situations that unsettle comfort. Global citizenship must be grounded in encounters that move beyond abstraction. Narrative imagination must become relational and accountable rather than merely aesthetic (by which I mean that imaginative empathy alone is not enough, but that embodied empathy enacted in contexts that demand responsibility is also necessary).

Given all of this, I now turn to community engagement, not as a supplementary activity, but as a pedagogical site in which the capacities Nussbaum identifies can become embodied.

2.3 Community Engagement and the Cultivation of Humanity

Reading about the world is not the same as stepping into it. This distinction may appear self-evident, yet it has not always been taken seriously within higher education. The assumption that exposure to ideas is sufficient for ethical formation underestimates the conditions under which moral capacities are cultivated. If cultivating humanity is also a matter of practice, then the question becomes where and how such practice can occur within higher education learning. Here, I suggest that community engagement is not a peripheral or supplementary activity in higher education learning, but foundational to an education that seeks to cultivate humanity. While Nussbaum articulates the capacities required for democratic life, Freire (1970) reminds us that such capacities are forged *not only* through reflection but through dialogical encounter in the world. Community engagement creates spaces in which knowledge becomes relational, embodied, and accountable. It interrupts the one-directional flow of expertise from university to community and instead opens dialogical spaces in which students, academics, and community members co-produce meaning and action. My suggestion in this section is that if we return to Nussbaum's three capacities, community engagement provides a context in which critical self-examination, global citizenship, and narrative imagination can be practiced and enhanced. By community engagement, I refer here to structured partnerships between universities and communities oriented toward mutual learning and social responsibility, rather than one-directional service. Within this broad field, critical service learning has emerged as a particularly important approach, defined by its explicit focus on social justice, the redistribution of power, and sustained, reciprocal partnership, rather than charitable or depoliticised forms of service (Mitchell, 2008, 2015).

Within traditions of critical service learning (Mitchell, 2008, 2015) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 2000), structured reflection is central. Ash and Clayton (2009) emphasise that reflection is not incidental to engagement but constitutive of learning. It is through guided reflection that students interrogate their assumptions, recognise their positionality, and confront the limits of their prior understanding. In this sense, the reflection

involved in critical service learning is not simply retrospective, but the process through which experience becomes ethically and intellectually meaningful, enabling the kind of critical self-examination that Nussbaum describes. Engagement frequently places students in unfamiliar or uncomfortable situations that destabilise inherited certainties. Mezirow (1991) describes such moments as "disorienting dilemmas", instances of cognitive and emotional friction that prompt re-evaluation of previously taken-for-granted beliefs. One early study, in which I was involved, illustrates this dynamic (Sewry & Paphitis, 2018). In a service learning course within a chemistry department, students were required to maintain reflective journals alongside their community-based activities. Analysis of eighty journals revealed that while the course formally aimed to develop science communication skills, students' reflections overwhelmingly centred on personal growth, the questioning of stereotypes, and increased social awareness. One student wrote, "At that point I realized that I had been stereotyping due to the things we hear and see on the news. I learnt that I should stop stereotyping and rather re-evaluate my facts and opinions." Such moments capture critical self-examination in practice not as abstract reasoning, but as lived recognition of one's own implication in systems of representation and bias.

Critical service learning, as Mitchell (2008) argues, moves beyond volunteerism by explicitly linking local engagement to broader structures of injustice. Beginning locally is pedagogically powerful not because it narrows vision, but because it situates students within patterned systems of inequality and resilience. Encountering difference in proximate settings cultivates what might be called ethical proximity. And through this, students are not merely imagining distant others, they are engaging neighbours, collaborators, and partners. Through such relationality, global consciousness becomes grounded and real.

Moreover, narrative imagination, within this context, shifts from aesthetic identification to dialogical practice. Freire's (1970) conception of dialogue as grounded in humility and mutual recognition reframes imagination as relational rather than observational. Students do not simply consume stories in community-engaged activities, they enter reciprocal processes of listening and sometimes co-creating knowledge. This demands ethical humility and

the willingness to be transformed by the encounter (both through the necessary reflective processes and for ongoing engagement). Moral imagination in community engagement becomes accountable and action-oriented because it is situated within an ongoing relationship.

At this point, I think it is important to recognise that community engagement is not uncomplicated. It is relationally demanding, requiring what Freire (1970) understands as dialogical risk, and institutionally undervalued within universities that are increasingly organised around metrics of productivity and short-term outputs (Giroux, 2014; Collini, 2012). Precisely because community engagement resists easy quantification or tidy outcomes, it can sit uneasily within contemporary performance cultures. And yet its transformative potential lies precisely in its refusal of neatness through a prioritisation of power-sharing, and long-term presence. Such commitments do more than enrich student learning: they surface questions of power that cannot be avoided in sustained partnership. In these conditions, the capacities Nussbaum describes are no longer abstract virtues. When engagement moves beyond episodic service toward reciprocal partnership, it becomes oriented toward practical justice in action. Working within South African contexts shaped by apartheid's enduring legacies has underscored for me that community engagement is oriented toward justice in precisely this way.

First, as social justice, it responds to structural inequality through the redistribution of institutional resources and the cultivation of reciprocal partnerships. As I have said elsewhere (Paphitis & Kelland, 2016), in contexts of racialised poverty and educational exclusion, engagement may function not only as access but as reparation, asking how universities might contribute to repairing historical harm. If cultivating humanity involves recognising others as fully human within unjust systems, then engagement must confront the material realities that deny that recognition. Second, as epistemic justice, community engagement challenges dominant hierarchies of knowledge (Paphitis, 2018). Drawing on Fricker's (2007) account of epistemic injustice and decolonial scholarship, such as de Sousa Santos (2014), engagement can function as a site in which historically marginalised ways of knowing are recognised as legitimate (Bezerra, Paterson & Paphitis, 2021). This may involve co-authorship, the validation of oral or artistic forms

of knowledge, and the decentring of academic authority. It requires asking not only what students learn, but whose knowledge is recognised in the process. To cultivate humanity, in this sense, is not only to feel empathy through the moral imagination but to deepen our criticality to reconsider whose knowledge counts and who is authorised to speak.

In extending Nussbaum's framework, I do not reject her capacities. Rather, I argue that community engagement provides a pedagogical site in which those capacities can be practiced, cultivated in a way that is action-oriented, and deepened.

2.4 Higher Education Institutional Culture and the Cultivation of Humanity

In this final section, I suggest that there are limits to what the humanities curriculum and community engagement can accomplish if institutional culture is hostile, indifferent, or extractive. Even the most compelling texts or the most meaningful engagements struggle to take root within universities organised primarily around productivity, competition, and metric performance. If cultivating humanity is a matter of formation and practice, then the institutional environment within which those practices occur is not incidental.

Universities are often described as neutral spaces devoted to inquiry and reason, but institutions are never neutral. As scholars of education and institutional life have long argued, they reproduce social hierarchies and normative assumptions even as they present themselves as meritocratic and impartial (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Ahmed, 2012; Giroux, 2014). They are sites of cultural and epistemic reproduction as well as potential transformation. They reproduce inequality when they privilege certain knowledge systems over others, reward individual competition, and position students primarily as consumers.

At the same time, I have long believed that universities hold the possibility of modelling alternative ways of learning and becoming (Paphitis & Kelland, 2016) when we take the question seriously:

What kind of institution do we want the university to be?

I also think that if we want to cultivate humanity in our students we need to ask ourselves a critical and perhaps deeply uncomfortable question:

W*hat do students see when they look at us?*

I am going to start with this question of how we, *qua* academics, relate to one another. I start here not because it's necessarily the most important aspect of institutional culture (though I suspect it may well be), but because it is an aspect of this paper that I have been thinking about for arguably the longest time. One of the first conference papers I presented as a young philosophy student was on the academic culture around philosophical argument[1]. I had become uneasy with the adversarial tone that often characterised philosophical exchange where I noticed that arguments weren't always engaged with but attacked, and questions were not always invitations to think further but were sometimes performances of intellectual dominance. I found myself asking what this model of critique was teaching those of us who were still learning how to think. Philosophy has been criticised for precisely this adversarial method, and debates about diversity in the discipline have suggested that highly combative norms of engagement may contribute to exclusionary climates (Haslanger, 2008; Saul, 2013). But even before I had the language of diversity or epistemic injustice, my concern was more immediate: students are watching. They are watching how academics disagree, how we receive challenge, how we treat one another in moments of intellectual tension. They learn from our conduct. In this sense, the relational life of the university forms part of what scholars call the hidden curriculum (Margolis, 2001): the informal norms and practices through which values are transmitted.

All of this is useful background to my claims here that if we are interested in cultivating humanity in our students, then collegiality cannot be reduced to performative niceness, and the way we model disagreement matters profoundly. Collegiality must involve intellectual humility and the courage

[1] This paper was called 'Boo Philosophy, Hurrah Philosophy' and while I stand by the thoughts I had then, there is no way to cite it now because, admittedly, it wasn't very good and so was never published!

to support one another in the face of institutional pressure. It must allow for principled disagreement without sliding into hostility. Yet our institutional structures do not always reward these practices. How often do promotion criteria meaningfully recognise collaboration? How often is care for colleagues viewed and rewarded as an institutional priority? Too rarely, if ever, I think. And yet these relational practices are foundational to any institution that claims to value human dignity. They are foundational not only for staff wellbeing, but *because students are watching*. Hierarchies, microaggressions, and exclusionary dynamics among staff do not go unnoticed. Conversely, when students witness generosity, solidarity, and principled disagreement, we offer them a living example of ethical engagement. We show them that critique and care are not opposites. If we hope to cultivate humanity in our students, we must embody it in our own interactions. And here, the hidden curriculum, a living embodiment of the institutional culture we make every day as academics, may be one of the most powerful pedagogical tools we possess.

If students are observing how we relate to one another, they are equally attentive to how we relate to them. Institutional culture is not only performed between colleagues, but it is also enacted in our everyday pedagogical relationships. Teaching, if it is to contribute to cultivating humanity, must be rooted in recognition, co-learning, and mentorship, as well as in how we treat students as members of the university community. In educational contexts, students flourish not simply when they are instructed effectively, but when they are taken seriously as knowers and participants in shared intellectual life.

These pedagogical relationships, however, do not exist outside institutional structures. Workload models, student satisfaction metrics, regulatory frameworks, and market logics all shape how academics are encouraged to see students. Scholars of higher education have argued that the increasing framing of students as consumers can alter expectations on both sides of the classroom, subtly reconfiguring educational relationships in transactional terms (Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). In such contexts, student feedback may be channelled through managerial processes that prioritise risk mitigation, satisfaction metrics, or reputational concerns. While these mechanisms are not inherently problematic, they can

make it more difficult to sustain dialogical engagement that treats student critique as part of shared intellectual inquiry rather than solely as evaluative data. This institutional framing also affects how student concerns about pedagogy, access, wellbeing, or justice are received. Where institutional priorities emphasise performance metrics and risk mitigation, there may be limited space for the slower, more demanding work of dialogical engagement. Conversely, where institutions explicitly value partnership and co-creation, structures can be developed that support shared inquiry and reflexive critique.

Research demonstrates that when students are involved in curriculum design, pedagogical development, or research collaboration, their sense of belonging and intellectual agency increases (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Bovill, 2020). The distinction between a student who approaches education as the acquisition of content and one who experiences themselves as participating in the shaping of knowledge and institutional life is significant. The latter orientation becomes more likely when students feel able to speak without fear of dismissal or repercussion. hooks' (1994) work on engaged pedagogy is relevant here, and it emphasises that intellectual challenge is strengthened when grounded in mutual recognition and relational accountability.

Not all students will respond to such invitations in the same way, and nor should they. The aim should not be to prescribe a singular moral orientation, but to cultivate institutional conditions in which serious intellectual engagement and reflexive critique are possible. The cultivation of humanity, if it is to mean anything beyond rhetoric, depends upon these lived institutional norms. It is here, in the ordinary patterns of recognition and response, that students come to understand what it means to participate responsibly in shared intellectual life.

Finally, I think that if we aspire to cultivate humanity, this aspiration must also be reflected in a humanising institutional culture that supports research that is ethically robust, reflexive, and socially responsive. Competitive funding environments and performance-based research assessment frameworks shape what kinds of research are most easily pursued and rewarded. Scholars analysing audit culture and academic capitalism have

noted that intensified competition privileges speed and volume (Shore & Wright, 2000; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) in ways that sit uneasily alongside slower, relationally grounded forms of inquiry (Mountz et al., 2015). Within such conditions, there is a risk that relational and ethical dimensions of research receive less institutional recognition. Concerns are constantly being raised in qualitative, participatory, and community-engaged research about tokenistic partnership practices, hierarchical authorship conventions, and the prioritisation of 'impact' over reciprocal benefit to communities (Filipe, Renedo, & Marston, 2017; Smith, 2012). These patterns reflect institutional environments in which the metrics of success are not aligned with the values of justice and accountability.

Research culture is thus a significant aspect of institutional culture that shapes what kind of 'site of transformation' universities really are. Students and early career researchers learn what counts as good scholarship not only from theoretical methodological training but from observing how research is conducted, credited, and evaluated. They notice whether ethical review processes are treated as procedural requirements or as substantive engagements with responsibility. They observe how collaborators are acknowledged and how communities are represented. In this sense, research culture does not merely produce knowledge but also *researchers*. The norms embedded in institutional research practices shape who emerging scholars become. If institutions value reflexive, accountable, and socially engaged research in principle, this valuation must be visible in funding priorities, promotion criteria, authorship conventions, and doctoral training. Otherwise, commitments to justice and integrity risk remaining aspirational rather than operational. The cultivation of humanity within the university, I think, then, depends on how research is structured, rewarded, and actually lived everyday in our academic practice.

2.5 Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have argued that cultivating humanity in higher education is not secured by curriculum alone. Drawing on Nussbaum, I began with the claim that universities have a moral and democratic purpose, one that extends beyond economic utility toward the formation of citizens capable of

critical self-examination, global responsibility, and narrative imagination. I have suggested, however, that these capacities remain abstract unless embedded in relational practice. Community engagement offers one such site in which these capacities can be enacted and deepened through structured reflection, dialogical partnership, and justice-oriented collaboration. Yet even this is insufficient if the wider institutional culture does not sustain the values it seeks to promote. The everyday patterns of collegial interaction, pedagogical relationship, and research practice quietly shape who we and our students become.

Why does this matter now? Because I find myself increasingly aware of how quickly the conditions of academic life are shifting. Higher education is operating within a rapidly changing technological landscape that increasingly mediates how knowledge is produced. Digital platforms, artificial intelligence tools, and data-driven governance systems promise efficiency and scale. But these systems risk further abstracting knowledge from relationship and (perhaps most dangerously) accelerating the pace at which academic life is conducted. Here, I do want to stress that the danger is not technology itself, but rather, I think, the erosion of our attentiveness and embodied encounters. As pedagogical interactions are increasingly mediated through screens, the relational conditions under which humanity is cultivated are becoming increasingly fragile. The question, then, is not whether universities will change. They will. The question is what they will become. I am convinced that if we do not deliberately cultivate relational, reflective, and justice-oriented practices within our institutions, those practices will not survive by accident. Fighting for the version of the university in which it is a site for the cultivation of humanity may be one of the most important forms of resistance available to us in the present moment.

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3. Educating for the Cultivation of Humanity: Integrating Ubuntu, Universal Human Values and Ethics of Care in Higher Education

| Savathrie Margie Maistry, Amey Deshpande and Monica Canca

Abstract

This chapter advances a transformative vision for higher education centred on the cultivation of humanity through community engagement. It argues that dominant economistic and cognitively driven models of education are insufficient for addressing the complex ethical, social, and psychological challenges facing students in contemporary contexts, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, the chapter proposes the integral reparative education framework (IREF), which integrates Ubuntu, universal human values, and the ethics of care as a holistic and relational approach to student development. Grounded in a relational ontology, Ubuntu redefines personhood as co-constructed through interconnectedness, while universal human values provide a shared ethical compass linking rights, responsibilities, and moral action. The ethics of care operationalises these foundations through lived relational practice, emphasising attentiveness, reciprocity, and ethical responsiveness. Central to the framework is a reconceptualisation of reparation as an ongoing process of healing rather than repair, addressing epistemic injustice and social fragmentation at individual, relational, and systemic levels. The chapter further foregrounds epistemic and pedagogical justice by challenging Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies and positioning community engagement as a site of co-creation and mutual learning. Drawing on integral perspectives of human development, it emphasises the integration of knowing, action and being in fostering holistic student formation. Ultimately, the IREF positions community engagement as a transformative praxis through which students participate in processes of co-healing, ethical

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becoming, and social responsibility. The chapter concludes that cultivating humanity must be a central purpose of higher education in advancing more just, compassionate, and sustainable societies.

Key words: *Ubuntu, universal human values, ethics of care, cultivation of humanity, community engagement, integral reparative education framework*

3.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to address a central question: how do we educate students for the cultivation of humanity? Achieving this requires, ideally, a paradigm shift-arguably a seismic one-not only at the institutional level but also across national and global understandings of the purpose of higher education. Such transformation entails a fundamental reconfiguration of prevailing worldviews, particularly the dominant economistic orientation that continues to shape higher education systems. While the role of universities in preparing students for careers and contributing to economic development remains significant, as noted by Bawa and Meyer (2025, p. 2): "sustained economic growth depends on creating a national, broad-based reservoir of cognitive skills," education cannot be reduced to this function alone.

The limitations of an exclusively economic and cognitively focused model were unambiguously exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic which underscored the fragility of education systems grounded primarily in economic imperatives and highlighted the urgent need for approaches rooted in more than economic rationalism. Without excluding the economic purpose of higher education, in this chapter we propose Ubuntu, values-based education and care ethics as a holistic and humanistic approach to educating students through community engagement. The urgency for this approach is justified by the heightened levels of fear, uncertainty, and psychological distress experienced by students during and beyond the pandemic. As noted by Julius, Putteeraj, and Somanah (2024), the rise in mental health challenges among students remains a pressing concern, reinforcing the need for a more holistic, humane, and value-centred approach to higher education.

An equally important paradigm shift that is required as part of the purpose of higher education is the need for epistemic justice. South Africa's colonial and apartheid history reveals how education was ubiquitously utilised as a primary tool of oppression (Badat, 2010), entrenching epistemic injustice through the systematic suppression of indigenous knowledge systems and the promotion of values contrary to collective well-being. Universities across the Global South-not only in South Africa-face the ongoing challenge of disentangling themselves from the dominance of Global North knowledge paradigms. In his article *Decolonisation of higher education: Dismantling epistemic violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa*, Heleta (2016) draws on wa Thiong'o (1981, p. 84), who argues that meaningful transformation requires engaging the curriculum in terms of its "relevance to our situation ... [and its] contribution towards understanding ourselves." The question of curricular relevance, alongside the pursuit of self-knowledge at both individual and collective levels, necessitates critical engagement with complex ontological and epistemological concerns, as well as their implications for research, teaching, learning, curriculum design, and pedagogy.

The paradigm shift called for by decolonisation entails a transformation of consciousness that rejects the harmful values, norms, customs and worldviews entrenched through colonialism and apartheid. We propose that it requires a profound reorientation in thinking, from a dichotomous, 'either-or' and divisive logic rooted in positivist rationalism toward a more holistic 'both-and' perspective, coupled with a humanistic, interdependent approach to life and living as reflected in the Four Worlds Integral Development Model discussed in the introductory chapter.

Many scholars caution that resistance to transformation remains deeply rooted within university structures, where entrenched interests continue to protect power, privilege, influence, and decision-making authority (Heleta, 2016). How then do we educate students for the cultivation of humanity? Equally critical is how we interrupt the cyclical reproduction of injustice and oppression, given that systems of oppression dehumanise not only the oppressed but also the oppressor (Freire, 1970). Injustice is both structural and reproductive, as colonialism, apartheid, patriarchy, and racism persist because they are continuously re-enacted through institutions, everyday

practices, and internalised beliefs. Freire's argument in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) is that oppression is not a one-directional harm; it is dehumanising because it distorts the humanity of *both* those who are oppressed and those who participate in or benefit from oppressive systems. The oppressed are denied, among other things, agency, voice, and dignity, while the oppressor becomes what we refer to 'as less than human' by dominating, controlling, and objectifying those whom the oppressor considers to be 'less than human' as exemplified by colonialism and apartheid. In this sense, the oppressor's humanity is also diminished because their identity becomes tied to maintaining power and hierarchy and not in *authentic mutual human relationships*. This is how injustice becomes cyclical-most people are socialised into roles and patterns that reproduce the same dynamics across generations.

We propose that cultivating the humanity of students should be a core purpose of higher education institutions. In this regard, community engagement offers a vital pedagogical and political space through which such cultivation can occur. Students are afforded the space to participate in forms of knowledge that are relational and transformative (Boyer, 1996). It creates opportunities for students to co-create knowledge with communities outside the university, learn about themselves and others of diverse cultures, be caring, and develop ethical responsibility and responsiveness. Just as Heleta (2016) calls on progressive academics to lead decolonisation efforts rather than waiting for institutional change, advocates of community engagement are similarly positioned to advance this transformation by *intentionally* educating students for humanity.

As a starting point, this chapter proposes an integral reparative education framework (IREF) for the cultivation of humanity through community engagement. The framework brings into dialogue Ubuntu, universal human values, and the ethics of care, offering a holistic relational foundation for student education and development. This chapter emphasises that healing is essential for the cultivation of humanity, specifically in South Africa, and therefore educating students requires a framework that attends to reparative healing.

The next part of this chapter discusses reparation as healing and the IREF for the cultivation of humanity in students. Following this, an integrated and interconnected perspective of Ubuntu, universal human values (UHV) and the ethics of care as the foundation of the IREF is presented. In the concluding section of the chapter, we suggest key components of the IREF for the cultivation of humanity in students through community engagement which may be adapted to specific contexts.

3.2 Reparation as Healing and the Integral Reparative Education Framework

Central to the IREF is a critical rethinking of reparation itself. In this chapter, we position reparation as the process of healing and integral-wholeness, or becoming whole, as the consequence of reparative processes. Rather than conceiving of reparation as mechanical *repair*-a notion that presumes the possibility of returning to a prior, intact state-the framework advances a conception of reparation as an ongoing, relational process of healing. This shift aligns with an indigenous knowledge perspective and contemporary scholarship in transformative and reparatory justice, which rejects narrow, compensatory models in favour of approaches that foreground dignity, agency, and structural transformation (Lu, 2017; Thompson, 2015). Within this framing, healing is not equated with victimhood or passive recovery. Instead, it is understood as an empowering and agentic praxis through which individuals and communities actively participate in restoring meaning, reconstituting relationships, and reimagining futures.

Our understanding of reparation as healing is informed by an indigenous worldview, particularly the seminal 1998 study by Lane, Bopp, Bopp, and Norris of the Four Worlds International Institute in Canada. This work reinforces the argument that reparative processes are not supplementary to education but constitute a foundational condition for human and community development. A central assertion of the study is that there can be no development without healing; social and economic progress cannot be sustained where historical trauma, dislocation, and relational fragmentation remain unaddressed (Lane et al., 1998). This insight is especially significant

in the South African context, where community engagement is explicitly linked to broader goals of social and community development (DoE, 1997).

The study describes healing in Aboriginal terms as "personal and societal recovery from the lasting effects of oppression and systematic racism experienced over generations" (Lane et al., 1998, p. 2). From this perspective, a healthy individual, family, community, or nation is one that can address the fundamental determinants of well-being. Healing is therefore not a passive state but an active, ongoing process of recovery and renewal. Accordingly, the capacitation of individuals and communities becomes central. Here, the authors describe healing as "a process of removing barriers and building the capacity of people and communities to address the determinants of health" (Lane et al., 1998, p. 2). Health is understood holistically: physical well-being is inseparable from spiritual, emotional, and mental dimensions (Lane et al., 1998). Overcoming the legacy of oppression and abuse thus requires transformation at multiple levels – within individuals, within relationships, and within the broader social and environmental conditions in which people live. Healing involves the cultivation of new patterns of thinking and living that enable sustainable well-being.

The study demonstrates that material conditions, psychological restoration, and cultural reconnection are deeply interdependent rather than discrete domains. This insight deepens the reparative dimension by positioning education as part of wider systems of social healing. Universities and community engagement initiatives become sites where reparation is both pedagogical and structural, shaping not only individual students but also institutional cultures and community relationships, irrespective of the huge structural constraints of the institutions.

In this sense, reparation within the IREF is inherently transformative: it is less about fixing what was broken and more about enabling new forms of being and becoming that affirm shared humanity while confronting historical and ongoing injustice. When community engagement education is grounded in this reparative lens, it becomes a transformative praxis in which students do not merely *serve* communities, but participate in processes of co-healing, dialogue, and the affirmation of shared humanity. The IREF seeks to cultivate the humanity of students through holistic, ethical, and relational

learning processes. It is grounded in the integration and interconnectedness of Ubuntu philosophy, universal human values and the ethics of care, all of which emphasise relationality and interdependence – key facets of healing.

As a concept, *integral* is rooted in the idea of wholeness, completeness, and the integration of diverse dimensions of reality into a coherent unity. An integral perspective resists reductionism and advances a holistic orientation that attends to the interdependence of cognitive, ethical, relational, and spiritual dimensions of human life (Aurobindo, 1999; Wilber, 2000). As a conceptual and methodological lens, 'integral' in this chapter is used to bring the various intricately connected parts-Ubuntu, universal human values and care ethics – to work together cooperatively and interdependently as a unified whole, grounding the IREF. As a pedagogy, *integral* connects knowledge, action and being; intellectual development with ethical formation, relational healing, and social transformation.

The notion of integral is also influenced by the work of Lane et al. (1998), who sketch lessons drawn from teachings of Phil Lane Sr., a Yankton Sioux elder. In a 1986 gathering, he articulated a vision of wholeness and interconnectedness through the metaphor of the circle. As described by Lane et al. (1998), this simple teaching carries profound implications:

> The circle means that everything is connected to everything else in life. Nothing can happen to any part of the circle without affecting all other parts. Human beings are not the only beings in the circle. The mineral world, plant life, animals, the air, the water, and even the stars and planets are all part of this interconnected whole. What happens to any part of the circle happens to all of us; the hurt of one is the hurt of all (Lane et al., 1998, p. 10).

This teaching introduces what the authors describe as a form of "deep ecology – a recognition of the profound interdependence of all forms of existence" (Lane et al., 1998, p. 10). The study by Lane et al. (1998) demonstrates that there can be no sustainable development in the absence of healing, and no meaningful transformation where aggrieved social relations persist.

As a foundation for the IREF, Ubuntu, universal human values, and care ethics positions community engagement education as a form of reparative praxis. This praxis foregrounds relational accountability, the restoration of human dignity, and ethical responsibility. In so doing, community engagement becomes a transformative space for healing and for the co-creation of more just and compassionate societies. The next section discusses Ubuntu, universal human values, the ethics of care and its role in synthesising Ubuntu, and human values as practice in community engagement.

3.3 Ubuntu, Universal Human Values and Ethics of Care: A Radical Foundation for the Cultivation of Humanity?

The cultivation of humanity encompasses the nurturing of individuals capable of compassion, moral reflection, and responsible citizenship, qualities required for improving individual and collective well-being (Nussbaum, 1997; Waghid, 2010). We propose that higher education should aim towards producing students of character and the wholesome integration of intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual aspects of being. Mphahlele (2002, p. 13) strongly supports this idea when he writes:

> Education must liberate students...from the low self-esteem and self-hate that oppression inculcates in many of its victims. Education should equip people to break down imposed barriers of self-fulfilment and self-realization. Self-realization can only be valid, however, if the needs of one's community are served by it. In order for education to serve this purpose, a reordering of some of its principles is needed...such as development of mind, body and spirit may still be valid. But a radical philosophy of education has to redefine the processes and terms so that fundamental age-old principles can be realised at the concrete level in collective purpose and action. The individual should no longer be the sole focus of teaching but must also be trained to think and act as a servant of the community. In other words, we need a philosophy of education that will account for the social ills that confront us and empower us to deal with them.

His words align with the view in this chapter on reparation as healing, and further affirm the need for the holistic education of students together with preparing them for community engagement and servant leadership. In line with Mphahlele's call for a radical education philosophy, we see the foundational base of Ubuntu, universal human values and care ethics as a 'radical' perspective on educating students for the cultivation of humanity through community engagement.

We acknowledge that the relationship between *Ubuntu philosophy* and *universal human values* is contested, complementary, and complex. However, considering the adapted Four Worlds Integral Development Model relational ontology and epistemology in the Introduction chapter, and as mentioned earlier, we attempt to transcend the dominant Eurocentric dichotomous approach to life, society and human development, generally and in education in particular, by presenting an integration of Ubuntu and universal human values as integral for the cultivation of humanity, enacted through the ethics of care.

3.4 Unpacking Ubuntu

Ubuntu is a Nguni word meaning "humanity." English translations for this term, however, are always inadequate or incomplete, failing to fully reflect all that Ubuntu embodies. In its entirety, Ubuntu is an African philosophy that hinges on shared values, interconnectedness, and shared dignity. Grappling with the translation of Ubuntu, Letseka (2000) highlights that Ubuntu is not just a philosophical idea but also a practical guide for living, emphasising the interconnectedness of individuals and the importance of communal well-being. This concept is key to African ways of being and doing, rooted in the belief that an individual's identity is inherently tied to their community, that one's well-being is reliant on the well-being of the collective. Historically, in African societies, Ubuntu has been integral in promoting values such as empathy, compassion, respect and mutual support (Ajitoni, 2024), in alignment with universal human values.

The concept of umntu or human being is of immense importance in the African worldview. Man or umntu consists of the following core elements:

1. umzimba (body, form, flesh), 2. umoya (breath, air, life), 3. umphefumlo (shadow, spirit, soul), 4. amandla (vitality, strength, energy), 5. intliziyo (heart, centre of emotions), 6. ingqondo (head, brain, intellect), 7. ulwimi (language, speaking) and 8. ubuntu (humaneness) (Le Roux, 2000, p. 43). All the above elements should be present before one could speak of being human as opposed to being a thing. The most important quality, however, for authentic human existence is ubuntu. The person possessing ubuntu will have characteristics such as being "caring, humble, thoughtful, considerate, understanding, wise, generous, hospitable, socially mature, socially sensitive, virtuous and blessed" (Le Roux, 2000, p. 43).

3.4.1 Ubuntu Values

Broodryk (2005) argues that the African philosophy of Ubuntu is not easy to encapsulate in a definite meaning because its understanding is derived from a concrete context in which it thrives. However, in an earlier text (Broodryk, 2002, p. 13), he writes of Ubuntu as a "comprehensive ancient African world view based on values of intense humaneness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion and associated values, ensuring a happy and qualitative community life in a spirit of family." He also comments that Eastern philosophies have many characteristics in common with Ubuntu. Undoubtedly then, as a philosophy based on humanism, Ubuntu and its related values are applicable universally. The value of Ubuntu lies in practices that are responsive to community needs and aligned with communal values.

Ujomudike (2016) defines Ubuntu as a set of values centrally driven by reciprocity, common good, peaceful relations, emphasis on human dignity, the value of human life, and consensus, tolerance, and mutual respect. Mbigi (1997) further states that in African cultures, an individual is not complete without the group and the group is not privileged over the individual. He further relates Ubuntu to the collective fingers theory as outlined below:

> A thumb, although strong, cannot kill aphids on its own; it would require the collective cooperation and equal contribution of efforts from other fingers. Firstly, like fingers, individual persons need to work collectively and cooperatively to achieve any aspired goal. Secondly, recognition as equals promotes willingness to participate.

> Thirdly, fingers, in the proverb can represent core African values which, when internalised and nurtured, can promote a collective culture (Mbigi, 1997, p. 33).

Ubuntu has six core values which emanate from a belief that as a human being, one's conduct is guided by respect for and tenderness towards other beings. It alludes to valuing these beings and having a desire to protect them. This is encapsulated in Ubuntu values as follows (Ujomudike, 2016):



Figure 1: Ubuntu values diagram by Monica Canca

Ubuntu at its core emphasises the well-being of the collective by recognising the inter-connected nature of humanity and the collective responsibility required of each individual in maintaining social harmony. The philosophy of Ubuntu highlights the belief that our existence lies in the collective existence of humanity, and that the flourishing of the individual lies within the community context (Banda, 2019). On a global scale, the principles of Ubuntu, such as communal good and social harmony, can offer valuable insights into addressing social challenges such as inequality, strife and social

intolerance. In an increasingly interconnected world, the philosophy of Ubuntu can contribute to fostering global solidarity, mutual respect, and cooperation. The common thread in Ubuntu is the idea of a shared 'humanity' as made explicit in the Nguni translation of *Umntu ngumntu ngabantu* which means *a person is a person through other people or I am because you are* (Ramose, 1999; Mbiti, 1969).

What makes these values a living entity is the ability to not only espouse them but to live them in our daily interactions as humans, thus making humanity and humanness qualities that can be modelled and passed down from generation to generation. Several South African policies are underpinned by the philosophy of Ubuntu and its values. Unfortunately, Ubuntu is often appropriated rhetorically in policy discourse without substantive transformation of power relations, thereby masking persistent inequalities (Ramose, 2002). Without romanticising Ubuntu, we argue that the South African higher education system needs to educate students on the philosophy of Ubuntu and its values from a critical perspective emphasising its context specificity and universal potential. The relevance of the philosophy of Ubuntu for South Africa, the African region and globally is iterated in these words of Julius Nyerere (1976, p. 6) when he wrote that:

> Education has to liberate both the mind and the body of man. It has to make him more of a human being because he is aware of his potential as a human being, and is in a positive, life-enhancing relationship with himself, his neighbour and his environment.

Importantly, higher education institutions in South Africa must pay much more attention to the White Paper 3 on the Transformation of Higher Education (1997) which advocates for community engagement as a vehicle for strengthening democratic practices, cultivating engaged citizenry and collectively working towards the common good. There is an urgency to move community engagement from the margins to the centre, to take its purposeful place with learning, teaching, and research.

3.5 Universal Human Values

In advancing the case for universal human values (UHV), we begin with a foundational question: *What does it mean to be human?* This question is not intended to diminish the rich deep-ecological and relational ontologies embedded in Indigenous knowledge systems. Rather, it recognises that *becoming* fully human may be the pathway toward a more holistic consciousness. Classical accounts of the human emphasised rationality, language, and tool use. However, contemporary research in animal cognition challenges the exclusivity of these traits (de Waal, 2016; Harari, 2015), shifting attention toward moral, relational, and meaning-making capacities as central to human distinctiveness (Nussbaum, 2011).

At the same time, decolonial perspectives, and more recently posthumanism, challenge anthropocentric assumptions by situating the human within ecological, technological, and relational systems (Braidotti, 2019; Mbembe, 2017). Posthumanism conceptualises the subject as a relational and distributed "we" embedded within networks of human and non-human life (Gemuend, 2021, p. 138). Paradoxically, this perspective resonates strongly with indigenous epistemologies of the Global South, which have long emphasised interconnectedness and relationships with nature and other life forms and have experienced the pain of epistemicide (Hall & Tandon 2017; de Santos, 2014). Within this expanded frame, the question is not merely what distinguishes humans from other species, but what enables humans to live ethically, collectively, and meaningfully. The capacities discussed below may be seen as distinguishing humans from other species, However, values remain central.

Moral Reasoning and Conscience

Moral reasoning, the capacity to evaluate actions in terms of right and wrong, remains a distinct human trait (Kohlberg, 1984). While Kohlberg's (1984) developmental model emphasised rational stages of moral judgement, more recent work highlights the interplay between intuition, emotion, and social context in ethical decision-making (Haidt, 2012). Humans not only make moral judgements but also experience moral emotions such as guilt, shame, and indignation, which regulate behaviour and sustain social cohesion (Tangney et al., 2007). Importantly, contemporary scholarship

emphasises that conscience is dialogical and socially embedded rather than purely individual. Moral orientation emerges through relationships of recognition and resonance with others and the world (Rosa, 2019). Thus, conscience, a moral compass, reflects both internal reflection and external ethical engagement.

Altruism and Sacrifice

Humans exhibit forms of altruism that extend beyond kinship and immediate reciprocity, often directed toward strangers, future generations, or abstract principles such as justice and human rights (Singer, 2011; Tomasello, 2019). Acts of service, charity, and civil disobedience arise from deeply held values rather than evolutionary necessity. Recent research suggests that humans are 'ultra-social' beings, capable of norm-based cooperation and collective intentionality, which includes the willingness to uphold shared values even at personal cost. Such actions are evident in social movements, humanitarian efforts, and forms of civic engagement, underscoring the ethical depth of human altruism (Henrich, 2020).

Responsibility and Accountability

Human societies are structured around systems of responsibility and accountability that presuppose moral agency. From legal frameworks to cultural norms, individuals are held answerable for their actions because they are understood to possess the capacity for reflection and choice (Arendt, 1958). Contemporary discussions extend this notion to include collective and historical responsibility, particularly in contexts marked by injustice and inequality (Young, 2011; Mbembe, 2017). In the South African context, for example, accountability is not only juridical but also ethical and relational, linked to processes of reconciliation, restitution, and social justice. Responsibility thus becomes both an individual and a collective moral project, grounded in values such as dignity, justice, and care.

Spiritual Aspiration and Meaning-Making

Humans uniquely engage in meaning-making, driven by spiritual, philosophical, and existential concerns. This quest for purpose is linked to values such as love, truth, peace and unity (Sathya Sai Baba, 2005; Maslow, 1968). In African philosophical traditions, Ubuntu further emphasises

relational being and the co-construction of meaning through community (Ramose, 2019). Thus, spiritual aspiration is not limited to formal religion but reflects a broader human capacity to orient life around values and purpose.

What distinguishes humans, therefore, is the capacity to reflect upon, institutionalise, and act in accordance with values. Humanity is not a fixed condition but a process of moral becoming (Braidotti, 2019; Ramose, 2002).

3.6 Defining Universal Human Values

The notion of values as guiding principles dates to ancient philosophy. Eastern traditions underscore the centrality of values. Confucianism promotes *ren* (benevolence) and *li* (ritual propriety) as essential for harmony (Confucius, trans. 1979). Hindu philosophy and Buddhist philosophy respectively emphasise *dharma* (righteous duty) and compassion as imperatives for ethical living (Bhagavad Gita, trans. 2008; Dhammapada, trans. 2000). These diverse traditions converge in affirming that values are intrinsic to what it means to be human.

In contemporary society, human values are commonly understood as enduring beliefs or normative standards that shape human judgement, behaviour, and social interaction (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992). They function as internalised criteria through which individuals evaluate what is desirable, worthwhile, and morally appropriate across contexts. Rokeach (1973) distinguished between *terminal values* (end goals like happiness or freedom) and *instrumental values* (means like honesty or discipline). Human values are both context specific and universal. While values are expressed differently across contexts, their underlying structure reflects shared human concerns, including welfare, justice, and dignity (Schwartz et al., 2012). This dual character – universal in principle yet culturally mediated in expression – enables the integration of universal human values such as peace, compassion, non-violence, integrity, love and empathy with contextually grounded systems such as Ubuntu.

Sen (1999) and Nussbaum's (2011) capabilities approach similarly identifies universal conditions necessary for human flourishing while allowing for

contextual variation in their realisation. Global normative frameworks, including UNESCO (2015; 2021), reinforce values such as peace, dignity, sustainability, and intercultural respect as foundational to global citizenship. Such frameworks affirm that while the expression of values may differ across contexts, their normative core enables dialogue, mutual recognition, and cooperation across cultural boundaries. In this sense, locally grounded value systems, such as the ethic of Ubuntu, can be understood not as alternatives to universalism, but as culturally situated articulations of widely shared human concerns. Here, we offer a word of caution – we must be wary of reproducing liberal universalism and be sure of engaging with historically embedded power relations, epistemic injustice, and relational ontologies of personhood (de Sousa Santos, 2014).

Values differ from preferences in that they carry moral obligation, compelling individuals to act even at personal cost. In plural and unequal societies, shared human values provide a basis for social cohesion, ethical coexistence, and democratic life. Their importance becomes particularly evident in times of crisis, such as pandemics and climate change, where solidarity and collective responsibility are essential (United Nations, 2020). In relation to rights and responsibilities the inclusion of human values form an interdependent ethical triad. While human rights articulate entitlements, values provide moral direction, and responsibilities ensure accountability and social cohesion (OHCHR, 2018; InterAction Council, 1997). Rights define what individuals can claim, while responsibilities define what they owe. Values connect the two, ensuring ethical practice with the potential for relational transformation beyond legal frameworks, specifically in South Africa.

3.7 Human Values in Contemporary Development and Education

We ask this pertinent question here: is there a need for values education in South Africa and globally? From a South African perspective, Kaplan (1996, p. 50) expresses the need for values education when he argues that the "myth of revolution" has resulted in an impasse in the post-independence phase, sustaining divisions, fragmentation, and entrenched conflict. The transition

to a new political dispensation, coupled with pressures of economic growth, technology, and social change, has contributed to cultural dislocation and the erosion of both universal and indigenous value systems. Reconstruction in South Africa therefore requires a shift toward interdependence, integration, and a collective "we", grounded in what Kaplan (1996, p. 56) describes as "a conscious humility of interdependence".

The need for values education in South Africa was further evidenced when the *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* (DoE, 2001) sought to embed values such as democracy, social justice, Ubuntu, and reconciliation within the education system to foster unity and heal past divisions. The Manifesto (2001, p. 7) clearly pointed to whom it was aimed at: "At heart this manifesto is for young South Africans, the succession of citizens who are the country's future. But its reach is more extensive in that it is for all those engaged in any way in education". While the values were incorporated into policy, implementation has remained uneven. A key challenge has been the gap between teaching values and practicing them, particularly where educators do not model expected behaviours (Khathi et al., 2022). In this context, relational humility (Dalmiya, 2007) offers a critical ethical orientation for rebuilding social cohesion.

On a global scale, despite the universality of core values, contemporary society faces a crisis of values, exacerbated by materialism, rugged individualism, consumerism, digital disconnection, and inequality, all of which have to varying degrees accelerated the erosion of core values, especially among youth (Bauman, 2000). The pursuit of material success and power often overrides ethical considerations, and relativism replaces moral clarity (Bauman, 2000). Individualism and digital technologies shift the responsibility for ethical decision-making onto the individual, often without the support of coherent moral guidelines, especially for youth. The commodification of education further erodes shared ethical foundations, and education systems emphasise skills over ethics and values. There is an urgent need to reintegrate human values into public discourse, education, and governance (UNESCO, 2016). The absence of a shared moral foundation exacerbates polarisation and reduces the possibility of consensus on crucial issues such as justice, freedom, and human rights (Haidt, 2012).

UNESCO's Delors Report (1996) emphasised four pillars of learning: learning to know, do, live together, and be, all of which are deeply value-laden. As mentioned above educational systems play a pivotal role in transmitting values across generations. Integral education models, such as those practiced at the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning and other higher education institutions in India, and recently as a consequence of national policy, integrate academic knowledge with values inculcation and service, aiming to develop the student as a whole human being, that is, "intellectual, aesthetic, social, physical, emotional, and moral in an integrated manner" (Indian National Education Policy, 2020, p.36).

For higher education institutions, especially in South Africa, emphasising the significance of interdependence and interconnectedness in ways of "knowing, acting and being" (Barnett & Coate, 2004, p. 1), indicates that engagement with one's community is not an act of "service" but instead integral to our own sense of being, realities and processes of knowledge generation as well as part of our ethical responsibility to society (Waghid, 2023, p. 106). For universities, Ubuntu and the related human values may also indicate the importance of a *relational ontology* as our lives draw meaning from our collective membership in community (Chilisa et al., 2017). This conceptualisation integrates the boundary between community and self, and indicates a way to challenge dichotomous thinking that not only separates university and community but the attributes of humanism and holism. Rather than adopting a polarised stance, we propose a framework grounded in holism and humanism that holds values and capabilities for human flourishing (individual and collective) while allowing for cultural variation in their interpretation and enactment, thereby offering a normative bridge between ethical universalism and cultural particularity (Sen, 1999). Importantly, universal human values and Ubuntu share a transformative humanism rooted in relationality and mutual recognition (Shutte, 2001). This shared ethical orientation renders dialogue and integration both intellectually coherent and pedagogically viable, resonating with broader cosmopolitan efforts to reconcile universality with respect for cultural diversity (Appiah, 2006; Eshetu, 2017).

3.8 The Ethics of Care

Educating students for the cultivation of humanity through community engagement requires engaging Ubuntu and universal human values through an ethics of care. At its core, care ethics is a relational approach to moral life. Noddings, in *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984) and *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics & Moral Education* (2013), develops a practice-oriented framework in which morality is grounded in lived relations characterised by attentiveness, responsiveness, and care. Care, understood as a practice, involves maintaining the world of, and meeting the needs of, oneself and others.

Central to Noddings' account is the "caring relation" between the "one-caring" and the "cared-for," where ethical meaning emerges through reciprocity. Moral education, therefore, is not primarily the transmission of rules but the formation of persons capable of sustaining caring relationships. This is cultivated through four educational strategies: modelling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation (Noddings, 2013, pp. 171–187). Within IREF, dialogue and practice are especially significant, as they foreground relational engagement in community contexts.

Like Ubuntu, care ethics situates moral development within a web of relationships, emphasising empathy, reciprocity, and the cultivation of humane dispositions. Caring is thus foundational to education. Academics are not merely conveyors of knowledge but moral agents who embody care in their interactions with students and communities. This requires knowing students and, through community engagement, enabling students to know, communities as a basis for ethical responsiveness. As Noddings (2013, p. xix) notes, "confirming another requires understanding their reality".

Importantly, care ethics foregrounds action as key to caring. It moves Ubuntu and universal human values from abstraction into practice by insisting that ethical responsibility entails responding to injustice. Care is not simply affective but enacted, often requiring a challenge to the status quo (Noddings, 2013). Noddings' distinction between "caring-for" (direct, relational care) and "caring-about" (generalised concern) is instructive here:

while caring-about may motivate commitments to justice, IREF emphasises caring-for as the ground of meaningful, situated engagement.

While Ubuntu articulates a vision of relational personhood and communal obligation, care ethics provides the pedagogical means through which such relationality is enacted through listening, dialogue, presence, and responsiveness. In relation to universal human values, care ethics serves as their embodied expression: values such as compassion, respect, peace, integrity and justice are realised in practice, not merely affirmed in principle. For IREF, this underscores the need to cultivate habits of relational ethical action rather than rely on declarative commitments.

Together, Ubuntu, universal human values, and the ethics of care form a coherent foundation for the integral reparative education framework: Ubuntu provides the ontological grounding of relational humanity; universal human values offer the normative compass; and care ethics supplies the praxis through which relational, ethical, and reparative engagement is enacted. Within IREF, this synthesis positions education as a humanising and reparative project, where learning becomes a site of relational healing and reciprocity.

3.9 The Reparative Integral Education Framework: Components

First, we highlight the three integrated levels across which the ethics of care can be articulated and enacted:

i) The Micro Level: Relational-Care as attentiveness, listening, compassion, and responsiveness in everyday interactions between academics and students; and academics, students and communities.

ii) The Meso Level: Pedagogical-Care as a guiding principle for curriculum, teaching, learning and research practices – foregrounding dialogue, inclusivity, and the co-construction of knowledge. Here, learning becomes a humanising and healing process.

iii) The Macro Level: Structural-Care as a principle of institutional and societal transformation, addressing historical injustice, redistributing resources, and reimagining education as a site of individual and collective healing and ethical responsibility.

The IREF is comprised of a set of interdependent components that together articulate a coherent vision of education as a deeply humanising, relational, and transformative process. Drawn from this chapter, the seven suggested components of the framework, as a starting point are:

3.9.1 Ontological Foundation: Ubuntu and Relational Humanity

At its ontological core lies the philosophy of Ubuntu, which grounds the framework in a relational understanding of humanity. Within this perspective, personhood is not an isolated or pre-given attribute but is constituted through interconnectedness with others. Ubuntu thus positions human existence as fundamentally co-constructed, interdependent, and ethically bound to the well-being of others. In this way, the IREF reorients the self away from individualism toward relational being, framing education as a process of becoming human with and through others.

3.9.2 Normative-Ethical Compass: Universal Human Values

Building on this ontological foundation, the framework is guided by a normative-ethical compass grounded in universal human values (UHV). These values, such as compassion, respect, responsibility, love, peace and integrity, provide a shared moral vocabulary that informs both individual and collective being and action.

Within the IREF, UHV function as normative anchors that link rights with responsibilities and ethical conduct. Importantly, they do not operate in abstraction but are mediated through culturally grounded expressions such as Ubuntu. In doing so, they bridge universal ethical principles with contextual realities, ensuring that education is oriented toward moral purpose rather than being reduced to instrumental or purely economic goals.

3.9.3 Pedagogical Enactment: Ethics of Care

The operationalisation of both Ubuntu and UHV within the framework is achieved through a pedagogy informed by the ethics of care. Drawing on care ethics, particularly the work of Noddings, this component emphasises the lived enactment of values through relational practice. Care is expressed through attentiveness, responsiveness, and reciprocity within the caring relation.

Within the IREF, this pedagogical orientation translates ethical commitments into action through modelling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation (Noddings moral education strategies). It prioritises *caring-for* as a situated and relational engagement, positioning academics as moral agents while recognising students and communities as active ethical participants. In this sense, care ethics functions as the method through which the framework is enacted in practice.

3.9.4 Reparative Process: Healing as Transformative Praxis

A defining feature of the IREF is its reconceptualisation of reparation as a reparative process grounded in healing as transformative praxis. Rather than understanding reparation as a form of technical repair that seeks to restore a prior state, the framework conceives of healing as an ongoing, active, and relational process.

This process is holistic and multidimensional, encompassing psychological, social, cultural, and structural transformation. Within the IREF, healing addresses epistemic injustice and social fragmentation, promoting unity in diversity while integrating individual, relational, and systemic levels of change. Students and communities are positioned as co-participants in these processes, and reparation is understood not as compensatory but as generative and transformative.

3.9.5 Epistemic and Pedagogical Justice: Decolonial and Co-Creation of Knowledge

Intricately linked to this reparative orientation is the framework's commitment to epistemic and pedagogical justice. The IREF challenges the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems by affirming the legitimacy

and value of Indigenous and community-based knowledges. It positions community engagement as a site of co-creation rather than mere transmission of knowledge. This component centres relevance, context, and self-knowledge, disrupting hierarchical modes of knowledge production and repositioning students as co-learners, and communities as equal knowledge partners. In doing so, the framework ensures that its ethical commitments are accompanied by epistemic transformation.

3.9.6 Integrative Human Development: Holistic and Integral Formation

The IREF further adopts an integrative approach to human development, emphasising holistic and integral formation. Rejecting fragmented approaches to education, it attends to the development of the whole person – intellectual, emotional, ethical, spiritual, and relational. Influenced by integral theory and Indigenous conceptions of wholeness, the framework understands education as the integration of knowing, action and being. This component connects cognitive development with ethical and relational growth, aligning personal transformation with social responsibility. Wholeness, in this sense, becomes both the outcome and the measure of reparative educational processes.

3.9.7 Transformative Site of Practice: Community Engagement

Finally, the primary site through which the IREF is enacted is community engagement, understood as a transformative space of practice and collaborative knowledge creation. Within the framework, community engagement is not peripheral but central; it serves as a pedagogical, ethical, and political arena for healing, relational learning and social transformation.

Through its various forms, it enables dialogue, co-learning, and mutual recognition, bridging the university and the community as interconnected knowledge spaces. Through this engagement, the principles of care, values, and healing are enacted in lived contexts, transforming community engagement into a site of co-healing and co-transformation rather than a model of service delivery.

Taken together, these components form an integrated and dynamic whole. Ubuntu provides the ontological grounding of being; universal human values offer the normative orientation of what ought to be; the ethics of care enables pedagogical enactment through doing; reparation as healing defines the transformative purpose of becoming; epistemic justice shapes the decolonial orientation of knowing; integrative human and community development ensures holistic formation; and community engagement serves as the site of praxis where these dimensions converge. In this synthesis, the IREF emerges as a relational and transformative framework that reimagines education as a process of cultivating humanity in its fullest sense through community engagement.

3.10 Conclusion

Despite the challenges that this may present for community engagement from many fronts of the institution, and based on our assumption that that students are currently being prepared prior to engagement with communities in their respective institutions, we believe that the adoption, adaptation or inclusion of the integral reparative education framework should be given due consideration.

This chapter has advanced the argument that the integration of Ubuntu philosophy, universal human values, and care ethics offers a transformative and contextually relevant framework for reimagining higher education in the twenty-first century. By drawing on relational ontology and epistemology, and engaging the Four Worlds Integral Development Model, specifically with holism and humanism, the chapter has sought to move beyond dominant Eurocentric dualisms toward a more holistic understanding of human development – one that integrates intellectual, moral, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of being.

The discussion has shown that values are not peripheral to education but foundational to the cultivation of humanity. In a context marked by global uncertainty, social fragmentation, and the enduring legacies of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa specifically, the need for an ethical reorientation of higher education is both urgent and necessary. Ubuntu

philosophy, with its emphasis on interconnectedness, interdependence, and shared dignity, complements universal human values in offering a framework for fostering ethical consciousness, social responsibility, and collective well-being. As the world faces complex moral, environmental, and social challenges, among others, a renewed commitment to Ubuntu and human values is not merely desirable; it is an imperative. In the absence of values, humanity risks regressing into conflict, exploitation, and ecological collapse. In their presence, humanity has a chance to fulfil its highest potential as a moral and cooperative species. Humanity cannot survive, let alone thrive, without the inner infrastructure of values that sustains its collective soul. Importantly, the chapter has highlighted that the challenge is not merely to teach values but to embody and practice them within institutional cultures and pedagogies. Ultimately, the integration of Ubuntu and universal human values practiced with caring is a compelling pathway for cultivating graduates who are not only knowledgeable, but also compassionate, reflective, and committed to advancing a more just and humane society.

As Sathya Sai Baba says:

> Where there is righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in character; Where there is beauty in character, there will be harmony in the home; Where there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation; Where there is order in the nation, there will be peace in the world (Sathya Sai Baba, 1970).

And the end of education is character.

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4. Cultivating Humanity: Reflexivity in Higher Education Community Engagement in South Africa

| Vhonani Netshandama

Abstract

This chapter examines how South African higher education can reimagine community engagement (CE) as a deliberate practice for cultivating humanity, understood as empathy, dignity, respect, reciprocity, and reflexivity. Drawing on Ubuntu philosophy, reflexive scholarship and intergenerational mentorship, the chapter argues that the predominance of transactional and output-driven approaches in universities has constrained the development of humane, inclusive, and socially responsive academic cultures. I position CE as a critical space within higher education where relational, ethical, and transformative practices can take root, enabling institutions to align their scholarly obligations with their moral and civic responsibilities. Through Ubuntu-informed relationality, mentorship, and inclusive pedagogies, a framework for cultivating humanity emerges, one that challenges epistemic hierarchies and affirms community expertise. Despite its transformative potential, CE remains undervalued and inconsistently institutionalised. The chapter concludes by proposing an integrated approach that foregrounds relational ethics, scholarly reflexivity and mentorship as foundational commitments for universities aspiring to embed humanity at the centre of their engagement with communities.

Key words: *Ubuntu; Reflexive praxis; Community engagement; Humanising pedagogy; Collaborative leadership; Relational cultures.*

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4.1 Introduction

This chapter emerges from three interconnected sources, namely presentations and dialogue at Rhodes University, reflexivity, and my own lifelong journey shaped by academic elders. Reflexivity in higher education refers to a critical, iterative process of self-examination through which individuals, particularly educators, leaders, and researchers, engage with their own positionalities, assumptions, values, and the socio-political contexts that shape their actions and decisions. Esposito et al. (2016) conceptualise reflexivity not as a singular act but as 'reflexivities'; a plural, dynamic, and situated process that unfolds across multiple levels of academic life. Reflexivity also underpins emancipatory methodologies, where knowledge production is not neutral but entangled with values, identities, and power. It supports a shift from extractive research and top-down leadership to co-constructed, dialogic, and inclusive practices that honour lived experience and collective wisdom.

Higher education in South Africa is mandated to contribute beyond knowledge production. It must foster democratic citizenship and the common good. The Higher Education White Paper 3 (RSA, DoE 1997) explicitly tasks the sector with strengthening democratic ethos, common citizenship, and societal commitment. As one of the three core functions of all universities, community engagement (CE) offers a critical avenue for embodying this purpose. However, Nhlapo (2025) argues that whilst the "third mission", which should embrace societal impact, innovation, and entrepreneurship is well-established in Europe and North America, its institutionalisation in South Africa remains inconsistent. Most South African universities reference community engagement and social responsibility in their mission statements, however, the presence of entrepreneurial and innovation-focused dimensions is often underdeveloped, and community engagement remains underfunded and undervalued. Nhlapo (2025) critiques the fragmented and grassroots nature of third mission activities, which lack systemic support and robust evaluation frameworks.

Furthermore, the absence of shared norms, the dominance of singular epistemologies, the complexity of defining 'community' itself and the lack of robust, inclusive monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks undermine

the transformative potential of CE, often excluding community voices from agenda-setting, evaluation, and benefit-sharing. This results in short-term, project-based engagements that fail to foster sustained co-learning, trust or social transformation (Netshandama, 2023). Despite policies, institutional gaps remain, such as lack of alignment across departmental silos, reward and promotion structures which rarely account for relational community engagement, and funding which tends to favour short-term, quantifiable outputs. Institutional culture often defaults to transactionalism.

Higher education has become increasingly transactional, prioritising outputs, metrics, and short-term projects. Brink's (2018) seminal work, *The Soul of a University: Why Excellence is Not Enough*, offers a compelling critique of the narrow focus on academic excellence in higher education. Brink argues that universities must go beyond metrics and rankings to embrace their moral and social responsibilities. He emphasizes that the true soul of a university lies in its commitment to public good, ethical engagement, and societal relevance. This perspective aligns with the chapter's call for cultivating humanity through community engagement, underscoring the need for institutions to prioritise values such as empathy, dignity, and relational accountability.

Transactional higher education undermines the cultivation of humanity, erodes trust with community partners, and perpetuates power asymmetries. I problematise project-based engagements with packaged numerical outputs, and lack of African-centred pedagogies. Furthermore, tokenistic inclusion of Ubuntu concepts on university branding, and incoherence in institutional cultures, further hinder meaningful engagement that should cultivate and nurture humanity. The dominance of Western epistemologies and institutional cultures that perpetuate epistemic injustice have been widely critiqued in literature (Fosu, 2024; Mbembe, 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Fosu critiques the dominant framing of decolonial theory as a binary struggle between the Global North (West) and Africa, arguing that this approach is reactionary, overly focused on epistemic justice, and insufficiently attentive to the everyday realities of African societies. He proposes a "post-independence" approach that re-centres African agency and life as the ontological and epistemological foundation of decolonial theory.

The dominance of Western epistemologies and institutional cultures that perpetuate epistemic injustice has been widely acknowledged across African scholarship. Mbembe (2015) argues that African universities continue to operate within "colonial matricial frameworks" that privilege Eurocentric knowledge while marginalising indigenous epistemologies and African intellectual sovereignty. Similarly, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) describes this condition as epistemic colonisation, noting that African knowledge systems are structurally silenced through curriculum design, research agendas, and institutional culture. wa Thiong'o's (1986) critique of the "cultural bomb" further illustrates how Eurocentric epistemic dominance erases African cultural memory, identity, and linguistic agency. Together with Fosu's (2025) "post-independence" critique, these scholars collectively demonstrate that epistemic injustice is not an isolated concern but a structural, widely documented challenge in African higher education.

In addition, African higher education scholars such as Odora Hoppers (2002) and Hountondji (1997) show that Western epistemic hierarchies not only shape what counts as knowledge but also whose knowledge counts. Odora Hoppers argues that Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) have been systematically delegitimised through colonial and postcolonial educational systems, while Hountondji's concept of "extraversion" demonstrates how African scholarship is often validated only when recognised by Western epistemic gatekeepers. These critiques resonate with Maistry and McCann (2024) and Rajah (2019), who call for knowledge democracy, epistemic justice, and the centring of African worldviews, relational pedagogies, and Ubuntu ethics in higher education. Together, these scholars affirm the need for intentional epistemic re-centring that values African philosophies and community-rooted knowledge as legitimate, generative, and globally relevant.

Similarly, the establishment of the *African Journal of Higher Education Community Engagement* is a step in the right direction. In their editorial, Maistry and McCann (2024) call for a paradigm shift in African higher education towards relational, humanising, and decolonial approaches to learning, knowing and being, and advocate for knowledge democracy rooted in African philosophies, community engagement, and relational pedagogy. However, the uptake will be a steady process, given the poor, and sometimes

lack of, support and recognition in many institutions across the country for scholars who do and tell, since the work of knowledge democracy is labour – intensive and difficult to codify in the same way that hegemonic knowledge is codified.

4.2 Defining Community Engagement in Higher Education

Whilst many definitions of community engagement exist in literature (Nkoana & Dichaba, 2019; Bhagwan, 2017), Rajah (2019, pp. 1–14) defines community engagement as a pedagogical and philosophical approach rooted in African Indigenous Education, particularly the principles of Ubuntu, communalism, and indigenous axiology. It is not merely an 'add-on' to higher education but a core educational pillar alongside teaching and research. Community engagement is envisioned as a humanising, transformative and student-centred praxis that fosters social responsibility, identity formation, and epistemic justice. It is a relational and epistemically inclusive process that positions communities not as passive recipients of knowledge, but as co-creators and custodians of knowledge systems. It is rooted in Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasises interconnectedness, mutual respect, and collective well-being, and challenges the Eurocentric, extractive models of engagement that have historically dominated higher education (Rajah, 2019).

Community engagement in South African higher education is a core academic function, alongside teaching and research. It seeks to redress the injustices of the past, centre marginalised communities, and reimagine the university's societal role. Ideally, community engagement should be intentional, to advance the developmental role of universities, contributing to community development and inculcating civic and social responsibility in students (Netshandama, 2010). The way in which Africa will be able to respond to the continent's enduring challenges, social injustice, poverty, corruption, unemployment, environmental degradation, and epistemic exclusion is by reflecting, confronting, and engaging in relational conversations and dialogues.

In the post-apartheid context, higher education community engagement serves as a mechanism for reconciliation, enabling universities to engage with communities historically excluded from knowledge production and institutional benefits. CE challenges the legacy of elitism and exclusion in higher education by fostering inclusive partnerships and co-creation of knowledge. In this regard, universities are compelled to frame CE as a moral and civic imperative, aligning with national goals of transformation and social justice. As Rhodes University Vice-Chancellor Professor Sizwe Mabizela noted at the Rhodes University Dialogue in May 2025, CE must be guided by the principle that universities exist not only to produce knowledge but to serve the public good and nurture socially conscious graduates. Ubuntu-inspired CE promotes compassionate scholarship, where knowledge is used to uplift communities, heal historical wounds, and foster solidarity. It challenges the transactional model of education and calls for structural change in how universities relate to society (Mabizela, 2025).

4.3 Ubuntu Philosophy

Ubuntu, variously expressed in Shona (Hunhu), Sesotho (Botho), Tshivenda (Vhuthu), and Zulu/Xhosa (Ubuntu), asserts that one's humanity is realised through others. Ubuntu represents relational ethics: interconnectedness, mutual respect, dignity, empathy, and reciprocity. Scholars such as Mbiti (1969), Ramose (1999), Metz (2007), and Waghid (2014) have contributed to its framing as metaphysical, moral, pedagogical, and ontological. In the context of higher education community engagement, Ubuntu's core teachings help us ask: what does it mean to treat each other, students, and communities as co-creators? How do we value local knowledge, respect ancestral wisdom, uphold dignity? Ubuntu reminds us that our academic knowledge is not superior but one among multiple ways of being, knowing, and doing.

Ubuntu emphasises interconnectedness and collective well-being, while Nussbaum (1997) proposes three capacities essential to cultivating humanity: critical self-examination, global citizenship, and empathetic imagination. Together, these principles align to provide a framework for transformative community engagement that is both African and global in outlook. Mpetsheni's (2019) work explores Ubuntu as a soteriological ethic –

a path to salvation and healing for the effaced *umntu* (person) in post-1994 South Africa. Rooted in Black Theology of Liberation, the thesis argues that despite the political transition in 1994, the socioeconomic structures continue to marginalise and dehumanise black South Africans, perpetuating the legacy of colonialism, apartheid, and European modernity.

Ubuntu is proposed as a liberative framework that restores dignity, identity, and wholeness (*ingqibelelo*) to the wounded umntu. The concept of *'umntu ngumntu ngabantu'* (a person is a person through other persons) becomes central to this ethic, emphasising relational harmony across generations, the living, the living dead, and the yet-to-be-born. Mphetsheni critiques modernity's individualism and capitalism as manifestations of *ukunxaxha* (missing the mark), which assault the image of God in the oppressed. Ubuntu, in contrast, offers a redemptive and reconciliatory vision, challenging the church and society to embody justice, dignity, and communal healing.

4.4 Ubuntu in Community Engagement Leadership

Ubuntu's emphasis on "I am because we are" challenges the individualism and competitiveness that often characterise higher education. It invites leaders to embrace humility, empathy, and collective responsibility. As Maphalala and Nkosi (2025) argue, Ubuntu fosters inclusive pedagogies and leadership practices that center the dignity and agency of all stakeholders, students, staff, and communities alike. In the context of higher education community engagement, Ubuntu transforms outreach into reciprocal partnership. Nicolaides and Austin (2022) describe Ubuntu-based engagement as a transformative undertaking, where universities do not "give back" to communities but co-create solutions with them. This resonates with efforts in benefit sharing in commercialisation, where communities are not passive recipients but active stakeholders in innovation ecosystems.

Swanson (2007) extends this ethic into research, advocating for a methodology of "humble togetherness." Her critique of the instrumentalisation of Ubuntu in post-apartheid nation-building is instructive: Ubuntu must not be reduced to

rhetoric but lived through ethical, participatory practices. This is particularly relevant in inclusive open innovation, where knowledge flows across boundaries and must be governed by principles of equity, transparency, and mutual respect. Luescher and Holtzhausen (2023) further argue that Ubuntu and transdisciplinarity are essential for building responsive, student-centred universities. Their work supports the integration of social entrepreneurship into curricula and institutional strategy, not as a market-driven add-on, but as a values-driven practice that cultivates ethical leadership and social impact.

Mathebula and Martinez-Vargas (2023) add that Ubuntu should be seen as a valued capability; a way of being that enhances student well-being, relational learning, and civic responsibility. This aligns with the vision of integrated social entrepreneurship as a vehicle for cultivating humanity, where innovation is not only economically viable but also socially embedded and ethically grounded.

4.5 Ubuntu-Anchored Universities as Catalysts for Cultivating Humanity in the Age of Artificial intelligence (AI) and the 4IR/5IR

Building on the Ubuntu-grounded discussions in sections 3.3 and 3.4, this section positions universities as ethical and relational anchors in an era increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and rapid technological shifts. Ubuntu's assertion that 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' reminds us that humanity is realised through relationships, interdependence, and collective flourishing. As the Fourth Industrial Revolution accelerates into the Fifth Industrial Revolution, universities are called to deepen, not dilute, their commitment to relationality, empathy, and community engagement leadership. Without this grounding, technological advancement risks producing graduates who are technically proficient but ethically unmoored, with diminished capacities for empathy, civic responsibility, or moral reasoning.

Within an Ubuntu ethic, universities hold responsibility not only as centres of knowledge production but as incubators of humane, ethical leadership able to steward technology in ways that affirm dignity and equity. As Mokgoantle (2021) notes, the the Fourth Industrial Revolution blurs the boundaries between the physical, digital, and biological, raising complex questions about power, access, exclusion, and human agency. In such a landscape, Ubuntu-aligned leadership becomes indispensable for preventing the dehumanising tendencies of technological systems – systems that can reproduce bias, amplify inequality, or undermine relational modes of being if left unexamined.

Community engagement therefore emerges as a critical leadership practice through which universities mediate between innovation and social justice. CE fosters reciprocity, empathy, humility, and co-creation; values that ensure that technological progress serves humanity rather than marginalising it. Its alignment with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4's commitment to inclusive, equitable, and socially responsive education reinforces the moral imperative for CE to be embedded within academic programmes. The Venda proverb *'Tsiwana i laiwa ndilani'* (an orphan is guided along the way) illuminates the relational foundations of learning. It reminds us that ethical grounding and wisdom often emerge from community relationships and lived experience rather than formal instruction alone, challenging universities to honour indigenous knowledges and community capacities as vital contributors to ethical innovation (Ramavhunga, Netshandama, and Matshidze, 2025).

Nussbaum's (1997) concept of *narrative imagination,* the ability to enter into the experiences of others, remains essential to humanistic education and is powerfully cultivated through CE. As Hoyos (2025) observes, while machines may surpass humans in technical precision, they cannot replicate empathy, ethical judgment, or relational accountability. Ubuntu-rooted CE thus becomes an indispensable pedagogical space where students learn to integrate technological competence with moral consciousness, social responsibility, and relational awareness. These capacities are not peripheral; they are foundational for navigating a world in which AI and human agency must coexist.

In sum, the 4IR/5IR does not diminish the relevance of Ubuntu and community engagement in higher education but amplifies it. Universities must therefore lead with relational ethics and anchor technological advancement in humanity, dignity, and shared flourishing. In doing so, they move beyond the narrow role of knowledge factories to embody their deeper purpose: cultivating graduates who can innovate responsibly and contribute to a just, inclusive, and humane society.

4.6 Mentorship, Intergenerational Learning, and the Cultivation of Humanity

In the cultivation of humanity within higher education, the role of formidable elders, mentors, and serendipity cannot be overstated. These relationships are not anecdotal but foundational; they provide moral grounding and practical insight into how authentic academic engagement navigates institutional pressures and sustains humane values.

Reflecting on my own academic journey, I am indebted to mentors whose relational practices embodied Ubuntu and social justice. Professor Sechaba Mahlomaholo taught me to persist, to stay in the game, even when the academic system seemed to marginalise relational or humane work. His legacy, as captured by Ndlovu (2025), is one of relational leadership, intergenerational wisdom, and a commitment to social justice. Through his sustainable learning environments (SuLE) project, Mahlomaholo demonstrated how inclusive, empowering educational spaces can be co-created through dialogue, collaboration, and care. His work emphasises the importance of culturally responsive, socially inclusive, and contextually relevant curricula, grounded in Ubuntu and aimed at achieving SDG 4, namely quality education for all.

Ndlovu (2025) extends this legacy by highlighting the need to include students with disabilities in the vision of sustainable learning environments. This extension reflects the emancipatory ethos of Mahlomaholo's work and underscores the importance of recognising diverse lived experiences in the design of educational spaces. It also affirms that mentorship and

intergenerational learning are not unidirectional but reciprocal, dialogic, and humanising.

Mahlomaholo's SuLE project exemplifies how relational leadership and intergenerational wisdom can shape inclusive and empowering educational spaces. His work, rooted in Ubuntu and social justice, reminds us that cultivating humanity is not only a pedagogical imperative but also a moral and communal responsibility. Drawing from my own praxis and reflexive scholarship, I have found that mentoring students and junior colleagues, and engaging in dialogue with elders, has been central to fostering a culture of care, critical reflection, and inclusive innovation in community engagement. Ndlovu honours the legacy of Professor Mahlomaholo by exploring his lifelong commitment to creating sustainable learning environments (SuLE) grounded in social justice theory. Professor Mahlomaholo's work focused on ensuring inclusive, equitable, and empowering educational spaces for the marginalised, particularly in South Africa. Mahlomaholo's scholarship emphasised the interconnectedness of all levels of education, from early childhood to higher education, and the importance of culturally responsive, socially inclusive, and contextually relevant curricula. His approach was relational, collaborative, and transformative; anchored in Ubuntu values and a commitment to equity, dignity, and lifelong learning. The article also extends his legacy by advocating for the inclusion of students with disabilities, highlighting the need for sustainable, inclusive environments that honour diverse lived experiences.

Other mentors have similarly shaped my praxis. Dr Margie Maistry reminded me always to write, to make visible the lived experience, the soul, and the humane in academic spaces. Professor Chris Brink encouraged me to speak of the "soul of the university", emphasising that humane values must be repeatedly articulated and defended, even when they seem self-evident. These mentors help me imagine a framework that integrates civic research, social justice, and respectful engagement. It is a scholarship that does not separate intellect from empathy, nor research from responsibility. It is through such relational practices that higher education can become a space where human dignity, critical reflection, and inclusive innovation are cultivated.

4.7 Towards an Integrative Framework

This chapter offers a decolonial, Ubuntu-informed framework for reimagining higher education leadership and community engagement. It foregrounds reflexivity as a transformative practice, enabling leaders and scholars to navigate institutional pressures while remaining grounded in human dignity, social justice, and relational ethics. Drawing together philosophical grounding, policy context, case praxis, and mentorship insights, this section proposes an integrated framework for cultivating humanity in higher education.

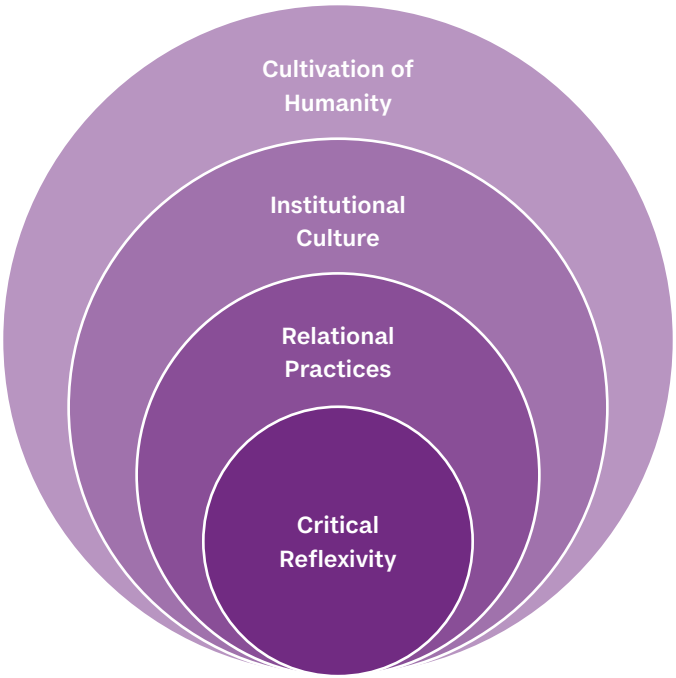


Figure 1: Composition of an Integral Framework for the Cultivation of Humanity

Critical reflexivity refers to continuous self-examination of positionality, privilege, and institutional constraints. It enables leaders and educators to navigate complexity with humility and ethical awareness. Epistemic justice demands the validation and integration of indigenous and local knowledge

systems as equal partners in knowledge production. It resists epistemic marginalisation and promotes inclusive curricula. Institutional infrastructure includes ethical committees, reward systems, and policies that support relational practice. Without the requisite institutional culture embedded in relational practices of Ubuntu values, humane engagement required of community engagement remains peripheral and unsustainable in higher education and by extension in society. Inclusive innovation leadership that is rooted in humility, shared governance, and diversity of epistemologies aligns with community priorities and promotes co-creation and benefit sharing. In summary, the diagram below proposes an ecosystems framework for the cultivation of humanity through inclusive and transformative engagement.

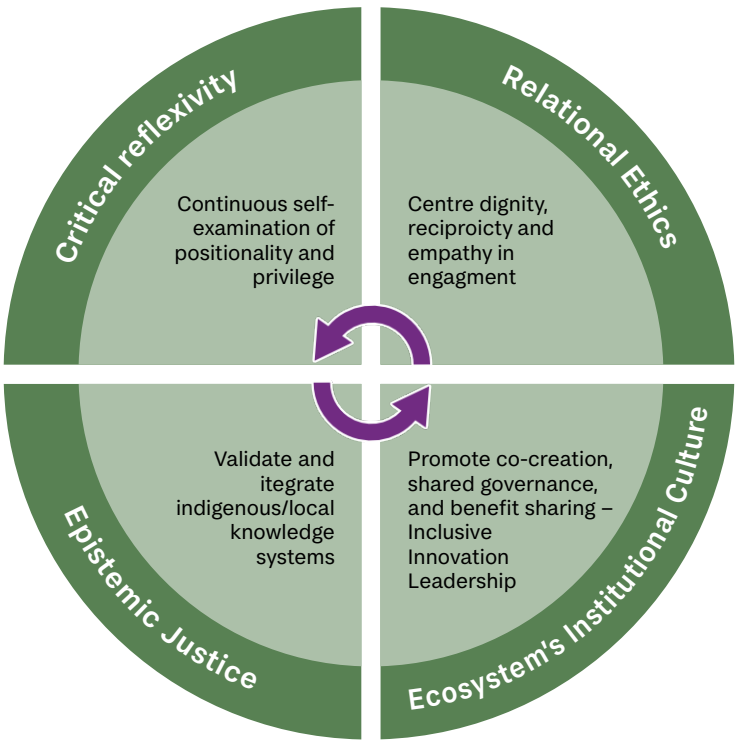


Figure 2: An Integral Framework for the Cultivation of Humanity

4.8 Discussion

The preceding sections (3.4–3.7) established that cultivating humanity in higher education is inseparable from Ubuntu ethics, relational community engagement (CE) leadership, and intergenerational mentorship. Ubuntu's relational ontology, the leadership insights of scholars such as Mahlomaholo and Mpetsheni (2019), and the values embedded in CE (empathy, reciprocity, and co-creation) collectively demonstrate that humane higher education requires ethical grounding, reflexivity, and institutional cultures that affirm dignity and inclusive innovation. The integrative framework presented in this section builds directly on these insights, offering a structured way to translate the philosophical, relational, and practical themes into an institutional model that can guide decision making, strategy, and leadership practice.

Figure 1: Composition of an Integral Framework and Figure 2: An integral Co-Systems Framework, serve complementary but distinct purposes:

Figure 1 provides the core building blocks of cultivating humanity in higher education. It identifies the essential components required for a humanising institutional culture, namely critical reflexivity, relational ethics, epistemic justice and institutional culture, to show the foundational capacities required for cultivating humanity in higher education:

- Critical reflexivity represents ongoing self-examination of positionality, power, and institutional limitations.
- Relational ethics reflect Ubuntu values of dignity, respect, reciprocity and empathy.
- Epistemic justice includes validating and integrating local and indigenous knowledge systems and challenging epistemic exclusion.
- Institutional culture refers to ethical infrastructure, policies, and leadership practices that sustain humane engagement.

These four components are not linear; they are interdependent and cyclical, continually reinforcing each other. The figure, therefore, represents a

relational composition, rather than a step-by-step process. Each element corresponds to insights earlier in the chapter:

- Ubuntu ethics → Relational ethics
- CE leadership and benefit sharing → Institutional culture and co-creation practices
- Mentorship and intergenerational learning → Reflexive leadership
- Decolonial scholarship and indigenous education → Epistemic justice

Thus, Figure 2 visually consolidates the conceptual arguments developed across sections 3.4–3.7.

Figure 2 expands these components into an interconnected ecosystem model, illustrating how they work together dynamically at institutional and community levels.

Together, the figures move from foundational elements (Figure 1) to a holistic institutional ecosystem (Figure 2). This progression mirrors the movement from Ubuntu principles and CE leadership (shared earlier in the chapter) to a fully integrated institutional architecture.

Where Figure 1 identifies foundational components, Figure 2 illustrates how these components interact across an institutional ecosystem. The model emphasises the relational nature of humanising higher education, echoing Ubuntu's insistence that no component functions in isolation. At the centre lies critical reflexivity, acting as the engine of transformation:

- Surrounding this core are relational ethics and institutional culture, creating an enabling environment for ethical engagement.
- Epistemic justice ensures that diverse voices, knowledges, and communities participate meaningfully in knowledge co-production.
- Inclusive innovation leadership connects the framework to societal transformation by translating ethical and relational commitments into practice through co-creation, shared governance, and benefit sharing.

The model is ecosystemic and iterative, meaning that transformation occurs through continuous relational cycles rather than linear stages. Ubuntu and CE leadership are inherently relational, requiring constant interaction among individuals, institutions, and communities. An ecosystem approach therefore prevents reductionism, recognises interdependence, supports long-term relational transformation and encourages shared stewardship across organisational levels, which is currently a struggle in a system founded in hierarchical principles. To support practical use, the framework can guide institutional transformation in the following ways:

- Curriculum Design: Integrate reflexivity, relational ethics, and community based learning into academic programmes.
- Leadership Development: Use the model to train leaders in relational accountability, ethical stewardship, and Ubuntu-aligned decision making.
- Policy and Governance: Embed epistemic justice principles into ethics committees, reward structures, and quality assurance processes.
- Community Engagement Programmes: Use the ecosystem design to map partnerships, co-design reciprocity mechanisms, and promote benefit sharing.

Institutional culture audits: Assess whether policies, practices and relationships align with the four components of Figure 1 and the dynamic ecosystem in Figure 2.

By integrating Ubuntu ethics, CE leadership, mentorship wisdom, and decolonial insights, this framework offers a relational, ethical, and contextually grounded model for reimagining higher education. Figures 1 and 2 should therefore be understood not as static visuals but as tools for reflection, planning, and transformation, guiding institutions toward cultivating humanity as a core academic and societal mandate.

Universities are catalysts for cultivating humanity through CE programmes, amongst others. In the context of higher education, the cultivation of humanity is not merely an academic pursuit, it is a moral imperative. Universities, especially in the Global South, are increasingly called upon to

transcend their traditional roles of teaching and research to become anchor institutions that drive social transformation through community engagement. This aligns with SDG 4, which emphasises inclusive, equitable, and quality education that promotes lifelong learning and global citizenship.

At the heart of cultivating humanity in higher education lies the imperative to develop capacities that transcend disciplinary knowledge and institutional metrics. Nussbaum's (1997) three essential capacities for humane education resonate with the values of Ubuntu, which emphasise relationality, dignity, and shared humanity. This philosophical alignment was echoed during the Rhodes University Dialogue, where participants from universities, community organisations, and policy sectors critically examined the barriers to embedding Ubuntu and relational ethics in community engagement. Key challenges identified included the persistence of colonial legacies, institutional incoherence, transactional project-based practices, and the epistemic marginalisation of indigenous knowledge.

These systemic issues often reduce engagement to short-term outputs, eroding trust and undermining the potential for sustained co-learning and transformation. In response, participants advocated for African-centred pedagogical reforms, co-creation with community partners, ethical review processes that reflect relational values, and Ubuntu pedagogy training. They also emphasised the importance of leadership that models relational accountability. Together, Nussbaum's humanist framework and the collective insights from the Dialogue offer a compelling normative and practical guide for designing engagement practices that are ethically grounded, socially just, and relationally sustained.

Discussions from the Dialogue presentation raised the need for further probing on the following questions:

- How can universities move beyond tokenistic community service to embrace community engagement as a transformative, reciprocal process?
- In what ways can Ubuntu philosophy and expressions like *'Tsiwana i laiwa ndilani'* inform the design of community engagement programmes?

- How can universities balance formal academic knowledge with indigenous and experiential wisdom in their curricula and CE?
- What institutional reforms are necessary to position CE as a core mission of the university, on par with teaching and research?
- How can CE initiatives be aligned with SDG 4 to promote inclusive, values-based, and lifelong learning?
- What role can students play as co-creators of knowledge and agents of change in community engagement programmes?

4.9 Conclusion

The cultivation of humanity through higher education community engagement is both a philosophical and practical imperative. Rajah (2019) argues that conceptualising community engagement through African Indigenous Education offers a restorative, transformative, and humanistic framework for reimagining education in South Africa. It affirms indigenous wisdom, promotes social justice, and positions CE as a foundational pillar for holistic education and sustainable development.

Additionally, drawing on Ubuntu principles, and grounded in the praxis and mentorship of my elders, this work offers a framework for inclusive and transformative engagement. Higher education institutions must move beyond transactional models and embrace humanity as a guiding principle in their relationships with communities. Cultivating humanity in higher education community engagement should not be a peripheral ideal but an essential commitment. The combined philosophical foundations of Ubuntu and Nussbaum's capacities, the praxis illustrated in the ecosystem approach, partnerships, and the life lessons from my mentors provide a strong basis for any relational transformation.

However, it is a call that searches a soul individually but requires an awareness of the power of the collective in pursuit of humane objectives, as a foundation of the great academic project. Why this is even a course for concern is that a lot of questioning needs to be done. For higher education institutions in South Africa to fulfil their social and democratic mandates,

they must shift from transactional models toward relational, humane, inclusive, and justice-oriented practices. The soul of the university depends on these reorientations – engagement on these matters of epistemic and cognitive justice will require a movement and a level of activism that the sector struggles to embrace, largely because of competing ideals of materialism and individual pursuits.

Institutions that accept that the academic project is relational can take up the challenge to move beyond mandates, metrics, and tick boxes to become genuine partners with communities in co-creating knowledge, promoting human dignity, and the public good. Our humanity is bound together; in recognising this fact, universities can reclaim their role not merely as knowledge factories, but as moral actors, centres of compassion, belonging, and shared flourishing.

A reimagined university is one that will consistently move from an ivory tower to an anchor institution. Johnson and Hlatshwayo (2025) propose a "helix conception" of the university, integrating the quadruple and quintuple helix models to position universities as anchor institutions in society. This model includes civil society, government, business, academia, and the environment, advocating for a radical reconfiguration of CE as central and not peripheral to the university's mission.

Additionally, a case is to be made on Sankofa, looking back to take the good of what we lost. Slater (2019), frames Sankofa as a reflective, restorative and future oriented African epistemology, not nostalgia. Furthermore, the Venda expression 'Tsiwana i laiwa ndilani' is a reminder that mentorship and wisdom often come from unexpected, informal sources. In the context of CE, this proverb challenges universities to recognise and honour community knowledge and not just certified expertise (academics) as a legitimate and vital contributor to human development. Sugawara (2022) further supports this by offering an analytical framework that links CE to local capacity for community development. She identifies three pillars, namely mapping community assets, functioning capacity, and transformational capacity. These frameworks underscore the transformative potential of CE when it is systematically embedded in institutional planning and pedagogy.

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5. The Social Construction of Race: Ubuntu as an Ethical Foundation for Addressing Racism and Promoting the Cultivation of Humanity in South Africa

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Abstract

Race remains one of the most persistent and divisive social constructs in contemporary society. Its historical legacies continue to shape economic inequalities, educational hierarchies, and enduring patterns of social fragmentation in South Africa. Despite three decades of democracy, the symbolic and structural residues of apartheid continue to reproduce racialised privilege and exclusion. This chapter examines the social construction of race through a decolonial and ethical lens, situating South Africa as a critical site where the contradictions between liberal equality and racial persistence are most visible. It positions Ubuntu as a foundational African moral philosophy that redefines personhood through interdependence and relational ethics, offering an alternative to individualist and competitive modes of human association. By drawing comparative insights from global traditions of humanism, Confucian ren, Western liberal humanism, and Latin American Buen Vivir, the chapter argues that Ubuntu advances a distinctive yet globally resonant paradigm for confronting racism. It proposes that racism is not merely a moral failure or social bias but a rupture of human relatedness. Ubuntu, therefore, provides an ethical framework for restoring co-being and shared humanity, inviting a re-imagining of human relations grounded in reciprocity, dignity, and collective flourishing.

Key words: *Ubuntu; Race; Decolonial Theory; African Humanism; South Africa*

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5.1 Introduction

The introduction to this book has already established the central role of cultivating humanity and the ethical grounding of community engagement within Ubuntu philosophy. Building on that foundation, this chapter extends the discussion by critically examining how race and coloniality continue to shape higher education and knowledge production in South Africa. The chapter, therefore, moves beyond the introductory framing to explore how Ubuntu can contribute to re-imagining the human within historically racialised and unequal institutional spaces.

Race remains one of the most enduring and divisive social constructs in modern society. This chapter argues that 'race' does not exist because it is a social construct, but racism does. Though race lacks any biological foundation, racism continues to organise access to resources, recognition, and power in ways that reproduce deep social hierarchies. The idea of race, once clothed in the authority of science and theology, became a defining logic of colonial modernity, shaping who could belong, who could rule, and who could be rendered expendable (Goldberg, 2022; Omi & Winant, 2015). From the early slave trade through European imperial expansion, racial classification functioned as a technology of domination that legitimised violence, dispossession, and exploitation. It translated physical and cultural differences into natural inequality, and gave moral justification to systems of extraction and exclusion that still structure global capitalism today.

In South Africa, the afterlife of these racial hierarchies remains particularly visible. Over three decades after the formal end of apartheid, the architecture of privilege and deprivation continues to reflect the spatial, economic, and psychological divisions of the past. The democratic transition of 1994 abolished the legal framework of apartheid, yet it could not dismantle what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2024) calls the *coloniality of being*, the moral and epistemic order that positioned Blackness as deficient and Whiteness as normative. Racial inequality has therefore outlived the apartheid state, surviving as a pattern of life. Wealth, land ownership, education, and social mobility remain profoundly racialised. The South African Living Conditions Survey [SALBCS] (Statistics South Africa, 2023) found that White households earn, on average, three times more than Black African households, while the

World Bank (2022) ranks South Africa as the most unequal country in the world. These disparities illustrate that formal freedom has not produced substantive equality.

This persistence cannot be understood simply as a failure of policy or redistribution; rather, it reveals how the idea of race continues to inhabit the social imagination and the underlying hierarchies endure. As Ratele (2024, p. 45) note, post-apartheid South Africa is characterised by "racisms without racists", subtle everyday practices that reproduce difference while disavowing it (Steyn, 2024). The transformation from legal apartheid to neoliberal democracy has thus displaced rather than erased the racial order, embedding it in markets, bureaucracies, and cultural norms.

To grasp the resilience of racial inequality, one must look beyond the material distribution of resources and interrogate the epistemic structures that sustain it. Race is not merely a descriptive category but a system of meaning, a symbolic code that organises how people see, feel, and understand themselves and others. It is through this system that power becomes naturalised, inequality justified, and exclusion normalised. As Mbembe (2021) argues, the racial imagination redefined humanity itself, dividing the world into those considered fully human and those cast as its shadow. In this sense, the struggle against racism is not only political or economic but ontological: it concerns the recovery of being, dignity, and voice for those whom colonial reason rendered invisible.

The persistence of race in South Africa must therefore be situated within the broader project of *coloniality*. Colonialism was not only a political order but a civilisational paradigm, one that established European thought as universal, and positioned African epistemologies as primitive or derivative. This hierarchy of knowledge continues to shape universities, policy frameworks, and global institutions, producing what Grosfoguel (2011, p. 8) calls an "epistemic apartheid." Decolonisation, then, is not merely about removing colonial symbols or redistributing resources; it requires re-imagining the human from within African moral and intellectual traditions. Among these, *Ubuntu* stands out as a philosophy of relationality and shared humanity, offering an ethical alternative to the logic of separation. Before turning to Ubuntu as a decolonial framework, however, it is essential to trace how race

itself came to define modernity, not as a scientific truth but as a social invention that continues to shape life chances, consciousness, and belonging (Nattrass & Seekings, 2022). The next section therefore examines the social construction of race, revealing how this concept emerged historically and why it remains embedded in the moral and institutional fabric of post-apartheid South Africa.

5.2 Race as a Social Construct

Race is neither a biological reality nor a neutral descriptor of human difference; it is a social construct born of historical struggles over power, labour, and legitimacy. As Omi & Winant (2015) argue, race is produced through racial formation, the process by which political, economic, and cultural forces create and transform racial meanings. These meanings become institutionalised in laws, bureaucracies, and cultural norms, shaping both individual identities and collective hierarchies. Race thus operates as both ideology and structure: it explains inequality while simultaneously reproducing it. The genealogy of racial thought shows that colonialism transformed difference into hierarchy. During the Enlightenment, European thinkers such as Linnaeus, Kant, and Hume classified humanity into ranks of civilisation, coupling reason and morality with Whiteness and associating Africans with savagery or incapacity (Fredrickson, 2005, pp. 25–47). These pseudo-scientific taxonomies legitimised imperial conquest by equating European domination with moral progress. In the African context, colonial administrations operationalised these ideas through indirect rule, land expropriation, and forced labour. Africans were not merely governed; they were defined as subjects whose humanity required supervision. This "civilising mission," as Mudimbe (1988, p. 18) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2024, p. 44) note, produced both the colonised body and the colonised mind, a double subjugation that continues to haunt postcolonial societies.

In South Africa, race was institutionalised with ruthless precision. The 1950 Population Registration Act, and a host of companion laws, classified citizens into rigid categories, White, Coloured, Indian, and African, determining residence, occupation, education, and even intimate relations (Posel, 2001). These classifications were not descriptive but performative: they created the

very divisions they purported to measure. Race became the organising principle of the economy and the psyche alike. Even after apartheid's legal collapse, its classificatory logic persists. Contemporary discourses of meritocracy, class mobility, and cultural difference continue to operate through racialised codes, producing what Bonilla-Silva (2017, p. 26) terms "colour-blind racism", a denial of structural inequality that sustains privilege through the language of neutrality.

Yet race's power lies not only in institutions but in inferiority. Fanon (1952) cited in Longhofer & Winchester (2023, p. 46) exposed how colonialism inscribes inferiority onto the body and psyche of the oppressed, a process he called "epidermalisation". The colonised subject learns to view themselves through the coloniser's gaze, internalising shame and alienation. Du Bois (1903, p. 103) captured a similar experience in his notion of "double consciousness", the painful awareness of one's fractured identity in a world that measures humanity by White standards. In post-apartheid South Africa, these psychic legacies persist in the social imagination, shaping aspiration, belonging, and even resistance. To undo racism, therefore, is also to heal the self from its internalised wounds. Reparation, then becomes essential to healing.

This psychic and structural inheritance is sustained by what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) calls the coloniality of knowledge: the continued privileging of European epistemic traditions as universal. Race operates here as an epistemic order, deciding whose knowledge is credible and whose experience counts as truth. African thought is often relegated to the margins of academic discourse, treated as cultural expression rather than theory. The result is what Grosfoguel (2011, p. 86) terms "epistemic apartheid", in which the Global South remains a site of data but not of ideas. In this sense, racial domination extends beyond material inequality; it shapes the very architecture of knowledge and being.

The endurance of race in South Africa illustrates this epistemic paradox. Universities, bureaucracies, and markets still mirror the hierarchies of colonial modernity. Eurocentric curricula dominate education; state policies rely on racial categories to administer redress; and capitalist markets continue to reproduce hierarchies of productivity and worth (Biekart, 2024;

Nyamnjoh, 2020). Even progressive interventions such as Black Economic Empowerment and Employment Equity, while necessary, risk reaffirming the language of race they seek to dismantle. As Mbembe (2021, p. 23) observes, postcolonial societies must "remember together and repair together," yet they do so while speaking the vocabularies of their former oppressors. This paradox underscores how race remains entangled with modernity itself, a ghost that inhabits the very tools of liberation.

To address this dilemma, scholars such as Fanon (1952) cited in Longhofer & Winchester (2023, p. 47) and Mbembe (2021) argue that true decolonisation must transcend the binaries of coloniser and colonised, Black and White, self and other. The challenge is not merely to expose the past but to reimagine the human in ethical and philosophical terms. This re-imagination requires moving beyond the ontological fractures imposed by racial thinking toward a vision of humanity grounded in mutual recognition and relational being. It is within this moral and intellectual horizon that African humanist thought, particularly Ubuntu, becomes indispensable. Ubuntu offers a counter-narrative to the isolationist logic of racial modernity, insisting that personhood is realised through connection, that to be human is to be in relation. In the next section, Ubuntu is explored not as nostalgia but as a living ethical framework through which the project of re-humanisation can begin.

5.3 Ubuntu as a Framework

Building upon the preceding call for ethical re-imagination, Ubuntu, derived from the Nguni expression *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* ("a person is a person through other people"), embodies an African philosophy that redefines personhood in profoundly relational, moral, and communal terms. It offers an alternative to the atomistic, competitive view of the self-embedded in Western liberal modernity. Rooted in Bantu ontology, Ubuntu rejects Descartes' *cogito*, "I think, therefore I am", and instead affirms, "I am because we are" (Metz, 2011, p. 16; Ramose, 2004). This relational worldview conceives existence as interdependent; one's humanity is realised through mutual recognition and moral responsibility. Whereas Western humanism privileges autonomy and rational self-interest, Ubuntu advances a

conception of the self as inherently social, arguing that dignity and moral agency emerge through participation in others' lives.

To move from description to interpretation, it is necessary to situate Ubuntu within the wider theoretical terrain of decolonial thought. Ubuntu operates simultaneously as a moral philosophy and as an epistemology, a way of knowing that resists the colonial separation of reason and relation. In contrast to Enlightenment rationalism, which treats knowledge as control over an external object, Ubuntu situates knowing within reciprocity, empathy, and accountability (Eze, 2010; Gyekye, 1997). Knowledge, in this tradition, is not abstract but embodied in communal practice; it is verified through its contribution to harmony and well-being. This epistemic stance dissolves Cartesian dualisms, mind versus body, individual versus community, by affirming that understanding arises through participation in the moral life of the collective. In this sense, Ubuntu performs what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018, p. 46) calls "epistemic freedom": the reclamation of African ways of knowing that were disqualified under colonial modernity.

Such an epistemology has profound implications for how we think about race and decolonisation. Race, in this light, is not a biological reality but a socio-historical invention constructed and designed to legitimise domination, colonisation, and hierarchy (Omi & Winant, 2015). In South Africa, colonial and apartheid regimes codified these hierarchies through law and bureaucracy, embedding inequality in every dimension of social life (Posel, 2001). Although apartheid as a legal system has ended, racial categorisation continues to reproduce structural inequities and fracture social belonging. Here, Ubuntu offers both an ethical and psychological counterpoint: it insists on the indivisibility of humanity and the co-constitution of self and other. Where racial discourse fractures being through exclusion, Ubuntu heals it through interdependence, transforming social coexistence into a moral project of recognition.

The transition from alienation to restoration requires not only political reform but the renewal of consciousness. The colonised subject internalises racial hierarchies, seeing the self through the distorting gaze of the coloniser, a psychic wound he termed the "epidermalisation of inferiority" (Fanon, 1952 in Longhofer & Winchester, 2023, p. 46). Ubuntu provides a framework for

reversing this process by redefining selfhood in relational rather than comparative terms. The self is validated not through domination or competition, but through belonging, empathy, and care. In this sense, Ubuntu transforms decolonisation into an interior as well as collective enterprise, a healing of the self through others, a re-learning of humanity as reciprocity.

Historically, Ubuntu has functioned not only as an ethical principle but also as a socio-political framework for restorative justice. During South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999) invoked Ubuntu to promote forgiveness, dialogue, and moral repair as the basis for national healing. Yet, as scholars such as Mangena (2016) and Ramose (2004) caution, the state's instrumental use of Ubuntu often stripped it of its radical potential, reducing it to a rhetoric of harmony devoid of structural critique. To reclaim its transformative essence, Ubuntu must be understood as an insurgent ethics, an act of intellectual sovereignty that resists Eurocentric universalism while grounding moral life in relational accountability. This view aligns with Fanon's (1952) call for a *new humanism*, one that reconstructs relationships through solidarity rather than hierarchy (Longhofer & Winchester, 2023, p. 48).

Philosophically, then, Ubuntu operates on two intertwined planes: ontological and decolonial. Ontologically, it posits that being is relational, "I exist because you exist", and that moral agency depends upon mutual recognition. Decolonially, it disrupts the epistemic architecture of colonial reason, which defined Europe as the universal measure of humanity while rendering African subjectivity derivative (Goldberg, 2022; Mbembe, 2021). By restoring relationality as the foundation of ethics, Ubuntu dismantles this hierarchy and reclaims African intellectual agency. It thereby transforms anti-racism from mere resistance into the positive project of re-humanisation: the creation of a moral community where justice is measured not by possession but by participation, and humanity is continuously re-enacted through care. Ubuntu, therefore, is not a nostalgic appeal to tradition but a living ethical horizon with global relevance. It challenges possessive individualism, market rationality, and the logic of separation that underpin both racism and neoliberal modernity. In its insistence that one's well-being is inseparable from others', Ubuntu articulates a moral grammar for

rebuilding coexistence in societies fractured by colonialism and racism. Ultimately, it envisions liberation as a collective awakening, an epistemic, ethical, and emotional restoration of what it means to be human together.

5.4 Comparative Reflections: Global Humanisms and Ubuntu

Building on Ubuntu's philosophical grounding as a relational and decolonial ethic, it becomes necessary to situate it within a wider conversation on global humanisms. Ethical systems across cultures have long grappled with the question of what it means to be human, and how moral coexistence can be sustained in a plural world. Each tradition, in its own historical context, has sought to articulate an ethical grammar that links individual flourishing to collective well-being. While these traditions differ in their metaphysical assumptions, they share a concern with how humans ought to live together meaningfully and justly.

In East Asian philosophy, the Confucian concept of *ren* (humaneness) parallels Ubuntu's emphasis on relational morality and communal virtue. In Confucian ethics, personhood is cultivated through *li*, right conduct, and *ren*, benevolence or empathy, expressing the ideal of moral selfhood achieved through the maintenance of harmonious relationships (Tan, 2021; Yao, 2000). Similarly, in Latin American Indigenous thought, the philosophy of *Buen Vivir* (*Sumak Kawsay)* advances a vision of well-being premised on balance and reciprocity among humans, communities, and the natural world (Gudynas, 2011; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Both systems, like Ubuntu, reject atomistic notions of selfhood and affirm that the moral subject is embedded within a network of social and ecological relations.

Yet a crucial transition must be made here from similarity to specificity. Where Ubuntu diverges most sharply from these traditions is in its historical and decolonial grounding. While Confucianism and *Buen Vivir* developed within civilisational contexts not primarily defined by European colonial domination, Ubuntu emerges and becomes significant directly from the experience of colonialism and apartheid, where the definition of the 'human' was violently racialised and monopolised by Western epistemologies.

Ubuntu's philosophical labour, therefore, is twofold: to heal the ethical ruptures caused by racial hierarchy and to reclaim Africa's intellectual sovereignty within global moral discourse. In this sense, Ubuntu's project of relational personhood, its vision of becoming – with others – directly challenges the liberal humanist ideal of the autonomous, self-determining subject (Taylor, 1989). By revealing how this ideal served as an epistemic justification for colonial exclusion, Ubuntu reconstructs humanity as co-constituted rather than isolated, grounded in mutual recognition rather than individual possession.

This transition from autonomy to interdependence places Ubuntu in dialogue with what Mbembe (2021, p. 22) terms a "critical planetary humanism." Such a humanism does not seek to impose a single universal definition of the human but acknowledges the interdependence of plural histories and ontologies. Ubuntu resonates here with the decolonial turn's call for *pluriversality*, the coexistence of multiple, context-rooted ways of being human (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). While Confucian *ren* and *Buen Vivir* affirm relationality, Ubuntu's uniqueness lies in its insistence that ethical restoration must also confront power, coloniality, and structural injustice. It is not merely a moral sentiment but a critical praxis: a philosophical response born of struggle that seeks to reconstruct human relations from the ruins of racial domination.

To deepen this comparative dialogue further, it is helpful to consider the distinct moral architectures of these traditions. Confucian *ren* emphasises virtue cultivated within social hierarchy, guided by the pursuit of harmony through moral discipline. *Buen Vivir*, grounded in Andean cosmology, foregrounds ecological reciprocity and collective well-being, envisioning humans as custodians rather than masters of nature (Gudynas, 2011). Ubuntu, in contrast, articulates a horizontal moral community, egalitarian rather than hierarchical, where dignity flows from participation and mutual recognition. Each framework values balance and interconnection, yet Ubuntu's emergence from colonial and racial trauma endows it with a distinct ethical urgency. It is not only a vision of harmony but a praxis of repair: a demand to rebuild humanity where it has been denied.

From this perspective, Ubuntu extends the conversation on global ethics by linking interpersonal morality with social and structural transformation. Its call for recognition, empathy, compassion and restorative justice is inseparable from its critique of domination, whether racial, economic, or epistemic. Ubuntu thus moves beyond coexistence toward co-flourishing: a condition in which dignity is affirmed through mutual care, social equity, and ecological balance. In doing so, it provides a moral vocabulary for rethinking sustainability and justice as relational rather than extractive. This approach aligns closely with post-growth ethics and the work of scholars such as Escobar (2020), who call for the re-imagination of global well-being through interdependence rather than accumulation.

Consequently, Ubuntu's ethical reach extends beyond cultural boundaries into the domain of planetary ethics. It bridges humanism and ecology, showing that the restoration of human dignity is inseparable from the restoration of the Earth. By foregrounding compassion and solidarity, Ubuntu articulates an African pathway to global coexistence, one capable of reimagining humanity amidst fragmentation, inequality, and environmental crisis (Bangstad 2019; Cornell & Van Marle 2015). It provides not merely a complement to other global ethics but a necessary corrective, reminding the world that the future of justice depends on recognising that we become human only through others, human and non-human alike. While Ubuntu resonates with other moral frameworks across civilisations, it remains uniquely African in its historical grounding, communal orientation, and decolonial intent. It offers a moral philosophy of coexistence founded on reciprocity rather than domination, care rather than control, and solidarity rather than segregation. As such, Ubuntu contributes not merely to comparative ethics but to the reconstruction of the human as a relational, planetary, and justice-oriented project.

5.5 Ubuntu, Decolonisation, and the Cultivation of Humanity

Building on the comparative reflections above, the decolonial significance of Ubuntu can only be fully appreciated when read as both a critique of colonial reason and a moral blueprint for the renewal of humanity. As Mbembe (2021)

and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018, 2022) remind us, decolonisation is not only about dismantling colonial institutions but also about recovering epistemic sovereignty, the right to think, value, and imagine from African locations of being. Ubuntu contributes profoundly to this project by repositioning African ethical thought as global wisdom rather than local custom. Its principle of interdependence directly challenges the epistemic violence of colonialism, which dehumanised Africans by denying them rational and moral capacity. In opposition to this negation, Ubuntu affirms that being human is not a possession of the few but a shared achievement of all. It transforms the colonial narrative of deficiency into one of abundance, offering a moral anthropology grounded in reciprocity, care, and the irreducible dignity of every person.

In the South African context, this philosophical shift is vital for addressing the enduring legacy of racial segregation. Ubuntu provides the ethical and psychological resources to rebuild social relations fractured by apartheid's spatial and moral divisions. By redefining the self as interdependent rather than isolated, Ubuntu challenges the racialised logics of separation that continue to shape communities, schools, and workplaces (Malherbe & Ratele 2022). It replaces the binary of 'us' and 'them' with a vision of shared becoming, where inclusion is not an act of tolerance but an affirmation of mutual existence. In this way, Ubuntu offers a framework for transcending segregation not merely through legal equality but through ethical transformation, the cultivation of empathy, recognition, and relational accountability across racial boundaries.

Transitioning from critique to praxis, Ubuntu's decolonial force lies in its ability to translate philosophy into ethical practice. It shifts the work of decolonisation from intellectual reclamation to lived transformation, from abstract resistance to moral reconstitution (Mpofu & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2024). In this sense, Ubuntu reframes reconciliation not as a state-sanctioned event but as an ongoing process of moral repair, a continual cultivation of empathy, compassion, dialogue, and mutual recognition in the everyday. It functions as a pedagogy of becoming, a way of learning to be human through relational encounters that restore dignity to both self and other. Ramose (2004, p. 14) describes this as an "ethic of co-being," in which humanity is not a static condition, but an achievement continually renewed through

solidarity, compassion, and accountability. Fanon (1952) too envisioned this ethical renewal as central to liberation, a process of reconstituting the human beyond the psychic and structural scars of racial subjugation (Longhofer & Winchester, 2023, p. 49). Both perspectives converge on the conviction that political freedom is hollow without moral and emotional decolonisation.

From this moral standpoint, Ubuntu also serves as a therapeutic and psychological framework for healing the colonial wound. Fanon's (1952) notion of the "epidermalisation of inferiority" captures how colonialism produced internalised hierarchies of worth, leading the colonised subject to view themselves through the eyes of the oppressor (Longhofer & Winchester, 2023, p. 49). Ubuntu's relational ethics disrupt this psychic dependency by restoring mutual recognition as the basis of self-worth. When the self is affirmed through community rather than comparison, the internalised logic of racial hierarchy begins to dissolve. In South Africa's racially stratified spaces, this re-humanisation is transformative: it enables all the people in South Africa alike to re-engage one another as co-participants in a shared moral world rather than as relics of a divided past. Ubuntu thus becomes both a psychological and social tool for dismantling segregation, not by erasing difference but by rooting equality in shared humanity.

Extending this insight to the institutional domain, Ubuntu's orientation toward ethical community holds transformative potential in education, governance, and intercultural relations. In education, it challenges the coloniality of knowledge by validating Indigenous epistemologies and dialogical pedagogies that centre collective reasoning, moral formation, and the co-production of understanding (Dube & Higgs, 2024; Letseka, 2012). Education grounded in Ubuntu becomes a space for cultivating relational intelligence, teaching not only how to know but how to coexist. And currently, community engagement provides the ideal platform in higher education institutons in South Africa to effect education grounded in Ubuntu for the cultivation of humanity. In governance, Ubuntu underpins participatory democracy and restorative justice, calling for leadership rooted in accountability, compassion, and inclusion rather than bureaucratic domination (Mangena, 2016; Metz, 2011). Likewise, in intercultural relations, it promotes what Metz (2011, p. 17) calls "communal harmony," a moral

equilibrium sustained by empathy and respect, enabling difference to coexist without hierarchy.

Such applications reveal that Ubuntu is not merely a moral ideal but an instrument of social transformation. It offers a vocabulary through which societies fractured by colonialism and race can reimagine justice beyond retribution, as the restoration of relationships, not the reversal of power. Through its emphasis on mutual recognition, Ubuntu recasts reconciliation as both an ethical discipline and a political vision: one that rebuilds trust through vulnerability, compassion, humility, and shared accountability. This aligns with global movements toward restorative justice and truth-telling, yet Ubuntu deepens them by grounding repair in ontological interdependence rather than procedural fairness. Beyond its ethical and political dimensions, Ubuntu also illuminates a pathway for cultivating what Mbembe (2021, p. 28) calls "a new planetary consciousness". By foregrounding interdependence, it invites humanity to transcend racial, national, and even species boundaries. The same principle that heals human estrangement can also reorient our relationship with nature, reminding us that ecological and social survival are inseparable. Thus, the cultivation of humanity through Ubuntu extends the decolonial project into an ecological ethic: to restore the Earth is to restore ourselves.

Ultimately, Ubuntu completes the decolonial turn not through withdrawal or separatism, but through transformation. It redefines what it means to be human in a world still scarred by racial and epistemic hierarchies, offering a moral horizon for rebuilding coexistence and restoring the fullness of being. In the aftermath of apartheid's deep racial fractures, Ubuntu provides South Africa with a living moral compass, one that transforms desegregation from a legal mandate into a daily ethical practice. By cultivating interdependence, empathy, compassion and justice across difference, Ubuntu enables the emergence of a genuinely inclusive humanism where equality is lived, not legislated.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that race, though devoid of any biological foundation, persists as a powerful social and epistemic construct that continues to organise hierarchies of value, belonging, and power. In South Africa, the endurance of racial divisions and racism after apartheid exposes how deeply colonial epistemologies still shape contemporary consciousness, institutions, and relations of recognition. Addressing these legacies requires more than redistributive policies or legal reform; it demands an ethical and philosophical reorientation, a reconstitution of what it means to be human. Ubuntu, as articulated in this chapter, provides such an ethical horizon. Rooted in African humanist thought, it offers a decolonial response to the fractures of racial modernity by redefining personhood through relational ontology rather than individual autonomy. Ubuntu insists that humanity is not an inherited status but a shared condition, continually enacted through acts of care, compassion, recognition, and reciprocity. By grounding justice in interdependence, it challenges the isolationist logics of colonialism and neoliberalism that reduce human worth to competition and accumulation. In this way, Ubuntu transforms anti-racism from a politics of resistance into a philosophy of moral reconstruction, one oriented toward empathy, dialogue, and the repair of fractured relationships.

The cultivation of humanity, in South Africa and beyond, depends on our collective willingness to embrace interdependence as the foundation of justice. Ubuntu envisions a world in which dignity is not possessed but shared, not merely proclaimed but lived through mutual recognition and care. It invites us to transcend the binaries of race, power, and identity and to adopt a relational ethics capable of healing the moral and historical wounds of division. It implores every individual to critically question the social construction of race and the harm caused by this false construct. By doing so, Ubuntu transforms decolonisation from a project of resistance into a project of re-humanisation, reminding us that the future of justice, and indeed of humanity itself, rests upon our capacity to become human together.

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6. Reimagining Community Engagement in Higher Education Institutions to Cultivate Humanity through Integral Education and Ubuntu

| Kanya Padayachee

Abstract

This chapter explores the notion of cultivating humanity in higher education community engagement in South Africa through the application of an integral education and Ubuntu approach. In the newly formed democratic order, a higher education transformation plan included the injunction to, amongst others, align more appropriately to the new social order and impact the broader community, strengthen democracy, advance a common citizenship for a common good. Implementation has been problematic, though some improvements in more recent times have been noted. In the context of the country's weak and weakening socio-economic conditions, made worse by the Covid-19 global pandemic and the perilous state of South Africa's democracy, the imperative for higher education to respond appropriately is beyond doubt. Accordingly, the Council on Higher Education (2020) has sought renewed considerations on the conceptualisation, design, development and implementation of community engagement programmes in universities. In this context, the chapter will reimagine community engagement for the cultivation of humanity by demonstrating the appropriateness of an integral education and Ubuntu approach which is undergirded by holism and humanism. This conception is compatible with community engagement in its alignment with the philosophies of holism and humanism, while also incorporating rationalism and pragmatism through its relationship with teaching and learning and engaged research. The reimagined paradigm thus has the potential, alongside educational intellectual development, to cultivate an awareness

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that human beings are interconnected to all in the world and the cosmos and that all actions impact everything in the universe.

Key words: *Community engagement; humanity; integral education; Ubuntu; holism; humanism*

6.1 Introduction

The concept of community engagement in South African higher education institutions (HEIs) or engagement with the communities associated with the institution has manifested in various guises since it was first mooted. The African National Congress' Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP, 1994), intended to redress the inequalities of the colonial and apartheid legacies, and included a higher education transformation plan. Indeed, as one of the producers and disseminators of knowledge, the sector was strategically positioned to play a significant role in unravelling the structural problems of apartheid (Padayachee et al., 2021). Fundamental to this responsibility was the transformation of the higher education system itself "to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs, and to respond to new realities and opportunities" (Department of Education, 1997, p. 1). More explicitly the same White Paper stated, "[I]t 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" (p. 3). 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 and development of the country (Thomson et al., 2011).

Accordingly, it identified community engagement – community/university partnerships – as an integral and core part of higher education to transform the racially divided institutions (Department of Education, 1997) and initiate the process of narrowing the historical gap between universities and communities. Amongst the range of community engagement (CE) imperatives, universities had to "demonstrate social responsibility ... and their commitment to the common good by making available expertise and

infrastructure for community service programmes" (Department of Education, 1997, p. 11). Plainly, at the heart of this challenge to universities, was the urgency to give effect to CE programmes and, arguably, develop a sense of shared solidarity and interconnectedness among institutions of higher education and connected communities in support of the democratic project.

Initially, assimilation into the functioning of HEIs was sluggish in comparison to the established functions of teaching and research. According to Bender (2008), CE was regarded as add-on acts of benevolence and, therefore, nonessential. Equally, a Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) study indicated that many of the CE initiatives conducted by universities had been of an ad hoc nature, fragmented and unconnected to the academic project (Department for Higher Education and Training, 2013). Proposing further clarity on the position, Butin (2007), argues that CE was not being properly framed pedagogically, politically and institutionally. Pedagogically, CE has been designed, and implemented, as an extra-curricular activity which students and academics participate in as additions to their core academic functions. Politically, CE is presumed to be synonymous with a liberal and activist worldview and unpopular with those who position themselves within the non-liberal and non-activist schools of thought, and institutionally, it is seen as an overarching institutional programme that does not find much expression at the department or discipline level. Overall, CE appeared to be relegated to the *backwaters* of functionality at HEIs.

Despite these grim earlier perspectives on the practice of CE in South African HEIs, Bhagwan (2017) argues and correctly so, that CE is becoming recognised as a tool for transforming pedagogy and introducing a more democratic and socially just higher education system inclined towards the public good. Significantly, the release of the National Plan for Post-School Education and Training (NPPSET) 2021-2030 (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2021), provided some direction on the implementation of CE. It suggested that CE should be integrated into teaching, learning and research to build civic consciousness and critical citizenship among the students, staff and the communities with which institutions engage. Furthermore, the NPPSET recommends further

research into the concept and practice of CE provincially, nationally and internationally. This chapter recognises the greater and growing awareness of the potential of CE as a mechanism for meaningful social transformation. It therefore proposes that CE for the cultivation of humanity should apply an integral education (IE) and Ubuntu approach, enabling the development of a sense of wholeness and connection with self, community, society, and the world. In this way, students will establish an intuitive disposition to be compassionate, empathetic and intrinsically connected to community at large.

This conceptual chapter will explore the notion of cultivating humanity for the practice of CE in HEIs in South Africa in the context of weak and weakening socio-economic conditions. It will demonstrate that an IE and Ubuntu approach is compatible with CE generally, and with this humane and compassionate form of CE, particularly. Overall, the chapter reimagines CE in higher education for the cultivation of humanity through the application of an IE and Ubuntu approach. Notwithstanding the South African focus, it has relevance to countries in the African region and some countries of the Global South and the Global North.

Following this introduction, the chapter will contextualise the current South African challenges to illustrate the urgency to take action. Then the cultivation of humanity based on Nussbaum's conceptual framework is discussed in the context of participatory democracy. An interpretation of an IE and Ubuntu approach being proposed follows, thereafter, the philosophical underpinnings of this paradigm. Apropos to this, the proposal to reimagine CE is presented and followed by a consolidation in the conclusion.

6.2 South African Context

South Africa's post-apartheid era challenges have been immense, largely as a result of overcoming the aftermath of colonial and apartheid exploitation. Predictably, the country remains riddled with the degradations of poverty, inequality, underdevelopment, unemployment, violence, and more. Past all this, Covid-19 appeared, changing our world in many ways and

disproportionately impacting the socially and economically marginalised or those experiencing other kinds of vulnerability or disadvantage (Schiavo, 2021). In the context of South Africa particularly, the crisis of Covid-19 was on a scale not seen for several generations. The true impact manifested not just on physical health, but was also reflected in jobs lost, education learning losses, childcare and nutrition deficits, and poorer mental health outcomes, among others (Daniels & Casale, 2022). The sum of this resulted in a national sense of profound loss and heightened precarity.

In addition, the July 2021 insurrection propelled by former President Zuma's imprisonment and embodied in acts of protest, violence, looting, and other treasonable acts impacting vital services (SAHRC Report, 2024), exposed a fragile democracy which has shown little change for the millions of the intergenerational poor, dispossessed and marginalised. According to Von Holdt (2013), South Africa wavers between the persistence of an exclusionary socio-economic structure marked by deep poverty and extreme inequality, and the symbolic and institutional rupture presented by the transition to democracy. The resultant highly unstable social order, characterised by old and new patterns of violence, can be construed as violent democracy. Moreover, these social and economic conditions giving rise to heightened contestations seem unlikely to change or improve in the near future.

In view of these and worsening socio-economic realities confronting our society, Weerts and Sandman (2008), argue that it is incumbent on universities to play the role of counterbalancing dominant and hegemonic forces in society. This must include oppressive and unjust political systems, market forces, belief systems, societal norms and values. In this way, universities assume the role of protecting vulnerable people from such forces, identifying and seeking solutions to other challenges confronting communities, and championing social causes broadly. This "social" relational approach has been popular among universities in developing countries towards making it integral to their core mandates (Mugabi, 2014, as cited in Saidi & Boti, 2023 p. 74). It resonates with the rationale for the introduction of CE in HEIs post-democracy. Accordingly, contribution to the socio-economic development of local communities and the inculcation of social and civic responsibility in students will be enabled. The chapter argues that these

responsibilities in the South African context involves the cultivation of humanity which can be achieved through the application of an IE and Ubuntu approach.

6.3 Cultivating Humanity

As noted in the previous chapters, in *Cultivating Humanity*, Nussbaum posits three capacities essential to the cultivation of humanity. First, "critical examination of oneself and one's traditions", second, "an ability to see themselves not simply as citizens of some local region or group but also, and above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern" and third: "narrative imagination" meaning, "the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have" (Nussbaum, 1998, pp. 9–11). In sum, critical reflection, social solidarity, interconnectedness and empathy for democratic citizenship.

Although Nussbaum's argument is in defence of gender, cultural and African-American studies in higher education, its relevance to liberal education generally is apparent. This is particularly true in the perception of education designed to give students access to advantageous places in society and maintaining a class position rather than acting for the good of the whole (Orange, 1999). Clearly, this sense of disengagement is counterintuitive to participatory democracy, particularly in South Africa. The historical racial discrimination, economic marginalisation and oppression of black people, as well as the higher education transformation and redress mandate, demands collective well-being and justice-oriented action. The White Paper (1997) on the transformation in higher education identified several related purposes of HEIs in the then new and still fragile democracy, including contribution to the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens. Accordingly, it mandated the creation of a new system of higher education to support a democratic nation and a culture of human rights, which in purpose and spirit are not dissimilar to Nussbaum's capacities for cultivating humanity.

The development of social responsibility and civic participation that should underpin meaningful participation in a democracy must include the cultivation of humanity, creating humane and responsible citizens who value themselves and others with equal respect, to the extent that all actions are primarily motivated by concern for the common good. Waghid (2004) argues that members in a democracy usually value, claim and defend their individual freedom of choice determined by their personal value choices, but they ought to equally value a society where there is adherence to the common good. Thus, the challenge facing democracies, including South Africa, is where individuals pursue their self-interest without regard for the common good, a condition becoming increasingly patent in current times.

The imperative, therefore, is the cultivation of humanity which, according to Keeling (2020), has become a pressing challenge in higher education. To have humanity is to be humane, to care, to notice and respond to others thoughtfully and with kindness (Keeling, 2020). This value system based on an ethic of collective well-being is unequivocally critical to the practice of CE in South African HEIs. In this context, as this chapter posits, an IE and Ubuntu approach to CE practice provides for the development and evolution of the self within the collective and, as such, would be more suitable to the purpose of promoting a socially responsible, compassionate and empathetic society for democratic South Africa.

6.4 Integral Education and Ubuntu Approach

6.4.1 Integral Education

Integral education was developed in the early twentieth century by Indian philosopher, sage and revolutionary, Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950). He believed that the mental capacities of human beings far exceeded their spiritual, emotional, and physical development, and the size and complexities of emerging civilisations far surpassed the capabilities of the educated populace. Creating an integral model of education was one of his responses to this crisis. Fundamental to this approach is the acknowledgement that: (i) human beings have many dimensions to their wholeness- the physical, emotional/vital, mental, and spiritual/psychic-and the awareness and

integration of these dimensions are essential to education; (ii) there is an interrelatedness that extends to all processes of life and all areas of knowledge, and (iii) self-knowledge and knowledge of the world are equally important educational aims (Adams, 2006). In essence, education must include and integrate the multidimensionality of humans, incorporate the correlation between experience and knowledge and assign equal value to self-knowledge and understanding the world.

In contrast, modern Western education 'mainstream', 'conventional' or 'traditional' forms tend to focus on the acquisition of knowledge, development of cognitive skills and individual achievement. This form of education does not accommodate the independent maturation of the body, the instincts, and the heart, whereas 'alternative', 'holistic' and 'transformative' education models include many aspects of an individual such as the emotional, moral, interpersonal, cultural and spiritual (Esbjörn-Hargens 2011), thereby enabling the development of other critical human dimensions for completeness of being. The primary goal of holistic IE is the fullest possible development of students' self-actualisation. This development includes higher levels of consciousness through educational intellectual development, while also cultivating their relationship with others in society (White, 2007). Aurobindo emphasised that without moral and emotional development, mental development becomes harmful to human progress. Accordingly, the heart should be so developed as to show love, empathy and consideration for all living beings (Singh, 2012).

An integral and unitive education addresses the head as well as the heart, the body and the spirit, therefore it is an education of the whole person (Partho, 2007). This approach enables the development and evolution of the self within the collective and is, therefore, consistent with the foundational and living principles of Ubuntu.

6.4.2 Ubuntu

Ubuntu has its roots in African traditional society and philosophy and means humanness, or the quality of being human. It espouses the ideal of interconnectedness among people. Gade (2011), describes Ubuntu, as it was understood through different historical periods, as a human quality,

connected to a philosophy or an ethic, as African humanism and as a worldview. As a human quality, Ubuntu speaks of humanity and its goodness.

On the whole, Ubuntu remains a value system that generates amongst its adherents a strong sense of self and community to engender compassionate, harmonious and respectful coexistence. This sense of interdependence is captured in "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Teffo,1999, p. 154). The White Paper for Social Welfare (Department of Social Development, 1997, p. 12) defines the application of Ubuntu in the following way:

> The principle of caring for each other's well-being will be promoted, and a spirit of mutual support fostered. Each individual's humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through a recognition of the individual's humanity. Ubuntu means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being.

At the heart of this definition are the values of social responsibility and civic participation, captured in "caring for each other's well-being", "spirit of mutual support", "humanity", "relationship", "people are people through other people", "rights and the responsibilities", and "individual and societal well-being" (Department of Social Development, 1997, p.12). The guiding principles of Ubuntu espoused in this policy document, underpinned by humane interconnectedness, express a fundamental respect for the rights of others and a deep allegiance to the collective identity, the core principles for participatory democracy.

Similarly, Mabovula (2011) highlights this ethic in his contention that Ubuntu serves to regulate the exercise of individual rights by emphasising sharing and co-responsibility and the mutual and reciprocal enjoyment of rights by all. This integrated way of life, reflecting the fundamental principles of a shared responsibility and social solidarity-which constitute the essence of humanity-necessitates the integration of the inner qualities of human life with the outer physical, social world.

The education system, according to Nkondo (2007), has to play a more effective role in the political, social, and economic re-ordering of the state and society. As such, education needs to articulate a methodology for

developing an Ubuntu social disposition. More pointedly, HEIs in South Africa have a critical role to play in nurturing the Ubuntu value system alongside the 'business' of knowledge transmission. An Ubuntu-oriented framework could be the engine and elixir for transformation, particularly if a clear methodology existed for the integration of its principles into the national system of education and training. Equally, Ntuli (2002) maintains that traditional African educational models have long been eroded through the successive eras of colonialism and apartheid. In present times, these could be instructive to HEIs in South Africa in developing appropriate and relevant programmes that focus on developing in young people compassionate, harmonious and respectful coexistence.

The social system undergirding the IE approach built upon an interconnected humanity is to ensure the maximum development of the individual's character within a collective, a vision shared with that of Ubuntu, which includes caring for one another's well-being in the spirit of mutual and reciprocal support. This distinct compatibility between IE and Ubuntu, it is argued, presents the possibility of reimagining the practice of community engagement in HEIs in South Africa for the cultivation of humanity.

6.5 Philosophical Underpinnings

The main philosophical concepts that guide the argument presented in this chapter are, respectively, integral education's holism and Ubuntu's African humanism, which converge closely as worldviews that advance the whole and complete development of human beings, where the self finds oneness with all around for interconnected and interdependent relationships towards social harmony. Both life systems see the world and human beings as an integrated whole rather than a disassociated collection of parts.

6.5.1 Holism

Holism is described as the science of the whole (Járos, 2002). According to this worldview, the universe is a seamless whole, evolving over aeons of cosmic time, and life within it is an intimate web of relations, and nothing is independent of any other thing (Laszlo, 2001). One of the most crucial

concepts in holism is the way parts change when they interact with each other and become incorporated into a whole; the sum of the parts is already different because the parts themselves change. The implication of this is that whenever individuals become associated with others and a larger whole (community or society) there is a need for individual change according to the requirements of the whole, but not to the extent of a loss of personal identity (Laszlo, 2001). Similarly, according to Kotze and Kotze (1997), an integral paradigm is based on the understanding that the nature and meaning of the whole context is more and other than those of its constituent parts (its dimensions with its various contextual elements). Meaning cannot be given to the whole by aggregating its parts, thus the integral approach to education is essential. If the world is perceived as a multiplicity of dimensions to be studied in separate and neatly demarcated subjects and specialisation fields, the context is fragmented and there is no relation to people. Alienation and disengagement are potential consequences of this fragmentation. Knowledge of the holistic context is therefore essential.

Aurobindean Perspective on Holism

The principle of individual change aligns with Sri Aurobindo's practice of Yoga and, through it, his development of a philosophy of complete affirmation (Chaudhuri, 1972). Yoga is a methodised effort towards self-perfection by the expression of one's latent potentials and a union of the human individual with the universal and transcendent existence (Joshi, n.d.). Integral Yoga, from which integral education derives, is a manifestation of a higher level of consciousness, and seeks to change the inner-self (psyche) and outer-life (social disposition), aligning with the substance of holism in which parts change when they become incorporated into a whole. Overall, his system of yoga was a synthesis of Eastern spirituality, which focuses on the inner person and the psyche, with Western psychology, which focuses on the outer personality and social behaviour. Aurobindo believed that Hindu spirituality and meditative yoga would augment his new vision of political thought, social work, and the quest for self-realisation as interconnected activities (White, 2007). Hence, these individual actions would be transformed and elevated and viewed not as separate domains but as interconnected activities for a higher evolutionary purpose in the service of humankind.

Aurobindo's conception of education was as an instrument for the true working of the spirit in the mind and body of the individual, the nation and of all of humanity. Such an education would make its central objective the growth of the soul and its powers and possibilities for the individual. Concurrently, the nation would focus on the preservation, strengthening and enrichment of the culture and its virtue, and raise both into powers of life. The fundamental concept underlying IE is the inextricable link between education and the individual's highest objective, the awakening and development of the spiritual being (Aurobindo, 1990, as cited in Raina, 2002). His way of defining and expressing the spiritual, however, included no dogma, worship, or obeisance that might be identified as religious (Adams, 2006). Instead, the spiritual is an inner aspiration to know, to feel, to enter into contact with the greater reality. Spiritual values associated with seeking the non-material or incorporeal are central values and must, therefore, govern and guide all the values and aspects of education. In the spiritual life, there is no sense of the separate self, rather finding oneness with all around, contrary to the material life that is individualistic and disintegrative (Aurobindo, 1990, as cited in Raina, 2002).

Limitations of Modern Education

Holistic thinkers hold to the belief that the industrial\technical age and its particular education paradigm have almost completely obscured the central importance of the spiritual qualities and possibilities of human life in favour of superficial materialistic pursuits (Miller, 1997). Equally, this deeper sense of self towards the attainment of a higher consciousness or self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943) is discernible in the guiding principles of an IE approach and an Ubuntu value system. The holistic worldview acknowledges and recognises the inner human qualities, such as mind, emotion, creativity, imagination, compassion, a sense of wonder and reverence, and the urge for self-realisation, as vital aspects of human existence. As a spiritual worldview, it treasures the more subtle, deeply personal qualities that are potential in all persons, and which are essential for true personal fulfilment and social harmony (Miller, 1997).

Modern education, however, does not enable the autonomous maturation of the body, the instincts and the heart, which can only participate in an inquiry process when externally guided. Moreover, after many generations of mind-

centred life and education, these dimensions are undeveloped, making them appear epistemically barren. Creating spaces for these human dimensions to achieve epistemic competence and autonomous maturation is needed. In this way, equality with the rational mind to participate in co-creating a truly integral process of inquiry and learning is enabled. Intrinsically, IE aims at the multidimensional inquiry and the collaborative construction of knowledge (Gardner, 1993), vital components for a community-university framework of engagement based on the cultivation of humanity.

6.5.2 African Humanism

Liberal humanism, which differs from African humanism, is a cultural position premised on the 'essential decency' of human beings. It promotes democracy, individualism, tolerance, rationality and "civilised values" (Dupuis & Hall, 2002, as cited in Rwodzi, 2014, p. 1916). Describing liberal humanism as insular and elitist, Novack (1973), argues that it is not a philosophy of the working class. Its teachings are not founded on the facts of economic life but on supposedly universal ethical standards, which are binding on all people based on their humanity. As such, this perspective seems to resemble abstract individualism upon which the ideology of bourgeois democracy rests, decidedly different from the participatory model of democracy inherent in African humanism.

Modern African humanism, according to Gordon (2008, as cited in Isaac, 2012, p. 92), emerged from Africa's response to colonisation, conquests, and the slave trade, and contains elements of Christian and secular liberal values. Thus, African humanism, including the political perspective of African socialism, is identified with movements of national independence and development of the collective African identity. The broader base of African humanism and socialism is used to underscore the values of a common African heritage. Its primary purpose is to unite in the struggle for freedom from colonialism and it includes the ideological works of Franz Fanon and the inspiration of national leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Leopold Senghor and Kenneth Kaunda (Bell, 2002). Therefore, African humanism has its roots in its peoples' struggles for freedom and independence. It is imbued with revolutionary fervour as a grassroots movement to unify and mobilise against oppressive forces and is as a result

different from the more intellectual liberal humanism associated with the West.

Within this framework, Ubuntu, an African humanistic philosophy as indicated, aims to provide a unifying vision of community. While the term Ubuntu is of Southern African origin, the phenomenon contains a wider African reality enshrined in African humanism, communalism, and what Nkrumah (1964) calls 'consciencism'. Like most fundamental concepts, however, Ubuntu defies a single definition or characterisation. Consequently, it has been variously equated with African communalism or African humanism, and consistent with those that promote interconnectedness and cohesion within communities.

Ubuntu is imbued with prescriptive senses to the effect that morally one should support the community in certain ways. Shutte (2001), sums up the basics of the ethic as a deep moral obligation to become more fully human which entails entering progressively deeper into a community with others. Morality, therefore, is through a process of integration into the community: "what is morally good is what brings dignity, respect, contentment, and prosperity to others, self, and the community at large" (Wiredu, 1980). This further coheres with the concept of holism, when parts change to 'become incorporated into a whole' (Laszlo, 2001). Ubuntu's sense of communalism and co-existence is founded on a societal bond that links community members. In this regard, More (2004), argues that fundamental to African political philosophy and ontology is the view that an individual is not a human being except as he or she constitutes part of a social order. This is a conception of the self as intrinsically linked to, and forming a part of, the community. In this communal orientation, the self is dependent on other selves and is defined through its relationships to other selves.

African humanism is different from the Western classical notion of humanism which stresses a particular concept of education and civilisation, premised on Greek ideas such as a balance of the arts and sciences, cultivation of individual values, and the exercise of rational self-control, accordant with the fundamental tenets of Nussbaum's argument in *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (1997). It places a premium on acquired individual skills and favours a social

and political system that encourages individual freedom and civil rights (Bell, 2002). Moreover, humanism, according to Gaylard (2004), has been criticised for assuming a universal shared humanity that is actually rooted in European norms and values, thereby reflecting cultural bias and contributing to the justification of colonialism. In other words, Enlightenment man took his norms and values as universal. Further, Fanon argued against a common vision of humanity between Africans and Europeans based on their (Europeans) superiority in relation to the inferiority (Africans) of human beings they colonise, doubting any theoretical basis for universal humanism (Fashina, 1998, as cited in Hallen, 2004, p. 132). Notwithstanding, the focus on African humanism's mutual and reciprocal relationship with individuality and communality remains instructive to the development of caring, compassionate and socially responsible individuals within a collective.

6.6 Reimagining Community Engagement

6.6.1 Policy Imperatives

The value and contribution of the higher education sector to the general redress and transformation plan for democratic South Africa are without doubt. Specifically, the 1997 White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education (Department of Education, 1997), as noted, called for a new system of higher education to support and nurture the new democracy based on a culture of social justice and human rights through appropriate educational programmes and practices for developing social responsibility. Included in this mandate is the understanding that HEIs contribute to the socio-economic development of local communities and to inculcate social and civic responsibility in students. Hence, the inclusion of CE with teaching and research, and further supplementing these two functions with a deeper sense of context, locality and application in HEIs (Department of Education, 1997). This resolution was reinforced and elucidated in the White Paper for Post School Education and Training (WPPSET) (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2014, p. 39):

> community engagement, in its various forms-socially responsive research, partnerships with civil society organisations, formal learning programmes that engage students in community work as a formal part of their academic programmes, and many other formal and informal aspects of academic work-has become a part of the work of universities in South Africa.

6.6.2 Alternative Education Capability

Community engagement is acknowledged as one of the means for HEIs in South Africa to respond to the challenge of creating an academic learning environment that targets equally the developmental and the transformational needs of students and society in a unique and decisive way. Notwithstanding, this chapter argues that considering the fragmented teaching practices and administrative structures that characterise 'mainstream' higher education, institutions may be inadequate to the task. According to the Kellogg's Commission report (1999), HEIs are inflexibly driven by disciplinary needs and concepts of excellence grounded in peer review, rankings, and global metrics. Consequently, they have lost sight of their institutional mission to address the contemporary multidisciplinary problems of the real world. Departments are self-contained silos, frequently bearing little relationship to the challenges facing our society.

In this context, an alternative and holistic IE and Ubuntu approach that emphasises unity in all forms to educate the whole person (personal) and about the total human situation (knowledge) is proposed. Such an approach to education in a time of great fragmentation envisions the possibility of enacting a more humane, pluralistic, and sustainable world, producing caring and compassionate graduates sensitised to the needs of communities and society. This is in contrast to the general current practice of emphasising education for the job market and churning out graduates who may be unprepared to engage with today's key issues or disassociated from these issues. It is imperative, therefore, for an education paradigm change that innately accommodates the focus on the pressing problems of society and communities. This calls for reimagining mainstream higher education and, within it, the practice of community engagement for the cultivation of humanity. CE in higher education is the appropriate starting point for the application of a holistic IE and Ubuntu for the cultivation of humanity in

students, academics and communities. While the framework of the proposed model falls outside the scope of this paper, the concept is presented.

6.6.3 Integral Education and Ubuntu Model

An IE and Ubuntu paradigm applied to CE enables the physical, emotional, cognitive, spiritual and social development of individuals and communities in harmonious, balanced and integrated ways. Currently, our education system focuses mainly on preparation for the material life and not on the holistic development of a human being. Holistic human development promotes wisdom, compassion and trust, and profound love and reverence for life in all its expressions; the essential qualities for the cultivation of humanity. When these qualities are developed, natural self-discipline and social responsibility arise out of a sense of universal values and harmony.

The visionary and holistic IE approach offered by Sri Aurobindo focuses on a progressive advancement of self-realisation, recognising the individual nature, multi-dimensionality, and interrelatedness of human beings. In aligning these ideals with teaching and learning, innovative guidelines toward the formulation of whole-person- centred progressive education results, placing great emphasis on individual, global, and spiritual worldviews that have been and remain largely absent in Western education (Zulaski, 2017). Humanity is steered in the direction of a new way of being on earth by turning one's inner sources of knowledge and wisdom towards oneness and harmony, and away from division and fragmentation. This leads to an awareness that human beings are not only individuals, but are interconnected, interdependent and interrelated to everyone and everything, in the world and in the cosmos, and that all actions impact everything around us.

Similarly, Ubuntu helps us to understand that to be human means to care for oneself, others and nature (Le Grange, 2012). The educator's role is to nurture each individual's rational potential, enabling their unique development while fostering responsibility toward a diverse and pluralistic world (Biesta, 2006). Ubuntu is central to this concept of education, because it encompasses a state of being that develops in relationship with other human beings and the world (Le Grange, 2012; Letseka, 2012). Educating students for Ubuntu is wholly essential to address the social and cultural challenges of present-day

South Africa, which is typically marked by absence of a shared moral discourse (Morrow, 2007; Letseka, 2013). In fact, education systems have neglected this African philosophy of life because of the focus on materialistic and instrumental value systems (Ntseane, 2012).

The Department of Education report *Values, Education and Democracy* (2000), proposes that education should equip students with values such as honesty, integrity, tolerance, diligence, responsibility, compassion, altruism, justice and respect, intrinsically aligned to the cultivation of humanity. Importantly, Ubuntu was one of ten values identified in South Africa's *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* (Department of Education, 2001) in order to find expression in post-apartheid curriculum frameworks for general education and training (GET) and tertiary vocational education and training (TVET). The rationale was to re-establish, through education, values that have become eroded as a result of centuries of colonialism and decades of apartheid (Le Grange, 2012). Consequently, Ubuntu has become a concept with particular significance in the building of a democracy (Mabovula, 2011; Letseka, 2012,), although Letseka (2013) cautions that exposure to what the rest of the world has to offer should be included to avoid the possibility of education for Ubuntu in the context of citizenship being too simplistic and narrow-minded.

The discernible alignment and synergy between the worldviews of both IE and Ubuntu, undergirded by the unified philosophies of holism and humanism, indicate the potential for a reimagined approach to CE for the cultivation of humanity. This approach, grounded in both consciousness and *consciencism* is, arguably, a unique opportunity to refocus the current direction of mainstream systems of education to a system with equal educational intellectual development and connections with self, community, society, and the world, for humane, socially responsible and constructively critical citizens. In this context, Garlick and Palmer (2008), propose a relational ethic to underpin community engagement in higher education, and accordingly distinguish between the concepts of *being-for* and *being-with,* the latter typically associated with neo-liberal conditions which foster and favour fragmentary, momentary and occasional connections. Conversely, *being-for* enables the development of students with creative, enterprising and engaged skills, and where community needs are met

through the acts and practices of engagement between university and community. This interpersonal relationship resonates with the values and principles embedded in an IE and Ubuntu approach which is grounded in an ethic of mutualism and interconnection. Significantly, CE coheres seamlessly with the philosophical foundations of humanism and holism that underpin an IE and Ubuntu approach. At the same time, it integrates elements of rationalism and pragmatism through its orientation toward teaching, learning, and engaged research-rendering it fully congruent with this framework.

The visual representation (refer to figure 1 below) depicts the interconnection of the four principal components of this reimagined model, IE, Ubuntu, Humanity and CE, and linked conjointly by the philosophical underpinnings of humanism and holism.

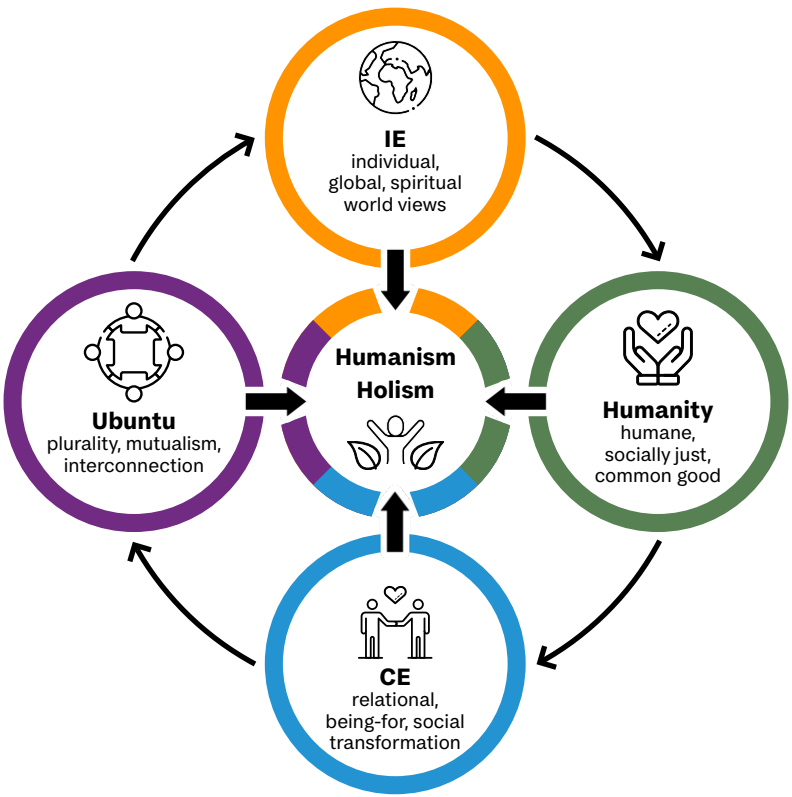


Figure 1: Visual representation of the reimagined IE & Ubuntu CE Model

6.7 Conclusion

South Africa continues to grapple with ever increasing challenges, mainly worsening socio-economic conditions, exacerbated by the Covid-19 global chaos which added a further dimension to the precarious state of societies and the world. Paradoxically, this pandemic has afforded individuals acute insight into the needs of the collective human society, necessitating a rethinking, reimagining and reinventing of their inner balance to do better both as individuals and for humanity as a whole (Sanei & Abedian, 2020). Specifically, it has compelled us to focus on the needs of our society in a completely different way, and to rethink how and what we do better as individuals, as a country and as a continent, conceivably building a citizenry of humane, committed, empathetic and socially conscious people.

While this vision resonates loudly and clearly in the legislative policy to transform HEIs in this direction, implementing these policies has been largely ineffectual, with the prospects of success without crucial changes looking bleak. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2020) advocates a rethink on CE as one of the core and visible functions in HEIs. As such, renewed consideration on the conceptualisation, design, development and implementation of CE in universities is encouraged. In this context, a reimagined CE paradigm for the cultivation of humanity should give serious consideration to an IE and Ubuntu approach, as presented in this chapter. Collectively, the values and principles embedded in this approach indicate a collaborative CE model based on relational and communal values and principles.

Individually and jointly, the IE and Ubuntu ways of life are premised on the development of the individual along natural and ethical lines toward the creation of a good society, or more specifically, a commonly shared good. Additionally, they are undergirded by the interconnectedness of human society, with the understanding that people should treat others as part of the extended human family. This approach embodies what it means to be a feeling, thinking, participatory, and conscious member of humanity, foundational principles that should guide the practice of CE in higher education, particularly in its mission of cultivating humanity.

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7. Rekindling the Love of Learning through Service-learning

| Pedro Tabensky and Lindsay Kelland

Abstract

This paper explores how critical service-learning can help to rekindle students' love of learning by reorienting their attention from an instrumental 'having mode' to an existential 'being mode' of engagement with their education. Drawing on Dewey's conception of education as intelligent growth aimed at sovereignty, and Fromm's distinction between 'having' and 'being', we situate our analysis within the Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics' IiNtetho zoBomi (isiXhosa for Conversations About Life), a community-engaged ethics course at Rhodes University. We argue that service-learning, when designed as a pedagogy of being, bridges the gap between thought and action, inviting students to experience education as a process of self-formation and the cultivation of personal sovereignty rather than as a means to certification or employment. Through reciprocal mentoring relationships with primary-school learners in local fee-exempt schools, dialogical learning, and reflective practice, students are encouraged to confront the social, psychological, and structural forces that shape their attention, values, and sense of purpose. The paper locates these pedagogical efforts within the broader context of systemic inequality, consumer capitalism, and technological distraction, which together compromise students' capacity for sustained, meaningful attention. Ultimately, we present IiNtetho zoBomi as a hopeful intervention. This concrete practice enables our students to recover the ethical and humanising potential of education by connecting their learning to life, community, and the cultivation of autonomy. While acknowledging the systemic obstacles that limit such transformation, we contend that service-learning remains a vital practice for cultivating humanity through higher education.

Key words: *Service-learning, IiNtetho zoBomi, mentoring, attention, distraction, cultivating humanity.*

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"Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all."[1]

7.1 Introduction

This collection brings together contributions that explore the role of community engagement in higher education, examining how various forms of community engagement, including service-learning, foster the cultivation of humanity, here understood as the deliberate pursuit of the ethical life. In our contribution, we explore this relationship by focusing on a service-learning course – IiNtetho zoBomi (isiXhosa for Conversations About Life) – which lies at the heart of our work at the Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics (AGCLE) in the Department of Philosophy at Rhodes University, South Africa. The conception of leadership that informs our work is personal leadership, sovereignty, or the ability to navigate one's life autonomously. We do not think we can lead others effectively unless we can lead ourselves, and self-leadership or sovereignty is an art that admits continual intelligent refinement, which requires an ongoing educative process. In its most general normative sense, education is the continual refinement of human life.

IiNtetho zoBomi (hereafter IZ) is a course in ethical leadership that hopes to engage students as whole persons. The course aims to show students that insofar as they have a stake in their sovereignty, they also have a stake in their education. We hope to show them that their education empowers them to actively shape themselves and pursue the life they want to lead upon reflection, highlighting the intimate correlation between ethics and education. Insofar as this is its aim, IZ also seeks to address deep problems in the contemporary classroom and to foster a genuine spirit of inquiry among students. Given generous funding from Allan & Gill Gray Philanthropies, we have had the freedom to develop and implement our pedagogical ideas with relatively few constraints for a decade. A central constraint we continuously encounter, however, is that the problems we are tackling are systemic, requiring a systemic approach and broad institutional buy-in – something we revisit in our closing remarks.

[1] This quote is widely attributed to Aristotle.

We explore the service-learning nature of IZ in some detail in "A Pedagogy of Being: Humanising Learning Environments in the South African Tertiary Sector" (Kelland et al., 2024). That paper responds to our dissatisfaction with the current state of higher education in South Africa and beyond. There, we consider Dewey's concerns with the thought-action dualism explored throughout his philosophical corpus, a dualism perpetuated by an excessive focus on professional capacitation to the detriment of personal growth. We also consider students' experiences of epistemic marginalisation in the South African academy as well as social trends – including precarity coupled with a consumer-capitalist ethos – that threaten their will and ability to critically engage with themselves and their world through education. We suggest that students' experiences of marginalisation cannot be explained solely in postcolonial terms. Indeed, Dewey explored a central aspect of the epistemic marginalisation students experience early on. He worried that the contemporary classroom dichotomises thought from action, the life of the mind from empirical existence. This severance is informed by a forgetfulness of what the point of thought has always been in human life, namely, to help us navigate life as intelligent beings. This is a topic explored in detail by Tabensky (2026) in his forthcoming *Ethics and Education as Practices of Freedom*. In "A Pedagogy of Being" (Kelland et al., 2024), we describe service-learning in IZ as a pedagogical response to these concerns. In particular, we suggest that service-learning in IZ, as a mode of active pedagogy, engages students as whole persons, bridging the gap between thought and action and encouraging them to bring new content into conversation with their existing pictures of reality. Service-learning, we argue, privileges Fromm's (2008) "*being mode* of relatedness to the world" through creating alternative, reciprocal learning environments, described in terms of Garrison's (2015) "Community of Inquiry". These are environments that relate the learning process to concrete action and students' lived experiences. Our hope is that, through service-learning in IZ, our students begin to experience education as a holistic journey of self-formation and the cultivation of sovereignty.

These concerns, and the pedagogical and philosophical aims underpinning IZ as a service-learning course, naturally inform what we want to say about service-learning in IZ in relation to the role of community engagement in the

cultivation of humanity. Given this, we do not want to spend too much time reiterating them here.

Our focus in this contribution is to expand on the idea that successful learning requires students to attend to their education. Importantly, specific conditions inform our students' interests and values and, ergo, what they pay attention to, typically making them reticent 'classroom-related learners' (arguably more so than in the past). Classroom attention is being compromised, in part because these conditions divert it from the central task of self-formation, or the cultivation of the self. That is, to quote Fromm (2008, pp. 24–25) once again, away from the "being mode of relatedness to the world" and towards the "having mode of existence". The "having mode" in relation to education is that of a consumer of knowledge, of someone who sees knowledge as a tool, typically to obtain lucrative employment. In contrast, the "being mode" involves weaving knowledge into the pattern of life. These two modes are not exhaustive. There is, of course, the apathetic student and the student who is reticent to learn and does not even bother shelving knowledge into separate compartments of the mind. But this is typically because they see knowledge as something inert that can (at best) be stored up and deployed in tests or when executing tasks whose value is purely extrinsic. Those in the "having mode" fail to grasp the existential role of knowledge, and fail to see how incorporating knowledge into the fabric of our lives has the expansive function of opening us up ever more fully to existence in the process of refining our own capacity for agential control, in short, for existential freedom (rather than, say, freedom from physical constraints, such as being in chains or under the yoke of a tyrant). The kind of attention brought to bear on learning from those in the "being mode" can be described as part of the care for the self. By contrast, the kind of attention brought to bear on learning by those in the "having mode" could be described as indifferent, fickle, or purely instrumental. Attention in the "having mode" tends to have the shape of an imposition, a burden that ideally should not be there.

So, how do we encourage students to attend to their formal education in the right way? Building on the suggestions already made in "A Pedagogy of Being", outlined above, we suggest that if we want our students to see their education as the existential endeavour it is, we need to redirect their patterns

of attention. Here, we suggest that service-learning provides a pedagogical means to explicitly re-engage our students' attention in the learning process through the "being mode" of relatedness. In so doing, we hope to cultivate their humanity by fostering their personal sovereignty. However, based on our experiences, we also caution against an overly optimistic view, emphasising that the forces directing our students' attention present powerful obstacles to the pedagogical, transformative, and humanising potential of service-learning.

This paper is a philosophical engagement with the topic and is not primarily focused on praxis, although praxis – grounded in philosophical insights – informs what we suggest. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, we proceed to discuss attention as such and its relationship with interests, value, and sovereignty. This discussion will help us better understand what is required for a pedagogy that fosters the "being mode" of relatedness to education. Second, we turn to a brief exploration of the conditions that inform the average student's patterns of attention, which reveal a predominant "having mode" of relatedness among our students. Finally, we return to the claim that service-learning has transformative, humanising potential. However, although service-learning offers this potential, we do not conclude the paper on an optimistic note. Not only are the distractions pulling on our students' attention real and pernicious but responding to them with the kind of systemic approach required depends on wide institutional buy-in to rethinking our traditional teaching practices, something that institutions of higher learning have often proved reticent to do on the ground.

7.2 Laying the Groundwork: On Patterns of Attention and Sovereignty

7.2.1 Attention, Value, and Education

For sound evolutionary reasons, we are naturally distractible creatures, permanently alert to new stimuli from both within and without. Much of what we discuss below is based on Lang's (2020) rich study of attention in his *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It.* Our

survival, and hence reproductive success, the evolutionary story goes, depended on our ability to detect threats that could come from any number of directions, among the thickets or overhead, and this made our ability to scan the landscape an evolutionary advantage before we managed to create protective artificial environments that shielded us to an extent from nature's onslaught. Focusing too much on one thing in an environment full of dangers would diminish our chances of survival and reproduction. However, focus was also advantageous when hunting, courting, and making tools and shelters. From an evolutionary perspective, roaming and focused attention, in the right measure and under the right circumstances, appear advantageous. However, focused attention, relative to roaming attention, tends to be effortful; it is particularly effortful when engaging in demanding tasks such as reading complex texts, rather than, say, playing a board game with friends or singing in unison around a fire, and the effort is only worthwhile if the objects of attention are valued. We do not attend to things we do not value, mostly positively but sometimes negatively, as when one homes in on a looming threat. Indeed, attention directed toward what does not interest us or what is not deemed valuable would distract us from what matters to us. We, Lindsay and Pedro, often find ourselves drifting when something is of little interest to us, and we focus with dedicated attention on what truly captures our interest or speaks to what we value. Attention, value, and interest are closely bound phenomena.

Moreover, what matters to humans is never value neutral. Trivially, we tend to care about what we value and naturally pay attention to it, while not attending to what we don't value if it does not, from our perspective, threaten or compromise what we do. Our passions and interests allow us to focus on some things and to be, of necessity, inattentive to others. We can only attend to some things because others do not call on us. Furthermore, what we value is largely context dependent. Material, ideological, and psychological constraints play no small part in determining what we care about and, hence, what we tend to attend to. A corollary of these observations is that our attention is easily manipulable (which explains the advertising industry's hold over us and its immense financial success). Thankfully, human interests vary massively among individuals, and we cannot and are not interested in everything. An individual equally interested in anything is, in fact, interested

in nothing. We could describe this phenomenon as the natural distribution of attentional loci across the human population, allowing for the rich diversity of interests that ideally enables us to contribute, through our different offerings, to the collective good.

Because attention is typically an energy-intensive resource, given what has been said above it follows that attention requires a clear rationale for engagement. However, our interests are not static and can only move in directions dictated by the allure of the object of attention. The relationship need not be strictly magnetic, although it can be.[2] The difference between average contemporary students and those who are deeply attentive to learning is not principally that one group is, on average, more attentive than the other. Instead, those we describe as deeply attentive have refined their critical capacities so that their attention patterns are less enslaved to unruly passions or prevailing social winds; that is, their attention is not easily distractible or compromised by distorting forces and stressors, allowing it to remain focused on what has value. What we are trying to say is that our students must come to appreciate *the value of dedicating themselves to their studies with a focused commitment*. They must recognise this 'must' before they can invest the psychological resources required to pay proper attention to their studies. Given this, it seems clear that one of the central aims of our teaching endeavours should be to show students the value of learning, so that they can bring their attention to bear on their studies in a focused way.

To succeed at this, we must understand how learning occurs naturally in everyday life environments – outside the industrial education models we have created, as Blum (2016) describes the contemporary formal education sector. Reified spaces, artificially constructed to fill students' heads with knowledge, are not suited to properly engaging the attention of those not naturally inclined to play in the world of abstractions. Dewey (1961) understood this clearly, which is why his educational model involves active bodily involvement, reminiscent of the apprenticeship model. Dewey's

[2] Pedro remembers his struggles with reading. However, he clearly understood this was driven by a love for knowledge and a clear conviction that much knowledge is contained in texts, so reading became worthy of his efforts and dedicated attention. He had the privilege of being brought up in an environment that valued understanding and inquiry. Few people grow up in environments like these.

model calls for a better understanding of why we wish to understand in the first place, avoiding the pitfalls of what he disparagingly refers to as "mere bookishness" (1961, p. 232) or the "sentimental indulgence of the few" (1961, p. 328), of "egoistic specialists" (1961, p. 9), or "sharps" (1961, p. 9), lacking a "social disposition" (1961, p. 9). Elsewhere, he (Dewey, 1933, p. 62) claims that,

> The gullibility of specialized scholars when out of their own lines, their extravagant habits of inference and speech, their ineptness in reaching conclusions in practical matters, their egotistical engrossment in their own subjects, are extreme examples of the bad effects of severing studies completely from their ordinary connections in life.

Most learn by grasping what is learned in relation to "their ordinary connections in life" (Dewey, 1933, p. 62). Dewey's 'sharps' are those whose intellect is placed at the service of thoughts that tend to constitute islands in the mind – severed from "their ordinary connections in life" (Dewey, 1933, p. 62) – that do not send their meaning-tendrils throughout the broader spheres of mental life and spill over into the world of action. If we conceive of knowledge as Dewey does, as needing to be connected to life, then service-learning immediately arises as an attractive way to connect knowledge to life, or, more precisely, to lived experience. This is indeed the fundamental reason we decided to incorporate service-learning into IZ.[3]

7.2.2 Education and Sovereignty

For Dewey (1961), genuine education aims at intelligent growth or the pursuit of a sovereign life. Central to the sovereign life is an understanding that our understanding opens us up to reality and allows us to live lucidly, to take authorial control over our lives. A lucid life, moreover, is a life aiming at consistency and rational unity, a life where thought, affect, and action flow from and into one another. We would fail the 'autonomy test' if our intellects pushed us in one direction, our passions in another, and our behaviour in yet another. Autonomy requires unity, and unity requires a refined intelligence that can self-regulate. The relevant unity here is complex and not univocal. It

[3] And indeed, if we consider the intimate relationship between ethics and knowledge, then serving the aims of justice by running a service-learning programme in desperately under-resourced schools becomes a very attractive proposition from a pedagogical perspective.

is the unity of someone whose word we can trust. It involves what Arendt (1978, pp. 179–193) aptly describes as the "*two-in-one*": the ability to question commitment and grasp multiple perspectives on a complex issue. It is not the univocal unity of the closed-minded.

Dewey (1997, pp. 64–65) expresses the problem of freedom relevant to our concerns succinctly:

> What has been said explains the meaning of the well-worn phrase 'self-control.' The ideal aim of education is [the] creation of [the] power of self-control. But the mere removal of external control is no guarantee for the production of self-control. It is easy to jump out of the frying-pan into the fire. It is easy, in other words, to escape one form of external control only to find oneself in another and more dangerous form of external control. Impulses and desires that are not ordered by intelligence are under the control of accidental circumstances. It may be a loss rather than a gain to escape from the control of another person only to find one's conduct dictated by immediate whim and caprice; that is, at the mercy of impulses into whose formation intelligent judgment has not entered. A person whose conduct is controlled in this way has at most only the illusion of freedom. Actually, he is directed by forces over which he has no command.

Although he does not explicitly mention attention in this passage, it is implied. Unless we manage to escape the control of internal or external forces via the cultivation of self-control, inseparable from "intelligent judgment", our attention regimes will operate slavishly. Note that Dewey was writing in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, and there, too, the ability to attend, as one ought, was grasped as a kind of achievement. Indeed, Lang (2020) explains how attention has been a challenge throughout history. Buddhist meditation, for instance, aims to develop the ability to have a say in what we attend to. It recognises, by its very existence, that the ability to deliberately rather than slavishly attend is an achievement. Even years of careful mindfulness practice will not silence the erratic rumblings that Buddhists refer to as the 'monkey mind'. Unchecked, our minds tend to drift randomly from place to place, but in fact, they are pushed hither and thither by internal forces largely shaped by social forces. Drifting largely on autopilot will lead to dread or delusion. Those who

drift through life unthinkingly are pushed around by forces over which they have little say. To be sure, those who are adrift in a sea of forces have thoughts, desires and so forth, but these are arguably not theirs in the sense that they have not been chosen or endorsed by the active engagement of an intelligence that is able, when warranted, to resist the thrust of causal forces that, unchecked, will shape minds passively in accordance with the workings of power and circumstance. Such a life cannot be said to have properly taken responsibility for itself. In this regard, it is not a sovereign life.

For Dewey, one of education's central aims is the refinement of self-control. This is another way of claiming that autonomy is one of the central aims of education. Indeed, for Dewey, and we agree, the ethical life just is the life guided by "intelligent judgment". A corollary to this view is essentially Platonic, namely, all wrongdoing is a function of blindness – of an inability to see things straight. Crooks may be 'clever' in the instrumental sense but fail to apply their cleverness to worthwhile aims and are essentially blind. "Intelligent judgment", instead of mere cleverness, is the proper exercise of our cognitive capacities.

7.3 Conditions Informing Students' Patterns of Attention: Attention and the "Having Mode" of Being

When we ask students how they feel, we typically get the same reply: tired. And the exhaustion here is accompanied by dread. In a large-scale study in the US, Gardner & Fischman (2022) reach analogous conclusions. How can it be that so many of our students, across seemingly distinct contexts, seem to be permanently exhausted, flattened, it seems, by all manner of stressors?

First, much of what happens in classrooms violates a fundamental learning principle, one underscored by Dewey and many others, including Freire (2000), hooks (1994), Blum (2016), Kohn (1999), Pink (2010), Fischman & Coleman (2022), Willingham (2021), and Ryan & Deci (2018). It is also a corollary of Fromm's "being mode". Stated minimally, we learn by incorporating the new into the pattern of the old. However, as Dewey (2001) pointed out, what tends to happen in classrooms is a dialogue between texts

that typically fails to connect with students' experiences, upon which the new must be related. This often leads to a sense that what is being taught in class is irrelevant to students' lives from their perspectives. As Blum (2016) points out, some students may thrive in environments where ideas are explored for their own sake, but not many do. And, in any case, learning in ways that connect the unknown to the already known, with lived experience, establishes a richer relationship to knowledge. This relationship fosters relevancy, a sense that what is being learned is meaningful and can be woven into the fabric of one's life.

Students' "having mode" of relatedness to their education is compounded by the fact that in South Africa, the canon comes from the places that conquered and humiliated mainstream society, an idea richly explored by the Black Consciousness tradition championed by Biko and, more broadly, by the postcolonial tradition famously inaugurated by Fanon. But one would have to be blind not to see it in operation at every level of contemporary South African society. Understandably, the provenance of most knowledge taught in South African universities tends to establish a hostile relationship with class content. Moreover, it tacitly fosters in students' minds the idea that those who have been conquered cannot produce knowledge of their own. Understandably, this often leads to resentment, reticence, and a sense that knowledge taught at university is oppressive, an extension of the colonial project. For more detailed explorations of the postcolonial dimension of our concerns, consider Kelland et al. (2024a, 2024b, and 2024c). See also Lucket et al. (2019), Boughey et al. (2021), Zembylas (2018), and Woldegiorgis (2025). Of course, this hostility is often accompanied by active resistance and protest, as South African students have exercised their agency to call into question institutions of higher learning, their institutional culture, and the pervasively Eurocentric curriculum still taught mainly within them. Students' calls for us to imagine alternative teaching practices – when they are not silenced – give us reason to continue to try to respond to these concerns.

Second, precarity, accompanied by the responsibilities that come with extended networks characteristic of South African families, is a significant stressor – most South African students, indeed most South Africans, live precarious lives. Understandably, South African students tend to come to

university less for the love of learning than for the urgent need for economic upliftment. Students are typically stressed not only about their futures but also by the pressure from home to support the family once they have attained a degree. Much pressure is placed on young adults when family hopes are placed on them, sequestering cognitive bandwidth (Mullainathan et al., 2013) and compromising attention available for studying.

This is even more understandable given the lack of diversification in the tertiary sector. The university is, as a popular cliché among students goes, 'the key to success', where 'success' is understood mainly in monetary terms, in "having" terms. However, the pool of unemployed graduates is gradually growing, placing doubt on the idea that education is 'the key'. More than motivating students to learn, economic imperatives help explain, though they do not fully account for, the pandemic of demotivation we witness in the South African classroom. To those seeking education for economic upliftment, what matters above all is certification ("having") rather than genuine learning. The certification ethos promotes minimal engagement (Kohn, 1999; Pink, 2010). Rather than excelling, passing is the bar when all or almost all that matters is obtaining a degree to increase one's (and one's family's) chances of financial security.

Third, we cannot fully explain what is happening in South African universities without considering both contemporary global trends and regional particularities. For instance, it is also arguably the case that, globally, teenagers and young adults, and probably not only they, as evidenced by Graeber's (2019) *Bullshit Jobs*, are experiencing a sense of dread due to the prospect of meaningless employment. The world of work, which occupies approximately a third of an employed person's life, is increasingly meaningless, work that adds little value to existence and saps away precious time that could be used for meaningful activities, such as spending time with loved ones. Of the two remaining thirds, one is used up by sleeping, and the remaining third is increasingly occupied by "distractions", often in the form of rabid consumption, or daydreams about consumption, helped along by the hypnotic allure of portable screens. When Pedro asks students why they want to work, they tell him they want to earn a salary. The corollary is that, if one could earn a good income without working, that would be more desirable than the dread of meaningless employment. We speculate

that many of our students recognise that their relationship to work is purely instrumental. That is, they understand that they will be selling (that is, sacrificing) a significant portion of their lives for profit. The view that work should involve contributing positively to human life is not a common perspective. So, students are typically caught between two unappealing prospects: unemployment or the dread of 'bullshit' work. This must surely be a great source of anxiety and a significant drain on bandwidth (Mullainathan et al., 2013) when working towards this future.

In addition, Gardner & Fischman's (2022) benchmark study shows that mental illness is on the rise on campuses in the US. Similar studies, primarily in Europe, reach analogous conclusions. Large-scale studies of this sort in South Africa would help us gain more clarity about the demotivation pandemic we find in the South African tertiary sector. There are likely multiple reasons for this rise, including the pressure universities place on students, high levels of indebtedness, social media, and the erosion of face-to-face relationships that comes with the overwhelming force of this communication medium. Some, including Haidt (2024) and Twenge (2023), argue that social media is the primary cause of the problem. Others, such as Lang (2020), disagree to some extent. However, we are not aware of any studies that unambiguously praise the role of social media in people's lives or consider its net effect to be positive. Our portable devices are the products of multi-billion-dollar research on how to rob people's attention and capitalise on our roaming, addiction-prone minds. Capturing people's attention is hugely profitable. However, as Lang (2020) argues, the attention industry can only rake in the billions because we are inherently distractible animals.

The psychological malaise affecting students where systematic studies have been conducted also affects students elsewhere, and South Africa is no exception. However, remember that being distracted implies that one is attending to something, albeit not to things that distracted individuals find of little value. The ease of social media scrolling and the seemingly insatiable hedonic bursts such scrolling tends to produce may feed the "monkey mind", but there is insufficient evidence to suggest long-term harm to the faculty of attention. The damage occurs because this technology fosters passive acquiescence, which undermines sovereignty. Students devote focused attention to tasks such as engaging in friendly conversation, watching

movies, playing board or video games, or reading for fun. We could add that most students are happy to put the effort into what interests them. To be sure, many of the things we attend to are not taxing, so attending to them in these cases is easy. Untaxed attention, however, is not typically the kind that leads to growth. Instead, it is what we could roughly characterise as entertainment attention. But we must be careful not to be too quick to dichotomise here, for some growth-promoting activities can be deeply entertaining.

In many cases, learning can be both taxing and enjoyable, but this is not typically the case in the contemporary classroom. Not for average students, at any rate. In class, students often seem bored out of their wits. This appears to be the case regardless of how exciting or relevant a course may seem to the lecturers. And one reason for this is that what is covered in class is neither entertaining to students nor, in their eyes, relevant to their lives beyond the remote instrumental gains that may accrue from acquiring a degree. Degree hunting is not a good motive to excel, as discussed by Kohn (1999). Mediocrity is good enough when the primary aim is not to learn but to have. Imagine how dreadful it must be for students to spend most of their waking hours performing arduous tasks when, for reasons expressed above, they have very little interest in the knowledge project, indeed not the knowledge project embodied in tertiary education.

Unless universities can help students unlearn and recognise the pernicious effects of what could be described as techno-consumer capitalism, universities will continue to operate as places of dread for far too many of our students. Students continuously tell us through their absences, their use of portable devices in class, and their tendency to walk out of class at any point that little of value is being offered to them. As teachers, we can start making amends by taking the classroom out of the proverbial ivory tower of what appear to be inane abstractions for students and connecting what is taught in class with our students' lived experiences. And it is by creating a bridge to life that service-learning can do its best work. Note that what is being underscored here is the epistemic role of service-learning.

7.4 On Service-Learning in IZ as Redirecting Attention to the "Being Mode"

In the introduction, we claimed that IZ lies at the heart of our work at the AGCLE – it exists at the nexus of our research, teaching, and community engagement. We also highlighted that the picture of leadership underpinning our work, and IZ, is self-leadership or sovereignty, which, following Dewey, we consider an art requiring continual intelligent refinement. IZ is designed around dialogical and experiential learning activities and encounters. It is available to all students at Rhodes University. It is intended to promote the value of ethical living in all our students, where being ethical, we believe, is a function of lucidity and the sovereignty or ability to lead the self that comes with clear vision. IZ students explore the relationship between education, ethics, and personal freedom, as well as the psychological and structural forces that influence their behaviour, both in conversation and in action, to develop their ability to perceive themselves, others, and social reality clearly.

It is precisely because of these aims that IZ is designed as a critical service-learning course – a course in which community engagement is embedded within and serves the ends of both the curriculum and the community. Unlike what has now been dubbed early, traditional approaches to service-learning, arguably informed by the deficit model and reinforcing the idea that knowledge and expertise are located within the academy and are charitably communicated to the community, students in IZ are encouraged to engage critically with their context to understand the impact of broader societal concerns in reproducing the needs that they serve. Critical service-learning has an explicit orientation towards social justice. Reciprocity is encouraged in relationships between students and learners, and solidarity, rather than charity, is the driving motivation behind the activities they engage in together (Mitchell, 2008).

Service-learning in IZ focuses students' attention on the local education sector, specifically on learner literacy, a significant issue in our country that our partner schools identified as a pressing need. Students develop one-on-one tutoring and mentoring relationships with learners in Grades 5 to 7 at two local primary schools, drawing on a collection of reading materials we

have built over time that speaks directly to what they are learning in IZ and to the learners' context. The centre's service-learning specialist for the first decade of its existence, Mapula Maponya, worked tirelessly to align our growing collection of service-learning books with the content and questions raised in the course and at the schools where our students mentor. This alignment enables our students to take their learning outside the classroom and explore the central themes of IZ with their mentees, including the relationship between education, ethics, and personal freedom, thereby explicitly connecting course content to their interactions with their mentees. In so doing, service-learning in IZ directly responds to the gap between thought and action and enables our students to incorporate knowledge into the fabric of their lives more effectively. This alignment also enriches the learners' life-orientation curriculum and fosters their self-formation, personal freedom, and, hopefully, their love of learning and literacy.

The transformative potential of critical service-learning, both in terms of individual self-awareness and broader social awareness, fits neatly with our aims and the learning outcomes of the course; including an understanding of the importance of ethics to students' lives, a critical awareness of who they are and their position and role in transforming their context, an increased awareness of structural and psychological obstacles to their personal freedom, and an ability to apply this understanding to illuminate their experiences and context. Service-learning offers us a way to connect with and engage our students as whole persons in this learning process, allowing for the natural movements we encounter in life between the different spheres of mental life – from the most abstract to the most concrete – and action. Action, moreover, with others. This last qualification is important because what happens in our heads cannot be separated, except artificially, from our modes of being with others. As Garrison (2016, p. 11) reminds us, we are "invariably socially situated". This practical engagement with others in the service-learning process engages students as individuals among others in a world that poses challenges. And by engaging with others for the sake of causes that transcend the scope of their immediate everyday concerns, students enter a domain of meaning that is hard to resist and that has the potential to draw their attention and bestow clarity of purpose on the growth trajectory we call education. Ultimately, the suggestion we are making here

is modest. If service-learning has the potential described above, it must also have the potential to redirect students' attention to the role of education in cultivating the self or cultivating sovereignty.

When our students first arrive at the schools we work with, they are placed in small groups, and their group is paired with a group of learners. The anticipation of both students and learners is palpable during this pairing process; they stare across at each other, separated by the initial distance that always exists when a group of outsiders arrives in a space. This is the learners' space, and our students pour out of the taxis and cluster in a growing body around the vehicles, awaiting instructions. These initial groups – and the distance between our students and the learners – dissolve over the ensuing weeks as activities begin to demand that students and learners engage more intimately, such as reading together. Naturally, the initial groups divide into pairs, and mentor-mentee relationships begin to form. In subsequent weeks, our students are initially surprised when their mentee recognises them and rushes over upon their arrival at the school. However, they soon realise that they have a small but significant impact on their mentees' lives and that their mentee and their relationship with them have become important to them as well. Reflecting on her experience of IZ, Tanatswa Chivhere (2019) wrote, in a piece entitled "The University Course that Changed Everything":

> Through IiNetho zoBomi, I found myself participating in service-learning for the first time. The topic was foreign to me and my contribution to the community was so far limited to donations. Service-learning taught me how my education could contribute to the education of others. … The course showed me how my knowledge, no matter how modest, could change someone else's life. My mentee, who was reserved at first, opened up in a way which allowed me to learn from her. She helped me with my isiXhosa, both oral and written, while I helped her with her English. This was the first time that I had been truly satisfied with my learning. Seeing a person's grammar gradually increase due to my contribution made me feel proud. It was satisfying to know that I helped others on my path to attaining knowledge.

Chivhere's comments express what many of our students have continually told us throughout the years. Many of the connections that are formed over the semester or year are beautiful to witness. And these beautiful, reciprocal connections inspire our continued belief that community engagement, including service-learning, can, indeed, have transformative, humanising potential.

Our habitual objects of attention ineluctably shape us. But if this is so, can we not enable our students to reflectively reshape themselves by changing what they habitually focus on or attend to? Service-learning in IZ is deliberately designed to redirect our students' attention to education as a means of self-cultivation. Remember that part of the learning process is honing our critical capacities to attend to what genuinely matters to us upon reflection. If service-learning can reveal to students the value of education in their mentees' lives, it is a short step to valuing education in general. And if we can reveal to them the value of education from their perspectives, then their attention should naturally flow in this direction. Service-learning in IZ is designed to engage students' attention in the learning process by directing them away from the predominant "having mode" we see in the academy and towards a "being mode" of relatedness to education. In short, service-learning in IZ is designed to provide students with a reason – the engagement rationale they need – to attend to their studies with the sincere commitment of someone who has grasped the existential dimension of learning.

It is worth turning to a final reflection before closing this section. There is more going on here than just reinforcing students' learning through teaching. Of course it involves their drawing on their understanding of, say, conformity, to help their mentee understand a book on bullying or their own experiences and context through the lens of these ideas. But what else is going on? One of our students – and this is certainly not an exceptional case – upon recognising their mentee's struggle with literacy, reflected on their mentee's situation in our lectures and lamented their difficulty reading at their age and grade, looking for someone or something to blame for this grievous injustice. What had gone wrong, this student asked in earnest, such that a Grade 7 learner could not yet read? Why had this not been addressed? She understood that we first learn to read and then read to learn. Her

consternation at the child's struggle, when reflected on, revealed to her the value she placed on the ability to read and, through reading, to open one's world beyond one's original parochial views. In short, her indignation pointed directly to the value she placed in education and the intimate relationship between education and active, reflective self-formation. More than furthering her understanding of course content, this student's affective response to her service-learning experiences uncovered something she valued – a deep recognition of the value of education as both a personal and societal good.

This said, we do not always see beautiful connections unfolding. We have seen students behave in unimaginable ways – flatly ignoring their mentees while, for example, being wholly distracted by their phones. The allure of the portable screen prevents them – and their mentees – from reaping the benefits of the experience. Unfortunately, we have dealt with several credit-hunting students in IZ, which is inevitable given the pervasive "having" orientation to learning. When the course is seen as an easy way to get a credit, the problems mentioned above, especially students' instrumental view of education, are further compounded. Hardly any of our students come into IZ excited to engage in service-learning. The experience transforms many of them, but not all of them. Perhaps it is simply arrogant to think that our teaching practices could have the kind of impact needed to adequately assuage the forces bearing down on the majority of our students. At base, pedagogical theory is just that – often, in fact, ideal theory in a nonideal world. Even if this were true, though, it should not undermine the effort. We cannot expect to have a transformative impact on all our students, but it is clear that many are changed by confronting thought and action through service-learning in IZ. Such moments of redirection provided by critical community engagement are modest but significant victories in the struggle to cultivate humanity through higher education.

7.5 Concluding Remarks

The constraints under which our students live are compromising their attention patterns. This is not to suggest, contrary to the most extreme defenders of the idea that the portable screen is destroying our capacity to

attend, that students cannot attend to things. The problem is not so much that attention as such has been eroded. The problem is that attention invested in learning class-related material has been compromised. We can say much the same about our distractibility when attending tedious meetings. We often find ourselves mindlessly scrolling to avoid the dreadful inanity of bureaucratic officiousness, and this in turn leads us to wonder whether our students do not experience similar dread when we discuss issues in class that we are passionate about, that we think, often in outrage, they ought to be passionate about but are not. The outrage is not warranted if we observe our own patterns of focused and roaming attention.

With exponential advances in communication technologies, there has been a parallel growth in the capacity of technology czars to monetise gullibility, including the gullibility of our students. Resisting the magnetic allure of the portable screen requires not only willpower, which is a limited resource, but also a clear sense of why the struggle is worth undertaking. To recognise this, students must also recognise the extent to which external forces and psychological mechanisms can undermine our personal sovereignty. One key obstacle that must be overcome is the illusion of autonomy, the notion that the mere act of choosing makes us autonomous. We are all under the illusion that we are free because we make choices, which means we are under the illusion that we are primarily in control of our lives simply because we choose. Students must come to recognise that personal sovereignty is a hard-won victory. Recognising this is at the heart of any educational endeavour, especially in a world where the science of manipulation has never been more effective. Moreover, students must learn that, despite the difficulties involved, a life that is not sovereign is deeply undesirable.

Service-learning in IZ aims to foster a genuine spirit of inquiry among students; to shift them from a "having" to a "being mode" of relatedness to their education. However, for this to be possible, considerable unlearning is required. Our task involves helping to redirect student attention towards education as self-cultivation, or the cultivation of their humanity through the pursuit of sovereignty. But we must acknowledge the very real limits of pedagogy in structurally unjust conditions. We must address the broader social constraints that shape our students' minds before they enter higher education, and which will continue to have a significantly pernicious impact

once they graduate if we fail to respond to them. Moreover, responding to them effectively requires a systemic approach that demands broad institutional buy-in. However, in a culture driven by bottom-line imperatives – one that shuns autonomy and collaboration and is fearful of envisioning new possibilities – this is a significant challenge. Nevertheless, we wish to emphasise the importance of addressing systemic problems systematically. Our success – those who believe higher education can serve to cultivate humanity – will remain limited as long as the tertiary sector's transformative initiatives are piecemeal rather than systemic. IZ is a hopeful intervention, offering a concrete practice of redirecting attention, not a panacea. But we must start somewhere, and in our corner, we do what we can.

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8. Community Engagement and the Work of Cultivating Humanity: Insights from Young People's Experiences at the Community-University Interface in Makhanda

Lizole Jalajala, Nwabisa Nkani, Zanoxolo Nyangiwe, Zandile Valela and Claire McCann

Abstract

Although universities increasingly express commitment to ideals of community engagement and access, the lived experiences of those who sit at the intersection of these two worlds are often overlooked. This chapter therefore explores what the lived experiences of Makhanda's 'local students' – young people who form part of the Makhanda community and go on to study at Rhodes University (RU) – reveal about the humanising capacity of higher education community engagement. Drawing on Nussbaum's (1997) notion of cultivating humanity through the nurturing of sympathetic imagination, and informed by the framework of transformative storywork, this inquiry took the form of a collaborative digital storytelling process undertaken by local students and an external facilitator. The digital stories produced during this process illustrate how local students navigate belonging and marginality, recognition and erasure, across the socially constructed boundaries that divide 'university' and 'community'. The stories do not offer a unified account, but rather a mosaic of tensions, crossings, and emergent understandings. They show how community engagement can be both humanising and alienating, holding potential for connection and recognition, while also surfacing unresolved dynamics of power and exclusion. Ultimately, this chapter argues that cultivating humanity in higher education requires not only institutional commitments to community engagement, but also the creation of spaces where lived experience is valued as knowledge. It is through the deliberate unsettling of binaries of

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'university' and 'community' that more humane universities might begin to take root.

Key words: *Higher education community engagement; cultivation of humanity; digital stories; transformative storywork; belonging and recognition*

8.1 Introduction

The idea of 'community' can be difficult to define. Within a university setting, community exists through the relationships between students and staff who together comprise the higher education system in a local context (Hall, 2010). This community can extend beyond geographical proximity as universities comprise larger knowledge communities, not bound by immediate geographic location but brought together by shared epistemological, political, and experiential conditions (Anderson, 1983). Communities thus emerge not just from geographic proximity but also from shared interests, situations, and goals. When we think of universities 'reaching out' to communities, however, the groups that come to mind are often those marginalised from these esteemed knowledge communities. We tend to think of a community 'out there', distant and separate from those making up the university (Hall, 2010, p. 27).

This distinction between 'community' and 'university' is a socially constructed dichotomy, with historically dehumanising effects (Unterhalter, 2003). In apartheid South Africa, education was a core component for strategies of segregation and division, the legacy of which is lived today in spatial patterns and educational outcomes (Unterhalter, 2003). Our higher education institutions thus do not exist outside of existing societal arrangements. As a result, they may be liberating or 'domesticating' (or somewhere in between); they may support larger struggles for social justice but may also reproduce unjust status quos (Freire, 1970; Ledwith, 2016).

This chapter spotlights the context of Makhanda, home to Rhodes University (RU), a historically white institution in South Africa. As a post-apartheid higher education institution, part of RU's transformation imperative

involves increasing access to students from historically excluded backgrounds, including the communities right on the university's doorsteps. Community engagement, which we broadly define as the mutually beneficial relationship between universities and their neighbouring communities to enhance teaching and research, as well as contribute to community development, may contribute to this goal.[1]

In part as a result of the university's community engagement efforts, the number of RU entrants who grew up in or did part of their secondary schooling in Makhanda has grown exponentially: from just 11 local entrants in 2012, the number has swelled to over 200 in 2025 (Banda, 2025). Most of these students, especially those attending disadvantaged schools, would have encountered the university in some form during their secondary schooling, as so-called 'beneficiaries' of the university's high school mentoring, tutoring, and extracurricular community engagement projects. Several of these students (hereafter referred to as 'local students') also join community engagement programmes as volunteers when they become university students themselves, often volunteering as mentors to learners from their own high schools or other high schools in the Makhanda area. Their presence therefore unsettles neat categories or distinctions between 'university' and 'community' and offers a rich site for examining the possibilities and limitations of higher education's humanising mission.

While universities increasingly express commitment to ideals of community engagement and access, the lived experiences of those who sit at the intersection of these two distinct worlds are often overlooked. At this stage, most empirical research tends to draw on academics, university management, and other university staff as research participants, overlooking the local students who know both the university and community intimately (Bender, 2008; Bhagwan, 2020; Chandramohan & Bhagwan, 2022; Dube & Hendricks, 2023; Johnson, 2020; Thakrar, 2018). Based on this oversight, we centre the knowledge of young people who live and learn in the same town where the university is situated, yet who often find themselves navigating contested spaces of belonging and recognition.

[1] This is a working definition, as there is currently no agreed-upon definition of community engagement in South Africa (CHET, 2003).

This chapter therefore explores what the lived experiences of young people situated between community and university in Makhanda might reveal about the capacity of higher education community engagement to cultivate humanity.

Emerging from a collaborative and relational inquiry grounded in transformative storywork (Wheeler et al., 2020), as five co-researchers – four local students and one external facilitator – we used digital storytelling to explore these experiences. In what follows, we offer narrative reflections and a collective analysis of what these stories reveal about the possibilities and limitations of higher education community engagement to cultivate humanity. By presenting these narratives, we do not claim to offer definitive answers. These stories, which resist easy interpretation, instead might themselves be a mechanism for the cultivation of humanity: by complicating the binaries of 'community' and 'university', and inviting more nuanced and relational ways of understanding and learning from lived experience.

8.2 Humanity in Liminal Spaces: Literature Review and Conceptual Framing

Nussbaum (1997) suggests that cultivating humanity comprises three interrelated capacities:

i) Critical examination of the self and one's traditions.

ii) 'Global citizenship' or the capacity to see ourselves not only as citizens of local groups but as bound to other human beings by ties of recognition and concern.

iii) 'Narrative imagination' – to imagine what it might be like to be in another's position or 'to be an intelligent reader of that person's story'.

For Nussbaum (1997), higher education institutions are not only sites for the generation and transmission of knowledge. They must also nurture sympathetic imagination to see different communities not as alien or 'other' but as sharing problems and possibilities with us. This work of recognition

helps dissolve the socially constructed boundaries that divide groups of people. As explored in the introduction, such a vision may align with the Southern African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which affirms our interconnectedness and shared humanity.

Narratives may play a crucial role in this process of recognition, as compelling reminders of our connection to others. Literature and narrative art have the power "to make us see the lives of the 'different' with more than a casual tourist's interest – with involvement and sympathetic understanding, and with anger at our society's refusals of visibility" (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 85).

Yet, as scholars like Fraser (2000) remind us, narratives are not always benign. Narrative constructions are not free-floating discourses but institutional and materialised patterns of cultural value that are reproduced over time. They can reduce and essentialise, freeze identities, and reinforce the dichotomy between self and other. These dangers emerge especially in cases in which individuals cannot control their own narratives, or where external agents define their stories. When narratives position some actors as "inferior, excluded, wholly other, or simply invisible", they enable *misrecognition*, the social and institutional denial of full personhood (Fraser, 2000). Writing on humanisation, and on cultivating humanity, demands that we also contend with its opposite: the real and ongoing practices that deny individuals their full humanity.

Such misrecognition is closely linked to *epistemic injustice*, the ways in which individuals or groups are dehumanised because of the delegitimising of their capacity as 'knowers' (Fricker, 2007). Acts of injustice include exclusion, silencing, misrepresentation, unfair distribution of knowledge authorities, or unjustified distrust about the knowledge generated by specific groups (Fricker, 2007; McKinnon, 2016). With respect to epistemic injustice, higher education institutions may be deeply implicated in questions of whose knowledge is legitimised, whose voices are heard, and who is authorised to speak.

Fricker (2007, pp. 5–7) distinguishes between two kinds of epistemic injustice. Firstly, hermeneutical injustice emerges as a "gap in collective interpretive resources" which puts certain individuals at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their lived experiences (Fricker, 2007, p. 6). Mason (2011) extends this argument, noting that hermeneutical injustice generates dual forms of ignorance: oppressed communities may lack the interpretive tools to understand their marginalisation, while dominant groups remain ignorant of the experiences of oppressed groups.

Secondly, testimonial injustice emerges from prejudice in the "economy of credibility" as some speakers are considered less legitimate as knowers than others – this constitutes a fundamental misrecognition of the capabilities of individuals and communities as knowers, and a denial of epistemic agency (Fricker, 2007, p. 5). In the context of higher education, this means social justice and the cultivation of humanity cannot be measured solely by who gains access to institutions. It must also involve who gets to be a knower, whose knowledge counts, and how knowledge is constructed, distributed, and valued. For universities in particular, the cultivation of humanity must be accompanied by a commitment to epistemic justice.

Universities are therefore not neutral; they are often political and epistemic battlegrounds. Historically, they have played key roles in constructing and upholding distinctions between elite 'knowers' and the excluded 'non-knowers'. The case of Rhodes University in Makhanda, South Africa, illustrates this point. The university, to its early promoters, was created as a kind of 'Oxford in the bush' (Currey, 1970, p. 12; Maylam, 2016, p. 21). Its socially and materially constructed community of students and staff was English colonial settlers, both in South Africa and the territory then called Rhodesia. This orientation was typical of British settler colonial higher education institutions of that time, forming part of a circulating imperial network (Pietsch, 2013, p. 112). Universities in the British metropole increasingly became connected to higher education institutions, culminating in global epistemic communities. These epistemic communities, though expansive, remained bound by "raced and gendered forms of trust" up until the mid-twentieth century (Pietsch, 2013, p. 6). For most of its history, RU was solidly tethered to the British metropole and other settler colonies,

but inaccessible – physically and epistemically – to many of Makhanda's (then Grahamstown's) black residents both before and during apartheid-era segregation.

Today, the university confronts this legacy of exclusion and dehumanisation. As is explored throughout this book, community engagement is one way in which the university may attempt to bridge the historic gap between itself and its surrounding community. Community engagement, the mutually beneficial relationship between universities and their neighbouring communities to enhance teaching and research, as well as contribute to community development, may destabilise the rigid (though socially and narratively constructed) boundaries between university and community, creating spaces of mutual exchange and knowledge sharing. As Favish and Simpson (2016) argue, community engagement has the power to enrich the academic project and orientate higher education research towards local contexts through the mutual sharing of knowledge between universities and communities. This knowledge sharing in turn affirms the epistemic agency of all parties.

Yet, this ideal is not always realised. In practice, community engagement may slip into paternalism or performativity, or manifest as shallow partnership (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010). When community engagement is framed as charity or siloed from the 'core' missions of the university, i.e., research, teaching, and learning, it may risk reinforcing the very hierarchies it seeks to disrupt (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010). Bringle and Hatcher (2002) caution against transactional or charity-focused forms of outreach. Instead, true engagement or community-university partnerships "must find ways to preserve the integrity of each partner and, at the same time, honour the purpose of the relationship and the growth of each party" (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002, p. 514).

Moreover, even justice-oriented models of community engagement often assume a stark difference between students and the communities they 'enter'. *But what happens when students are from those communities?* As universities seek to increase access, more students come from marginalised backgrounds, including those communities right on universities' doorsteps.

In some cases, these students' engagement with community might resemble home more closely than the lecture hall or university residence.

At RU, these dynamics play out in the lived experiences of first-generation students who did part of their secondary education in Makhanda ('local students'). As indicated earlier, the number of RU entrants who grew up or at least did part of their secondary schooling in Makhanda has grown exponentially at a time at which many learners experience the university in some form through the university's high school mentoring, tutoring, and other educational programmes (Banda, 2025). Several of these local students, upon entering university, also join community engagement programmes as volunteers, and may become mentors to learners from their own high schools or other high schools in the Makhanda area.

These local students blur the line between university and community. Many may be deeply familiar with both, although not fully at home in either. There is contestation about what these realities might signify and how they are experienced. These liminal spaces may represent areas of transition, transformation, and productive instability. Thus, the fact that more local students from marginalised areas of Makhanda access the university is in itself a gesture of transformation (Almjeld, 2021). These liminal identities may be transgressive as they destabilise the socially constructed divisions between 'university' and 'community', perhaps contributing to more inclusive and humane university spaces (Bhabha, 2021).

Liminal spaces, however, are also characterised by anxiety, instability, and discomfort which may or may not be productive (Almjeld, 2021). Wicomb (1998) criticises the depiction of in-between spaces as inherently subversive or transformative, as she argues that often-tragic lived experiences are displaced by an aesthetics of theory. For many caught in these spaces, the in-between is not liberating but damaging, resulting in entrapment and dislocation. This ambivalence, and the uninhabitable spaces emerging from it, is not inherently subversive and may often be deeply harmful. When individuals struggle to have their humanity recognised, the occupation of in-between spaces may alienate them from potentially identity-affirming communities.

Ultimately, local students form some of the strongest links between RU and Makhanda. Yet, there is little research on their experiences and often our understanding of community engagement fails to account for their realities, as we continue to assume that students engage with a community 'out there' and different to the one nurtured within the university. Emerging literature has begun to explore the experiences of local students (Machiha, 2025; Mwedzi, 2024), but significant silences remain. Notably absent are the voices of local students themselves, and critical analyses of the stories that are told about and by them.

Indeed, it seems that, just as local students may exist in between the spaces of university and community, they might also be in between various narratives. A common narrative is that of victimhood, as passive recipients of institutional charity. Community engagement efforts that centre the agency and assets of individuals and communities seek to challenge this dehumanising stereotype. Another narrative, sometimes less scrutinised, is that of the hero, casting these students as exceptional figures who must always demonstrate strength and gratitude. There may be several other stories told about local students, explored in more detail in this chapter. Fundamentally, these stories, even those that are well meaning, may fail to capture the humanity of local students, the fullness and complexity of their lives, and their right to vulnerability.

This chapter therefore leans into this complexity, aiming to learn from local students' realities and the stories they tell. It takes seriously their experiences and insights, not merely as subjects of research or as recipients of engagement, but as critical participants envisioning what it means to cultivate humanity in higher education. In this vein, it asks:

What do the lived experiences of young people situated between community and university in Makhanda reveal about the capacity of higher education community engagement to cultivate humanity?

8.3 Storytelling as Humanising Methodology

Having traced this chapter's conceptual terrain, the following section turns to the methodological choices that embody these commitments to humanisation in practice. In seeking to understand the lived experiences of young people situated between community and university in Makhanda, it becomes necessary to employ approaches that not only *study* humanity but *enact* it.

8.3.1 Storytelling as a Mode of Inquiry

The theoretical underpinnings of this research, grounded in ideas of epistemic justice and the cultivation of humanity, require methodological approaches that honour the same commitment. This recognition necessitates a shift away from extractive or hierarchical forms of research and towards approaches that centre *relationality, voice, co-construction,* and *humanisation*.

To this end, this chapter is written by five individuals: one external facilitator and four of RU's previous or current local students. This chapter is designed as a space for local students to tell our own stories, rather than having stories told about us or even for us. We thus adopted storytelling as both a method and mode of inquiry.

Our storytelling process was guided by the concept of *transformative storywork* (Wheeler et al., 2020), which views personal storytelling within a group context as a mechanism for deeper understanding of the self and others. Here, storytelling becomes a form of inquiry: it enables an exploration of daily experiences in relation to history and context (Wheeler et al., 2020). The process of story-making is not merely instrumental; rather, the act of articulating meaning is itself transformative. Central to this method is the belief that *the personal is political*, and that stories are not mere expressions of self, but knowledge claims that warrant expression and visibility (Wheeler et al., 2020, p. 735). Storytelling is also relational: our identities are shaped in and through relationships with others. The storytelling space becomes one of mutual recognition and dialogue, not simply a platform for sharing our own narratives (Wheeler et al., 2020). Importantly, storytelling here does not compress life into neat linearity but

invites participants to identify key moments (personal or collective) that catalyse shifts in understanding or worldview (Wheeler et al., 2020).

Transformative storywork is grounded in three interrelated principles (Wheeler et al., 2020, pp. 739–744):

- Humanising: affirming the full personhood of people and places often rendered invisible.
- Accountable: requiring deep reflexivity, care, and a shared commitment to transformation.
- Emancipatory: enabling both individual and collective agency.

The transformation that emerges from this group-based process is imagined at three levels: personal (through sharing and witnessing stories), collective (building relational understanding – and perhaps mitigating forms of hermeneutical injustice), and societal (enabling strategies for action). In this approach, both the *content* and the *process* of storytelling are orientated towards social change.

Our process of undertaking this research in 2025 was emergent, prioritising flexibility, and designed so that methods can be modified during the research process (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008). Research was *cyclical rather than linear*, as we continually reassessed research questions asked, methods used, and our own positions in relation to research, adjusting as insights revealed themselves. We worked as a group of six co-researchers – the external facilitator and five local students, one of whom did not partake in the later writing of this chapter – meeting for six brainstorming and storytelling sessions over three months. During our first session, which was focused on introductions and setting ground rules for this project, we made the collective decision to explore digital storytelling as our method.

8.3.2 The Digital Storytelling Process

Digital storytelling is the process of exploring different media and software applications to communicate stories, usually taking video format. They are three-to-five minute mini-films, featuring images, video clips, soundtracks and/or narration (McLellan, 2007). In research, digital stories are often used

to help people tell stories from their own lives in ways that are meaningful to them (McLellan, 2007). Digital stories have many purposes but can be *agentive*, allowing participants to exercise autonomy over their narratives; *reflective* on the meaning behind life experiences; *reconstructive* in the sense that they engage dialogue about preconceived beliefs or stereotypes; and *reflexive,* calling for an examination of one's own identity in relation to others (Wu & Chen, 2020, p. 5).

Once the group chose digital storytelling as the form our inquiry would take, our six sessions were organised into collaborative 'story circles', dialogic spaces for crafting, sharing, and refining our narratives (Chilisa, 2012). In our second session, the external facilitator stepped back, and one of the group members led a freewriting activity. This space allowed us to begin imagining the stories we might want to tell, rooted in personal experience, but shaped in relation to one another. By our third meeting, we brought our early narrative drafts to the group for feedback and discussion. Another group member and a staff member from the Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) Division facilitated an introduction to the fundamentals of digital storytelling, helping us understand both the technical aspects and the creative possibilities.

Our fourth story circle marked a turning point, as we shared more developed versions of our narratives. These stories reflected not only individual journeys but emergent themes across our lives, shaped by shared geographies, institutions, histories, and relationships. The penultimate session shifted focus toward the technical side of the project. The same RUCE staff member facilitated a digital storytelling workshop during which we learned the basics of CapCut, the editing tool we chose to create our short films. Our final session involved a partial screening of the works-in-progress: a space of celebration, support, and collective reflection.

Later in the year, we met for an additional seventh session which served as a culmination event – a space for us to screen and share the completed digital stories with an audience of our choice. Our family and friends came together to bear witness to our narratives and experiences.

8.3.3 Ethical Considerations

The ethics of this research are not confined to institutional approval, although such approval was secured from both the University of Oxford and Rhodes University. Rather, ethics is understood as a relational and ongoing commitment to care, recognition, and dialogue (Carpenter, 2018). It is not simply about protecting participants but about creating space for genuine co-authorship and self-determination.

The facilitator, rather than extracting knowledge, aimed to act as a *steward of the space*; charged with holding uncertainty and enabling a dialogic research process (Patel, 2014, p. 373). Anonymity, often treated as a default ethical requirement, is here approached as an open question, to be negotiated based on group members' desires for recognition, safety, and visibility (BERA, 2018). After extended dialogue, we have chosen to include our names alongside our reflections in this chapter, in recognition of the knowledge embedded in these shared lived experiences.

8.3.4 Approach to Making Sense of Stories

Narrative inquiry guided our approach to making meaning out of these stories. As Clandinin and Caine (2012) note, narratives provide a starting point for inquiries into experience. In the following results sections, we do not seek to fragment stories for traditional analysis, but rather to 'restory': to present the narratives generated through this process and place these narratives in conversation with each other and with the landscapes from which they emerge (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 332).

Like transformative storywork, narrative inquiry is inherently collaborative and relational. We approached stories as threads to be woven together, not in a fixed pattern but in ways that reflect the entanglement of past, present, and possible futures. This approach privileges fragmentation, multiplicity, and relationality over closure or consensus. Stories are not endpoints, but beginnings – they are "not a place at which to arrive but [...] a place to begin inquiry" (Gallagher, 2011, p. 53). As such, there is no final story. Lives are in motion, and "each story and experience begs for a new story to be told, for the experience to be retold and also relived" (Clandinin & Caine, 2012, p. 176).

8.4 Insights Emerging from the Digital Stories

In this chapter, each team member has shared parts of their own story, except for the facilitator, Claire McCann and one group member who chose not to participate in this part of the process. The findings section is therefore presented in two parts. First, we offer narrative reflections that share the content of our stories alongside our perspectives on the capacity of higher education community engagement to cultivate humanity. This is followed by a collective analysis that draws connections across the stories, highlighting key themes and emergent insights.

8.4.1 **Reflection I:** Two Worlds, One Journey: Nwabisa Nkani

Storytelling allows us to pause, reflect and make meaning of the spaces we move through, and who we become in the process. This paper explores what our own lived experiences reveal about the extent to which community engagement cultivates humanity. Stories themselves also serve as powerful evidence of the cultivation of humanity. To illustrate this, I draw from my own story (in relation to other stories of my story circle) which shares a journey of navigating two worlds: the world of home, shaped by struggle, limitations, and strong communal bonds; and the world of university, marked by privilege, ambition, and unfamiliar expectations.

Experiencing both worlds, I had the privilege to join the Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) office as an intern, where I learned and experienced that community engagement is the building bridge between these two worlds. It allowed me to make sense of both worlds and find meaning in holding them together.

Keeling (2020, p. 49) notes that "to have humanity is to be humane, to care, to notice and respond to others thoughtfully and with kindness." This resonates deeply with my journey. At RUCE, I learned that community engagement was not an act of charity or a one-way transfer of knowledge. It was a dialogue, a mutual encounter grounded in respect and reciprocity. Working with communities within and beyond the university opened my eyes to the truth that transformation goes both ways: as we serve, we are also shaped. I believe transformation does not always begin with a big change but rather the small acts of showing up, listening, and the willingness to grow together.

Rather than seeing the university as an isolated 'ivory tower', community engagement allowed me to experience it as a porous, responsive, and human institution. The practices of community engagement mirrored the values of *Ubuntu*, the African worldview that states 'I am because we are.' These communal values affirmed that my becoming was entangled with the becoming of others, and that education, at its best, is relational.

During the times we met with our storytelling circle, storytelling became a powerful method of creating connection. It was not about performance but presence. We gathered in a space of mutual trust, where our stories were met not with judgment, but with deep listening. Each session reminded me that while our paths were different, our emotions were shared, as feelings of fear, inspiration, grief, and longing all surfaced as part of our collective journey.

Telling my story helped me give shape to the discomfort I had often carried in silence. It also allowed me to realise that moving between these two spaces has not always been easy. There were moments of disorientation, self-doubt, and feeling as though I did not fully belong in either. However, after hearing how others had navigated their own crossings, and what it cost them to belong in one space without abandoning the other, storytelling became a form of 'world'-traveling, as Lugones (1987) puts it, an act of crossing between different cultural and social realities with both vulnerability and love. As Boal (1995) argues in *The Rainbow of Desire*, storytelling, especially when done collectively, is not just reflective but transformative. It allows us to imagine alternatives, break silences, and act differently in the world.

When I first entered Rhodes, I carried a sense of not belonging. I questioned my English, I doubted my capacity, and I felt out of place in a space that often assumed prior access to certain forms of knowledge and cultural capital. Being part of the Extended Studies Programme – an undergraduate programme designed to bridge the gap between secondary and tertiary education – and community engagement work validated my lived experience as a site of learning. It showed me that who I am is not an obstacle, but a contribution. Through community engagement experience, I learned the importance of mutuality. In that shared work, we not only generate new knowledge, but we also humanise education.

> Rather than speaking *for* others, storytelling invites us to speak *with* and *as* others to build knowledge and solidarity through dialogical processes (Freire, 1970). In this way, the spaces we tell our stories in serves not only as the backdrop of the stories but as a motivating force in how storytelling shapes our understanding of what it means to be human together. In our spaces, storytelling serves as a method of community engagement that fosters empathy, connection, and mutual recognition. It is through the act of telling and receiving stories that storytellers come to see each other not merely as beneficiaries or facilitators, but as human beings with layered lives and shared desires for humanity.
>
> My journey between the 'two worlds' of township and university, of hardship and hope, was not linear. It was complex and sometimes painful. But community engagement and the storytelling circles created the conditions for me to hold both worlds together and begin building one of my own. In that process, I not only survived, but I also learned how to be human, together with others. And in that, I believe, is the essence of cultivating humanity.

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Nwabisa's narrative illuminates what it might mean to move between 'two worlds' without relinquishing either. In this regard, community engagement may serve as a bridge between worlds, creating spaces of mutual recognition and affirming the legitimacy of different ways of knowing (Lepore et al., 2023). Yet when she writes of 'holding both worlds together' and eventually 'building one of my own' she gestures toward something more than transition. Rather than simply crossing between two fixed domains, she describes an active process of world-making.

At the same time, her reflection resists romanticising resilience. The work of bridging and building is meaningful, but it is not effortless. Nwabisa's story therefore complicates celebratory accounts of community engagement. It reveals both its humanising potential and the labour required to inhabit and reshape university spaces.

As we move into the next reflection, we begin to see how even with such affirming practices, the effects of structural inequalities may persist,

complicating the notion that community engagement alone is sufficient to undo harmful status quos.

8.4.2 **Reflection II:** Untitled: Lizole Jalajala

In thinking about the cultivation of humanity in higher education, and how the responsibility is to 'educate students for life and living', I reflect on my journey as a young student. I tell stories about experiencing imposter syndrome because I have learnt the clinical term for what I was feeling. I do think that the language of this psychological phenomenon fails to package the experiences of it as a young black female student. It did not only manifest as an intense feeling of inadequacy. In fact, in the moment, I felt I was invading a pure space, and I was actively tainting the reputation of Rhodes University. As such, my experience was a complex interplay of various social factors that include race, gender, and class. It was not just a feeling of inadequacy but a manifestation of intersecting social dynamics that then affected my psyche and skewed my sense of self and confidence.

Now, when I reflect on this with the mindset inherent to the principles and ideas of cultivating humanity, I think community engagement can only do so much. Sometimes, these experiences we have are a reflection of a deeper problem within our society. Obviously, the necessity of community engagement remains unquestioned, as I believe it is an important and necessary catalyst for social justice alongside fostering a critical approach to research and storytelling. That remains undisputed. What I then bring is, there is a limit to how deep it can go in terms of preparing students like me, who come from underprivileged backgrounds, for university spaces. In fact, it cannot prevent some of the experiences and can only offer resources to support recovery. By this, I mean the mentoring I received before coming to university was enough to prepare me for the transition from high school and navigating the academic environment. However, what quickly became apparent as a first-generation student, was the stark realisation of how deeply the damage of experiencing lack ran. The awakening that, despite making it to the holy grail, I was not fine, and in need of support. Yet, with that awareness, I still struggled to ask for help because I did not think I was worthy of it. I was constantly reminded that I must be grateful that I am at university and I must focus on only my studies and forget everything else. However, when we consider the spectrum of needs, the psychological is equally important as the physiological needs.

> So, with the assistance available in the university like the counselling centre/psychology clinic, I was able to learn about the underlying issues that manifested into imposter syndrome. I developed a clearer understanding of the challenges and even though I still grapple with them, I now navigate with a sense of intention and awareness. With that said, by reflecting on personal stories that do not sensationalise struggle, we further develop a more holistic model of community engagement that does not only addresses the physical needs but nurtures psychological and emotional well-being.

***

This story calls our attention to the limits of what community engagement can achieve, when structural injustices are deeply embedded in the Makhanda landscape (Matthews, 2010). While community engagement may be the bridge between community and university, it cannot on its own erase the internalised narratives of unworthiness that often accompany first-generation black, female students in historically exclusionary institutions. Perhaps we can read this narrative as an invitation for deeper engagement, requiring emotional and psychological support alongside academic preparation.

As we transition to the next narrative, we shift from an inward journey of healing to the outward-facing work of mentoring learners from disadvantaged schools, and the complex negotiations of identity and difference that come with it.

8.4.3 **Reflection III:** Mentorship: A Path of Development, Adaptability, and Community: Zanoxolo Nyangiwe

> Beginning the journey of mentoring was not an easy decision because I was unsure of what I would do. I worried that I would not know how to handle mentoring students of a different race, specifically those who are coloured. Before starting, I told myself that I wanted to mentor at my previous high school, Ntsika Secondary School, as I wanted to give back to my school. However, that was not the case, as I was assigned to Mary Waters High School, where I was given two mentees, both of whom were Coloured in terms of their race.

At the start of the journey, I remembered that I was initially joining the mentoring programme to enhance my curriculum vitae. Then I recalled that I have always been someone who wants to inspire others and lead them to great destinies. I believe I was chosen among my family to be the 'chosen one.' After reflecting on this, I realised that I wanted to give back to the community, which was my school. Instead, my mentees were Grade 12 students at Mary Waters High School. Our mentoring sessions took place in the classroom, and both mentees were studying different subjects, some of which I had taken in my final school year, while others I was not familiar with.

I want to share this story because it relates closely to my experiences, and I wanted to guide others toward an academic pathway that leads to tertiary education, as I did. Additionally, I wanted them to take ownership of their academics and achieve what they are capable of in their academic journey. Throughout this experience, I developed a sense of agency, as I was able to influence and advise them to make informed decisions in their lives.

Although the journey was stressful at first, I became confident in what I was doing and managed to make an impact on their lives. Both of my mentees successfully made it to university. Of course, this success was met with challenges, particularly related to race, as my mentees sometimes felt that their experiences were different from mine. At one point, I wanted to quit mentoring, but I had the resilience to continue the journey I had started for myself. It was a beautiful journey, and for years I have told myself that I will continue mentoring, driven purely by passion and a desire to give back to my community.

Establishing a connection with my mentees was quite a predicament, considering our *cultural* differences. I recall the times both my mentees would converse in their mother-tongue language at the time I was going through their academic summaries, and I would be clueless. At first, I thought of addressing that, however, I realised that perhaps they are conversing in their language because they grew up in a community that is predominantly speakers of Afrikaans and that their school is an Afrikaans school with Afrikaans as a home-language to them. This one time, I spoke to them in isiXhosa language which is my mother-tongue to see if they would understand any word. To my surprise they were familiar with some speech. To assess the situation, I began to question them about how they feel when I dialogue in isiXhosa, and they expressed that they would not understand much of the things I would be

uttering. In the end, a mutual agreement was concluded in that the sessions will be carried out in English to avoid not understanding each other, especially on their side since at the end of the day, they are the ones that need to be clear about everything

When I began this storytelling process, I wanted to share the journey of mentoring. However, along developing and creating the story, a realisation of how the journey changed my life appeared. I began to think of how the journey paved a way for me to be chosen for community outreach programmes, affording me the opportunities such as attending workshops in relation to community engagement. I remember this one particular workshop I attended in Johannesburg where I networked with founders of organisations such as Columba Academy. Through networking with people of that calibre, I was exposed to seeking out opportunities, especially those related to funding. Overall, telling this story is imperative in that I have been a tool of inspiration to others, and I believe further telling the story will certainly deliver a positive change in someone's life, as it has accomplished the same for my life.

***

This story traces a transformation from reluctant participant to passionate mentor. It reveals how community engagement, particularly in the form of mentoring, can generate agency and sense of purpose. Adding a layer of complexity, it also surfaces the tensions that emerge when navigating difference even within 'community', a category that we often assume to be linguistically and culturally homogenous (Calhoun, 1998; Matthews, 2010, p. 8). This story also serves as a powerful reminder that community engagement is never neutral, but shaped by histories of race, place, and power.

The next reflection takes us into a more personal register, reminding us that community engagement is not always formal or structured. Sometimes, it is simply the presence of others in our deepest moments of grief.

8.4.4 **Reflection IV:** Living with the Heartache: Zandile Valela

For so long, I have lived inside my head because I feared that my thoughts and feelings were not socially correct, or one was never meant to express grief in their time of mourning. This is what happened when I lost my father. I did not know how to mourn his death because I had never had to before. I would curl myself up in my bed, crying in silence, hoping no one hears me. This is because right after the funeral life moved on, everyone moved on, or so it seemed.

My story forms a great part of my healing journey. It is a reflection of how the brain can react differently to the same event at different points of one's life. I did not cry much when I wrote it, edited it, and read it out the first time. That easily convinced me to feel like I am so close to the healing line. I did not cry much when I was told my father had died. I did not cry much when everyone was crying on every other person's shoulder because I did not know I was allowed to. But I bawled my eyes out on the anniversary of his death. For nine years, I did. Healing is not linear. This is one thing I kept telling myself for the past nine years. It has been that long, yet I still cry like my brother has just walked into the living room, asked my mother to sit beside him, and told her that her husband has found internal peace – death.

When writing this story, I was able to see it as a reflection of a point in my life where the impact of the involvement of community started being so clear. We were not alone when we cried for my father. We were surrounded by people who spoke life into us even when all we could see was darkness, and all we could hear was the deadening sound of my mother's cries. Even my primary school teachers were present. This warmed my heart. It still does. It is always said that a person never forgets what you do or say to them in their times of difficulty. This is true. My people showed up for me, and to this day, I still appreciate it.

Whenever I think of my father, I remember him as the strong man he was, and I cannot help but end up thinking of how sick

> he was when he died. This flows to the nights I'd beg God to take away the pain he carried, and how I later feared that taking away the pain might have meant taking him away from us. Every time I get to tell my story, I am reminded that he lives inside me, and wherever I go, I carry a piece of him. It might sound so nice when I say it, but when I think it through, I would have preferred that he would be physically present at every point of my life. That part – losing him – has shaped my life in ways I would never have imagined. I have tried so hard to have a positive outlook on this experience. 'Maybe if he was still alive, I would not have so much independence,' I often think. But also, I would not need it because I have always been *intombi kayise* (my father's daughter).

***

In this final reflection, the notion of 'community' expands beyond institutional programmes to recognise the network of people who show up in times of loss. The story powerfully shows how the presence of others during grief can leave an enduring imprint, shaping one's orientation to the world (D'Eer et al., 2022). It reminds us that the cultivation of humanity is not just an abstract goal of education; it is a lived experience that takes place in the everyday acts of care and connection.

8.4.5 Collective analysis

All these stories present diverse viewpoints; like all human experiences, they are complex, nuanced, and incomplete. Together, they reveal significant insights about the capacity of community engagement to cultivate humanity.

Across these stories, we witness a recurring theme of *crossings*, not only physical or institutional passages between community and university, but also epistemic crossings between different social worlds. These journeys are rarely comfortable. As Nwabisa recounts, "there were moments of disorientation, self-doubt, and feeling as though I did not fully belong in either." Similarly, Lizole reflects that, upon entering RU, "I felt that I was invading a pure space and I was actively tainting the [university's] reputation." These reflections reveal enduring constructions about the

groups of people who 'belong' in university spaces, which are often racialised, gendered, and classed. Therefore, closely linked to these crossings are experiences of borders and unbelonging: racial, social, and institutional boundaries reveal themselves through these encounters.

In conversation with the reflection 'Untitled' by Lizole, imposter syndrome then emerges not merely as a psychological affliction but as a structural condition shaped by histories of exclusion. Even when individuals move between physical and epistemic worlds, legacies of exclusion from higher education may persist, meaning that certain individuals may continue to feel like trespassers within these knowledge communities.

Yet these crossings between communities are rarely navigated alone; they are facilitated by connections and relationships. The reflections point repeatedly to the centrality of *relationships* – with mentors, mentees, peers, family members, and neighbours – in shaping identity and enabling transitions. Nwabisa reflects on how community engagement relationships allowed her to bridge the world of home and the world of university; Zandile notes the role of her father's memory and community support in her healing process, and in shaping her identity as *intombi kayise*. These accounts push us to expand our understanding of what counts as engagement, reminding us that the cultivation of humanity is not confined to formal partnerships or institutional projects. It includes the often overlooked but deeply formative bonds of care embedded in everyday relationships, including but also expanding from the relationships nurtured by higher education community engagement programmes. Strength comes from family and community – it allows us to take up space in unfamiliar and sometimes hostile settings.

The stories presented explore the socially constructed divide between 'university' and 'community' through this idea of journey or crossing between these two spaces. Similarly, these reflections reveal that even within so-called 'community' spaces, social divides, and therefore other forms of crossings, may exist. Zanoxolo's experience of mentoring across cultural and linguistic divides illuminates tensions in relation to identity and understanding within Makhanda's marginalised communities. Moments of cultural difference, like the mother-tongue language gap between mentor and mentees, remind us that communities are not homogenous, and that

when we think of 'community engagement', the interactions nurtured are not merely those between the dichotomy of 'university' and 'community'. Socially constructed divisions related to *race* and culture permeate even within these groups. These crossings, both within and between groups, invite us to approach community engagement not as a bridging of two neatly bounded entities, *but as a complex relational practice shaped by histories, identities, and context.*

At the same time, the stories do not avoid the limits of community engagement. Strained or non-existent relationships remind us of the limitations of community engagement in addressing the forms of dehumanisation that may persist. As Lizole reflects, "there is a limit to how deep [community engagement] can go in terms of preparing students like me, who come from underprivileged backgrounds, for university spaces." First-generation students, who often lack the social capital and networks that ease others' transitions, may continue to feel out of place even when support is available. As Lizole writes, "I still struggled to ask for help because I did not think I was worthy of it." At times, students feel pressure to perform gratitude, even when their needs were unmet; this pressure may reflect that a 'hero narrative' in which the 'successful' community-engaged student is celebrated reduces these students' space to voice struggle or vulnerability. These reflections point towards the need for institutional humility of higher education institutions, or a recognition that while community engagement may bridge physical and epistemic worlds, it cannot substitute for deeper structural transformation within the university itself. Community engagement programmes may open doors, but unless institutions shift the cultures and assumptions that define them, those who enter may still find themselves unwelcome.

Storytelling emerges as a relational practice that offers both critique and possibility. Through storytelling, students come to see themselves not as isolated individuals but as people shaped through others. As Nwabisa remarks, "community engagement and the storytelling circles created the conditions for me to hold both worlds together and begin building one of my own." It creates space not only for healing and connection, but also for resisting dominant narratives. As such, this process of storytelling could be

the way for us to affirm epistemic agency and support the cultivation of humanity.

Importantly, these stories reject the simplistic arc of *triumph over adversity*. Instead, they offer textured, context-specific insights into lived experiences that include pain, doubt, and contradiction. For example, Zanoxolo reflects that he became the 'chosen one' in his family, a statement that seems to reflect both pride and burden. These reflections invite us to sit (perhaps uncomfortably) within their complexity, to celebrate the strength of these storytellers without erasing the struggle of their positionalities.

In doing so, they draw our attention to the liminal positions many local students occupy, which cross, contest, and are at sometimes caught between different spaces. These in-between spaces can be productive and transformative, but they are also marked by anxiety, instability, and a sense of not fully belonging. Storytelling, then, may become a way to make meaning in spaces of ambiguity, and to hold open the possibility of a more humanising university. This vision of a humanising university is not an endpoint but one that is continually worked toward through the recognition of complexity and humanity of those who move between worlds. As Zandile reminds us "healing is not linear", and this truth is mirrored in the messy, recursive work of humanising the university through the stories that make visible and affirm the experiences and humanity of those at its margins.

8.5 Final reflections

The stories reflected upon and analysed in this chapter do not offer a neat, unified picture of the ways in which community engagement may cultivate humanity. Rather, they present a mosaic of fragments, crossings, and tensions, speaking to belonging, (dis)connection, and change. They reveal that community engagement cannot be idealised as a panacea for the many forms of dehumanisation that occur within and beyond universities. Yet, these stories suggest that relationships, recognition, and the space to tell and reflect on lived experience can offer the basis from which more humane institutions might grow.

The stories gathered here suggest that higher education's promise to cultivate humanity is neither automatic nor reducible to access alone; it is enacted through sustained relationships, mutual recognition, and spaces that centre epistemic agency. Moving forward, further research may shed light on the institutional cultures and policy levers that enable or block humane practice, as well as the experiences of young people in spaces like Makhanda, who may not later become students, and the university. Methodologically, future work could further embed ethical negotiation and co-authorship as ongoing commitments rather than one-off procedures. These recommendations are not merely academic: they invite universities to undertake the slow, patient work of nurturing relationships, recognising that cultivating humanity is a collective, iterative practice.

To cultivate humanity is to remain critically reflective, and capable of holding space for stories that are unresolved, unfinished and, in so being, deeply human. The reflections shared in this chapter unsettle the binaries that divide 'community' and 'university'. This troubling of dichotomies, ultimately, may be at the heart of cultivating humanity: it is a slow, intentional undoing of the fences we have inherited, and a reaching out, gently but persistently, towards one another.

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9. Community-University Engagement as a Model for University Transformation and the Cultivation of Humanity

| George Openjuru, David Monk, and Robert Jjuuko

Abstract

This article explores the critical role of healthy community-university engagement in fostering transformative development and enhancing institutional vitality. It argues that universities must move beyond transactional outreach to embrace reciprocal, sustained partnerships with communities. Such engagement not only enriches experiential learning and research relevance but also positions universities as co-creators of knowledge and catalysts for inclusive change. The paper conceptualises 'healthy engagement' as a dynamic process rooted in mutual respect, shared goals, and epistemic justice, where community voices shape academic inquiry and institutional priorities. The article demonstrates how collaborative models of engagement contribute to community resilience, student empowerment, institutional credibility and the cultivation of humanity.

Key words: *Community transformation, community-university engagement, community-based research*

9.1 Introduction

In his working paper for UNESCO, *Pathways of Tomorrow,* Mbembe (2023) calls for a new paradigm of human being that recognises the deep entanglement of humans and the natural world. Mbembe accentuates the need for a new paradigmatic approach to thinking that could be found in African ontologies and epistemologies. Mbembe identifies the uncertainty of

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the planet as a result of the current capitalist driven organisation of reason(able) thinking and being. He states,

> The fact remains that we are all experiencing, instantaneously, two fundamental events that are both systemic and multidimensional. On one hand, the balance of the planet's natural processes is in jeopardy. On the other, the plan for the infinite expansion of capital aims, more than ever, to reduce society to the market and to ensure complete technical control over not only the essence of humanity, but over all living beings. What I mean is that of all the changes affecting life, not only humanity but all living beings, these two events deserve careful examination (p. 3).

We agree with Mbembe both in his observations of the capitolocene era and the need for a shift away from reason(able) thought as currently conceived of, to an embodied knowledge that can accelerate the emergence of a "new planetary consciousness" (Mbembe, 2023, p. 4). In searching for a new planetary consciousness we feel, along with Delors & Mufti (1996), that *learning to live together* must be a core consideration. A planetary consciousness, based in coexistence and deep ecological learning, is important, but thinking through the cultivation of humanity brings forward the opportunity to expand the concept of peaceful coexistence not only with the planet, but also with ourselves. Humans are destroying the world, seemingly as quickly as possible, with no consideration of other species on the planet, and we are treating ourselves equally horribly with endless and even accelerated atrocities, made possible through technological and psychological advancements. Surely the inability to care for each other is rooted in our psyche's disconnection from nature and the non-human world and somehow linked to a narrative of success as conquering, beating, raping, killing, holding power over other people, rather than living together. So, the question of tomorrow is deeply entangled with the transformation of human beings. Teaching and learning approaches and systems are a representation of what we hope to see in the future, thus a peace-full transformation in human beings requires transformational and transformed approaches to teaching and learning.

The UNESCO *Reimagining our Futures Together: A new social contract for education* (2021) calls for a transformation in higher education that

integrates multiple types of learnings and beings. In this chapter, we modestly share the examples of Gulu University, a university established during a 20-year civil war, with the express goals of building the region. Every fabric of the university is oriented in negotiating the post- conflict trauma of the land and the people. The university is deeply formed and embedded in the Acholi soil, and in Acholi ontologies of peace building as a process of reconciliation and shared participation. Community engagement is also intrinsically a part of the university. Including community knowledges in the university processes are increasingly evident in the community-university engagement of the university. Of course, the university still has overvalued knowledge hierarchies in Ameripean[1] approaches to higher education, however these are being challenged as the university attempts to bridge knowledge cultures. In this chapter we seek to contribute towards the cultivation of humanity by imagining the transformation of universities through the opportunity presented by a movement for community university engagement.

9.2 Gulu University's vision for community transformation

Gulu University, a public institution founded in 2002 by Statutory Instrument No. 31 of 2003, was established with a clear mandate to serve as a launch pad for equitable development in Uganda (Gulu University, 2023). This foundational purpose underpins its operational philosophy, positioning the university as a proactive change agent rather than merely a traditional knowledge provider. The institution's mission is *to provide access to quality higher education, training, research, and innovations for the delivery of appropriate services towards community transformation and sustainable development;* the vision is t*o be the leading academic institution for the promotion of community transformation and industrialisation for sustainable development*, and the motto is *for community transformation*.

[1] A term of Wangoola Wangola Ndawula (2017) referring to American and European cultural hegemony and reclaiming 'Western' spaces in Africa. See Monk et al. (2020).

The university's historical context, established during a conflict in the Acholi sub-region of Northern Uganda, further underscores its inherent role in community rebuilding and transformation, rendering its engagement mandate particularly poignant and essential (Monk et al., 2020). Gulu University's strong agricultural focus further illustrates this commitment, with all its programmes designed to promote agricultural activity in rural communities (Gulu University, 2025). This specialisation extends to all fields, such as medicine, where professionals are trained for rural-based health facilities, education, centring on training teachers for rural schools and agricultural education, and law, which focuses on land conflict and agrarian reforms (Gulu University, 2025). This arrangement demonstrates a deliberate and integrated alignment of academic offerings with the region's specific development needs, ensuring that educational outputs remain directly relevant to local challenges.

Gulu University has formalised its community-university engagement (CUE) through the Community-University Engagement policy in 2020 and a Directorate of Community-University Engagement in 2021 (Talloires Network, 2025). These formal structures provide a clear mandate and operational framework for all CUE activities, ensuring consistency and accountability. The prioritisation of community engagement is explicitly reflected in the university's overarching strategic plan (Monk et al., 2023; Talloires Network, 2025), ensuring that CUE is not an isolated initiative but a central component of long-term institutional development and resource allocation.

The policy positions community-university engagement (CUE) not only as one of its three core missions with research and teaching, but in fact driving and underpinning the latter two (see table 1 below). It is the participative approach to CUE at Gulu University that allows the community to inform research, development, teaching and learning, and consequent community transformation. CUE is directly informed by the local community (Smith, 2022), ensuring the relevance and applicability of the programmes and projects to the lives of the local community. For example, the student-centred outreach (SCO) model is one of the guiding frameworks for community engaged learning activities in the Faculty of Agriculture and Environment. This model positions students to work directly with rural communities,

facilitating experiential learning by providing real-life exposure to community circumstances and challenges, while driving innovation processes in the community (Kalule et al., 2016; Odongo et al., 2023). The SCO model empowers students to 1) share their academic knowledge, practical skills, and experiences with community members; 2) identify pressing community problems and develop appropriate responses with technical backstopping from faculty; and 3) identify enterprise-specific challenges within communities and transform them into viable business innovations (Kalule et al., 2016; Odongo et al., 2023). All programmes at the university have their models for integrating experiential learning with community development. Students' community learning experiences are also crucial for knowledge mobilisation from community into learning programmes, driving innovation and adaptation in learning programmes.

Further supporting its CUE mandate, the Gulu University Institutional Repository (GUIR) policy, established in April 2023, plays a crucial role (Gulu University, 2023). This policy promotes open access to research and innovation information, ensuring accountability and transparency in public and donor-funded research (Gulu University, 2023). A benefit of this policy is to promote community engagement in knowledge sharing, research, and innovation (Gulu University, 2023), as a deliberate strategy to make academic outputs accessible and beneficial to the broader community.

CUE is not merely an optional add-on, but an integral and non-negotiable part of the university's identity and operational fabric. The direct effect of this explicit, integrated mandate is that it shapes the university's educational and research outputs, ensuring that graduates are not just academically proficient but also deeply socially responsible and community-oriented, ready to contribute to local development. Gulu University's model challenges the conventional, often hierarchical, understanding of university missions and proposes a more integrated, responsive, and socially responsible role for higher education. This approach is particularly pertinent in the context of post-conflict recovery and rural development in Africa. It addresses pressing societal challenges and serves as a blueprint for other universities seeking to achieve a genuine and systemic impact in their communities. Table 1 below summarises the alignment of CUE in Gulu University. In what follows, we elaborate on the participative nature of this engagement.

Table 1: Gulu University's Core Missions and CUE Integration

University Mission	Status at Gulu University	Key Integration Mechanisms
Teaching	Equal core mission	Mandatory CUE component in all programmes; student-centred outreach (SCO) model; experiential learning; practical skill development; training for rural-based facilities (Gulu University, 2025; Openjuru, 2021; Talloires Network, 2025).
Research	Equal core mission	Research informed by local community; research-based learning; GUIR policy for knowledge sharing; collaborative research initiatives (Gulu University, 2023; Gulu University, n.d.; Smith, 2022).
Community Engagement	Equal core mission	Dedicated CUE policy & directorate; prioritised in strategic plan; SCO model; extension services; partnerships & collaborations; GUIR policy (Gulu University, 2023; Gulu University, n.d.; Openjuru, 2021; Smith, 2022; Talloires Network, 2025).

9.3 The Knowledge for Change (K4C) Hub: A Global Initiative for Engaged Scholarship

A fundamental challenge in community-university research partnerships (CURP) is bridging diverse knowledge cultures and effectively addressing the inherent power inequalities that often exist between academic and community partners (UNESCO Chair, 2024). The Knowledge for Change (K4C) Global Consortium is a significant international initiative spearheaded by the UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education (UNESCO Chair, 2024; 2025). Co-founded by Dr Budd Hall (University of Victoria, Canada) and Dr Rajesh Tandon (PRIA, India), K4C's overarching mission is to promote and enhance the movement of engaged scholarship and knowledge democracy globally (Hall & Tandon, 2023; UNESCO Chair, 2024). The central tenet of the K4C model

(outlined in table 2 below) is to promote knowledge democracy through relationships between universities and communities using community-based participatory research (CBPR) to collectively solve problems and create a better world together (UNESCO Chair, 2025).

This approach aims to empower local actors to drive research initiatives, ensuring that research is relevant and responsive to community needs. The mentor training programme (MTP) trains both academics and community practitioners, thereby blurring the traditional boundaries between expert and lay knowledge holders, and fostering mutual learning and respect. The MTP directly facilitates this deliberate shift from a university-centric, extractive model to a community-driven, co-creative model, empowering community members as co-creators and mentors (Hall and Tandon, 2023; Odora Hoppers, 2023; Openjuru, 2021) . This approach establishes a direct link between equitable training and fostering genuine co-ownership in research, ensuring that research questions and methodologies are relevant to and owned by the community, which leads to more sustainable and impactful solutions. The K4C movement offers a powerful and practical example of how universities can actively decolonise research practices and promote cognitive justice (Monk et al., 2023). Since its inception in 2017, this approach has demonstrated significant reach, having trained 160 mentors across 31 K4C hubs in 18 countries, including Uganda (Hall & Tandon, 2023; UNESCO Chair, 2025).

Notably, the Gulu K4C hub is somewhat unique because it lacks a formal, dedicated physical space within the university premises. Instead, most of its activities are generated through informal community partnerships and networks (Monk, 2023). This is purposeful to promote a community-driven model that prioritises community presence and accessibility over institutional formalities. The K4C Hub at Gulu University is not merely facilitating research but is actively working to dismantle the visible crisis of northern epistemology (Monk et al., 2024) by recognising, valuing, and integrating local and indigenous knowledge systems.

Table 2: K4C Hub Objectives and Activities

K4C Hub Objective	Key Activities	Underlying Principle/ Focus
Research & knowledge mobilisation	Deliver gold star mentor training programme (MTP); promote/support new K4C hubs; coordinate networks among existing hubs; conduct collaborative community-based research (Hall & Tandon, n.d.; Openjuru, 2021; UNESCO K4C African Centre, 2025; UNESCO Chair, n.d.).	Knowledge democracy; engaged scholarship; socially responsible higher education (Hall & Tandon, n.d.; UNESCO K4C African Centre, 2025; UNESCO Chair, n.d.)
Capacity building	Deliver gold star mentor training programme (MTP) to academics and practitioners; train community scholars; develop new K4C hubs through cascading model; offer workshops and courses in community-engaged research techniques (Centre for Community Based Participatory Research Gulu, n.d.; Hall & Tandon, n.d.; Openjuru, 2021; UNESCO K4C African Centre, 2025; UNESCO Chair, n.d., 2025).	Empowerment; skill development; self-reliance; knowledge democracy (Hall & Tandon, n.d.; UNESCO K4C African Centre, 2025)
Policy development	Advocate for and shape policies that support engaged scholarship; influence broader governance and development frameworks; coordinate networks among existing hubs (UNESCO K4C African Centre, 2025).	Systemic impact; social justice; sustainable development goals (Hall & Tandon, n.d.; UNESCO K4C African Centre, 2025)

9.4 Methodologies for knowledge co-creation and community-led research

The K4C Hub at Gulu University operates under the robust core of community-based participatory research (CBPR) principles that prioritise equity, mutual respect, and shared benefits (Monk et al., 2024). These

principles guide every stage of the research process, ensuring that community voices are central to the enquiry. Key tenets include active collaboration between community members and researchers at all stages of the research process; joint decision-making that strives for consensus among all participants, including what needs to be researched and how; long term relationships built on profound respect and trust; reciprocal exchange of knowledge, skills, resources, and ownership of the research process; continuous discussion and verification of data among all partners to ensure meaningful and useful results; explicit addressing of the interests and needs of the community; and building upon and contributing to the existing strengths and resources of the community (Monk et al., 2020). Community knowledge is explicitly recognised as distinct from academic knowledge but no less valid than knowledge created within an academic setting. It is deeply interwoven with people's everyday lives and practical applications and is often transmitted across generations.

The Gulu University K4C Hub places a strong emphasis on recognising the epistemic privilege of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS), which are characterised by a relational ontology – a worldview where knowledge is deeply interconnected with land, culture, language and spirituality (Odora Hoppers, 2023). It recognises and utilises non-written, culturally appropriate forms of knowledge transmission and expression. A notable example is the Wang Oo practice of meeting and sharing around a bonfire (Odora Hoppers, 2023). This traditional practice creates a culturally safe and familiar space conducive to speaking from the heart and mutual listening. It fosters genuine trust and authentic dialogue, which are indispensable prerequisites for the co-creation of knowledge. By embracing and adapting Indigenous methodologies, the university directly ensures that research questions are framed from a community perspective, data collection is culturally appropriate, and the resulting knowledge is more relevant, accepted, and actionable within the community. This leads to increased community ownership and sustainable impact.

We feel this demonstrates how universities can go beyond tokenistic engagement to genuinely learn from and adapt to diverse community knowledge cultures rather than imposing external, often Western, frameworks. This approach enhances the legitimacy and utility of research

outcomes for local communities, contributing significantly to the global movement towards cognitive justice and knowledge.

9.5 Impact and Success Stories of Gulu University's CUE and K4C Initiatives

Gulu University's commitment to community-university engagement (CUE) (outlined in table 3 below) and its Knowledge for Change (K4C) hub initiatives has yielded tangible and life-changing impacts across critical sectors, demonstrating the profound effects of integrated academic and community efforts.

In health and well-being, a significant achievement is the development of Covilyce-1, a remedy for COVID-19, which was developed through community engagement in the herbal medicine programme led by Dr Lamwaka at Gulu University. This initiative gained media attention, and its effects were validated through modern evaluation processes, including randomised trials in the community. The development of Covelyce provoked significant policy change in the processes for valuing and integrating herbal medicine and traditional medical research processes in public health. Gulu University also plays a crucial role in training medical professionals, specifically for rural-based health facilities (Gulu University, 2025; Openjuru, 2021). Through supervised community clerkships, in addition to hospital-based practice, students gain exposure to medical conditions in both rudimentary rural set-ups and in classical modern hospital settings (Openjuru, 2021). This produces all-rounded doctors who are uniquely prepared and willing to provide services in poor, rural locations, unlike many classically trained doctors who often prefer urban centres (Openjuru, 2021). Initiatives have also been undertaken at the community level to address mental health needs, demonstrating a holistic approach to well-being. Research conducted at Gulu University has also shown that aerobic dance programmes are an effective non-pharmacological method for managing adult hypertension. This has led to recommendations for Ugandan policymakers to consider incorporating these programmes into the national hypertension management protocols.

In water security and environmental resilience, Gulu University has engaged in significant collaboration with UNSW Sydney and the African STEM Education Initiative (ASEI) since 2016 (with UNSW) and 2020 (with Gulu/ASEI), focusing on ultraviolet-C (UV-C) water treatment technologies (O'Connell, 2025; UNSW Sydney, 2024). This partnership has directly provided 2,500 children and patients with access to safe drinking water (O'Connell, 2025; UNSW Sydney, 2024). Furthermore, 23 Ugandan schools have been reached with training and system installations, and 120 teachers and parents in Uganda have been trained in sustainable water management (O'Connell, 2025; UNSW Sydney, 2024).

Table 3: Community Engagement Initiatives and Their Impacts

Specific Project/ Programme	Key Partners/ Collaborators	Quantifiable/Qualitative Impact
Initiative Area: Health & well-being		
Covilyce-1 development	Local communities	Remedy for COVID-19 developed through community engagement, validated by trials (Smith, 2022).
Rural medical training	Rural health facilities, local communities	Production of all-round doctors serving rural, poor areas (Openjuru, 2021).
Hypertension management	Local communities, policymakers	Aerobic dance programme proven effective, recommended for national protocols
Initiative Area: Water security & environmental resilience		
UNSW water treatment partnership	Local communities, UNSW, ASEI, FundiFix	2,500 children/patients with safe water; 23 schools reached; 120 teachers/ parents trained; 8 jobs created (O'Connell, 2025; UNSW Sydney, 2024).

Specific Project/ Programme	Key Partners/ Collaborators	Quantifiable/Qualitative Impact
Initiative Area: Economic empowerment & entrepreneurship		
Plastic recycling initiative	Local entrepreneur, Gulu City Authority	Establishment of a plastic recycling company, cleaning Gulu City of plastic waste (Openjuru, 2021).
Student-led businesses	Business leaders, financial institutions, youth, refugees	Wine production business employing 12 youths; Seed trading cooperative with 30+ members; Refugee-led weaning food business (Openjuru, 2021).
Initiative Area: Education & regional development		
Moroto Constituent College expansion	Karamoja local leaders, NCHE, stakeholders	Accessible, region-specific higher education; tailored programs in mineral science, tourism, etc. (Oyel, 2025).
Teacher training	Rural schools, local communities	Training teachers for rural schools and agricultural education (Gulu University, 2025).
Initiative Area: Peacebuilding & conflict resolution		
Peacebuilding across disciplines	Local & refugee communities, academic staff	Fostering harmonious coexistence; addressing human-animal and land conflicts through traditional justice (Openjuru, 2021; Smith, 2022).

In economic empowerment and entrepreneurship, Gulu University shifted its entrepreneurship education from a classical theoretical approach to practical enterprise development training and social entrepreneurship (Openjuru, 2021). There is a revolving fund to support supervised student enterprise schemes, where students develop business ideas, create business

plans, receive mentorship and funding from business leaders and financial institutions, run their businesses, and repay advanced funds with modest interest (Openjuru, 2021). Notable examples include a student group that registered a wine production business in Gulu City, now employing 12 youths; an out-of-school youth group that registered a profitable seed trading cooperative with over 30 members in the Amuru district; and a group of South Sudanese refugees who, after training in producing weaning food from local resources, established a business supplying local markets and exporting surplus to South Sudan (Openjuru, 2021). This successful entrepreneurship capacity-building model has been extended beyond university students to include TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) institutions, community women's groups, out-of-school youths, and refugees in northern Uganda (Openjuru, 2021), ensuring broad community benefits. Building on these successes, Gulu University established a business incubation hub to scale further its business development efforts (Openjuru, 2021).

In education and regional development, Gulu University significantly expanded higher-education access to the Karamoja region by establishing its Moroto Constituent College (Oyel, 2025). This initiative is designed to provide accessible, region-specific higher education that supports local development in Karamoja, addressing historical educational gaps (Oyel, 2025). Academic programmes at Moroto will include a Bachelor of Science in Agriculture, alongside tailored programmes in mineral science, environment and natural resources, tourism, and hospitality, all of which are requested by the community to meet their self-identified learning and development needs (Oyel, 2025). Beyond Moroto College, Gulu University continues its core mission of training teachers for rural schools and agricultural education, directly addressing the needs of rural communities (Gulu University, 2025).

In peacebuilding and conflict resolution, Gulu University has strategically moved to streamline peacebuilding across all academic disciplines (Openjuru, 2021), indicating a comprehensive approach to fostering peace. Students from the Institute of Peace and Strategic Studies, supported by academic staff, have played a crucial role in promoting peace and fostering harmonious coexistence among local and refugee communities (Openjuru, 2021). The university's engagement also addresses specific regional conflicts,

such as human-animal conflicts and land conflicts, with a focus on promoting traditional justice systems that prioritise reconciliation over Western retributive justice.

The university not only studies problems but also actively co-creates solutions. The equal status of CUE alongside teaching and research (Monk, 2023; Talloires Network, 2025) and the mandatory CUE component in all academic programmes (Talloires Network, 2025) are not mere policy statements; they directly translate into diverse, impactful, and often entrepreneurial projects. The university's explicit focus on practical, region-specific needs ensures that innovations are relevant, adopted, and sustainable, resulting in tangible community benefits and the creation of significant job opportunities (Gulu University, 2025; Oyel, 2025). Bilateral learning and resource sharing facilitated through partnerships (e.g. with UNSW) further amplify the scope, sustainability, and technological sophistication of these impacts. Gulu University serves as a powerful and compelling testament to the transformative potential of higher education when it fully embraces community engagement mandates. The model demonstrates how an integrated CUE approach can lead to academic excellence and a profound, measurable societal impact, particularly in challenging post-conflict or rural settings. This positions universities as vital actors among others in development, directly contributing to regional resilience and prosperity.

9.6 Challenges and Lessons Learned in Community-University Partnerships

Engaging in community-university partnerships presents inherent complexities in terms of power dynamics and knowledge validation (UNESCO Chair, 2024). Historically community-based knowledge has been dismissed, ignored, and disrespected compared to knowledge produced within academic settings (UNESCO Chair, 2024). Traditional academic culture often operates under the assumption of a single knowledge culture, method, and practice, inadvertently marginalising other forms of knowing (Odora Hoppers, 2023.). This power dynamic has led to communities experiencing self-doubt and reluctance to share their invaluable knowledge,

as they perceive academia as the sole holder of knowledge and themselves as illiterate, uneducated, or invisible (UNESCO Chair, 2024). The K4C Hub at Gulu University explicitly recognises and actively aims to address these deep-seated power differentials, striving to promote cognitive justice and knowledge pluralism (Monk et al., 2023).

Another major challenge is the dependency syndrome of university academics on grants to conduct research. The problem is twofold. First, academics tend to only do research when there is money involved to facilitate it. This culture of dependency tends to incapacitate researchers' abilities to contribute as socially responsible citizens to community development, while expecting the community to participate in their research out of goodwill alone. When communities face a problem, they tend to come together and use their diverse knowledges and skills to research, test, and try to find a solution. Public university researchers, despite being (largely) funded by taxes, seem to think they can only do research if there is a grant – this often includes perceptions of doing community engagement. Second, and relatedly, academic knowledge culture is structured around short-term projects, which hinder the establishment and maintenance of authentic, ongoing relationships with communities and the solving of long term problems. Another major risk is that decisions about what needs to be researched, and how, are decided by people external to the local contexts, applying their foreign frames and assumptions for understanding the world to a context that they are ignorant of. The Gulu university model of community engagement attempts to get around dependency syndrome by emphasising ongoing responsibility and accountability and participation in community, taking on projects using the immense skill and knowledge and experience available for ongoing negotiations for improving the world, with or without funding.

9.7 Future Directions for Universities

Education is deeply entangled with narratives and actions that have fractured this world almost beyond repair, both in the formation of narratives about success as based in comparison and competition with others – a judgement of self as either better or lesser than others – with a

baseline for judgement being modernity and having more things and greater ability to dominate others. Education systems are also a result of the narrative they reproduce. We have designed competitive and transactional systems that seek mastery of competencies and skills that are predictable, rational and can enhance efficiency within modernity. Universities play an integral role in this process, with arrogant claims of omniscience and narrow and isolated conceptions of knowledge. The UNESCO report *Reimagining Our Futures Together* (2021) emphasises that higher education has transformative potential and responsibilities in shaping equitable, sustainable futures but that it must transform itself.

The report suggests that higher education must redefine its purpose beyond traditional academic boundaries, actively contribute to social transformation, environmental sustainability, and epistemic justice, and become inclusive spaces that foster cooperation, solidarity, and lifelong learning. The report stresses the need to correct historical exclusions, especially of Indigenous knowledge systems and marginalised voices. Institutions are urged to engage deeply with local communities to become collaborative, contextualised, and responsive to societal needs. Such a shift cannot be accomplished through simple reform of universities but requires a transformation to something fundamentally different. The soul or beingness of the old university needs to be hospiced (Andreotti, 2021) and reincarnated with different governing structures that align with negotiated, integrated and diverse ontologies and epistemologies which recognise and work within our ignorance and uncertainty, and which strive for peaceful coexistence and collaborative healing and wellbeing.

Gulu University's emerging community-university engagement model can help to imagine how a deeply participative approach can reconfigure the conventional functions of the university by placing community knowledge, priorities, and processes at the centre of research, teaching, and curriculum formation. By enabling communities to drive university processes rather than serving as peripheral beneficiaries, the model expands access to diverse ways of knowing, protects against epistemic exclusion, and embeds ethical commitments to justice and sustainability into scholarly and pedagogical work, potentially transforming the definition of scholarly to become more inclusive. We may even try to include non-human dialogue and knowing if

we are truly committed to expanding epistemologies. Pedagogically, it cultivates capacities for cooperation, critical ecological thinking, and democratic participation; institutionally, it demands new governance forms that are accountable to community partners and that prioritise co-creation over commodification. Ultimately, when universities adopt participative, community-led engagement at scale, they not only produce more relevant and resilient knowledge and graduates, they also help to cultivate the relational dispositions – empathy, humility, and collective responsibility – desperately needed in our negotiation of just and sustainable futures.

9.8 Conclusion

Gulu University continues to be informed by and is dedicated to addressing the persistent and intersectional challenges faced by the post-conflict Acholi sub-region, including high levels of out-of-school and unemployed youth, significant deforestation, land grabbing, livelihood loss, vulnerability to climate change, and water shortages (Monk et al., 2020). These challenges continue to inform the university's research and engagement priorities, ensuring that its work remains deeply embedded in local needs.

Gulu University exemplifies a distinctive and compelling model of higher education, where community-university engagement (CUE) is not a secondary or supplementary activity but a core pillar explicitly driving all its activities (Monk, 2023; Talloires Network, 2025). This institutional commitment is embedded in its mission, vision, and motto: *For Community Transformation*. The university actively manifests this commitment through a comprehensive and integrated framework that includes the formal institutionalisation of CUE via dedicated policies and a directorate, innovative student-centred outreach (SCO) models for experiential learning, and deep integration of diverse knowledge cultures in research and learning.

Gulu University's CUE stems from its holistic and interconnected approach. Institutional commitment provides an overarching mandate and legitimacy; the SCO model offers a student-driven, experiential learning approach; the K4C Hub supplies methodological rigour, a philosophical foundation for equitable knowledge co-creation, and a framework for decolonising

research; and external partnerships extend reach, resources, and technological capabilities. This synergy creates a powerful and dynamic feedback loop in which community visions directly guide academic activities. Academic outputs are intentionally designed to benefit the community, fostering sustainable development and promoting positive societal changes. Gulu University exemplifies a comprehensive, integrated, and highly effective model of higher education that bridges the traditional divide between academic pursuits and pressing societal needs. In *Pathways of Tomorrow: Contribution to Thinking Commensurate with the Planet,* Mbembe (2023) calls for greater epistemic humility amongst humans that decentres humans as the most intelligent and important of species. This is a major project that requires a cultivation of humanity and transformation of our stories about ourselves and the world, with a transformation towards shared existence across time. Universities are but one small space in this expansion of being, however their transformation will have significance in the planetary story. The movement for a transformed university can begin with redefined relationships of knowledge and being between communities and universities. Through this we can perhaps hope for planetary well-being.

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10. Institutional Initiatives for Promoting the Cultivation of Humanity: A Model Practised by Christ University

| Victor Paul and Melvin Victor

Abstract

Christ University, India, aims to strengthen its vision "Excellence and Service" by integrating academic rigour with social responsibility, ethical awareness, and holistic human development. Rooted in the philosophy of integral humanism, inspired by St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the University emphasises education as a means of personal and societal transformation. This chapter highlights the institutional initiatives, such as the Centre for Social Action (CSA), Parivarthana (waste management), the Centre for Life Skills Education (CLSE), Centre for Ecological and Social Sustainability (CESS), and the Centre for Social and Policy Research (CSPR), that collectively operationalise this vision through student volunteerism and service learning among other mechanisms. Drawing on Nussbaum's framework of cultivating humanity, namely dimensions of critical self-examination, world citizenship, and narrative imagination, the chapter analyses how these initiatives contribute to the development of ethically grounded, compassionate, and socially engaged graduates.

While the model offers potential for replication, its effectiveness is contingent upon institutional commitment, curricular integration, and contextual adaptation. The chapter contributes to broader debates on higher education as a public good by illustrating how institutional design can embed humanistic values within academic practice.

Key words: *Cultivation of humanity, Integral humanism, Humanistic development, Student volunteerism, Service learning, Social responsibility*

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10.1 Introduction

When we think of a university, we often focus on academic excellence, rigorous training, and career preparation, but what truly sets it apart is its unwavering commitment to nurturing humanity (Compagnucci et al., 2020). In an era where grades, rankings, and placements often define education, Christ University reminds us that genuine learning extends beyond textbooks and rankings (Christ University, n.d.). Rooted in its vision of "Excellence and Service", Christ University is a model of higher education that seeks to integrate academic rigour with structured institutional mechanisms aimed at fostering ethical awareness, social responsibility, and holistic development. In contrast to approaches that prioritise knowledge and employability outcomes in isolation, Christ University adopts a broader pedagogical orientation in which intellectual formation is closely linked to community engagement and moral development.

This chapter examines how the university operationalises the cultivation of humanity through curriculum design, community engagement structures, institutional structures, and policy frameworks. Rather than treating humanistic education as an abstract ideal, the University embeds it within formal programmes, administrative systems, and co-curricular initiatives that collectively shape student learning experiences. In doing so, it offers an example of how higher education institutions can translate normative commitments, such as epistemic and social justice and the cultivation of humanity, into sustained institutional practice.

Conceptually, the chapter is situated within interdisciplinary frameworks that include Nussbaum's (1997) articulation of "cultivating humanity", alongside complementary perspectives such as integral humanism and relational ethics. These frameworks emphasise the development of critical reasoning, intercultural understanding, and empathetic engagement as central to higher education's public role. The analysis presented here focuses on institutional operationalisation, demonstrating how these theoretical principles are enacted through specific programmes and organisational structures at Christ University.

Building on the theoretical framing of Ubuntu, epistemic justice, and the cultivation of humanity approach outlined in the volume's introduction, this chapter focuses primarily on institutional operationalisation rather than re-elaborating the conceptual foundations. By analysing Christ University's key initiatives and their alignment with broader educational theory, the chapter contributes to ongoing discussions on the role of universities as sites of human development and social transformation. It argues that the cultivation of humanity, when embedded within institutional design and governance, can function as a central organising principle of higher education.

10.2 A Philosophy Rooted in Integral Humanism

Christ University was founded in 1969. Currently, the University has six campuses in India: Delhi (NCR), Pune (Lavasa), and four in Bangalore. The university is home to 36,000 students, supported by over 1,000 academic staff and an equal number of support staff. In today's competitive world, where individual success is often achieved at the expense of collective well-being (Putnam, 2000). Christ University seeks to nurture leaders who are not just brilliant minds but also kind hearts, people capable of shaping a better, humane future. The institutional approach adopted by Christ University is grounded in the philosophical framework of integral humanism, which emphasises the harmonious development of the intellectual, emotional, ethical, social, and spiritual dimensions of the human person (Rout, 2024). Within this framework, education is understood not merely as the transmission of knowledge or the acquisition of skills but as a formative process aimed at enabling individuals to contribute meaningfully to society. This orientation draws inspiration from the educational vision of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the founder of the congregation that manages Christ University, who believed that education is for the formation of the human person for the fulfilment of society (Second Vatican Council, 1965).

This vision supports the whole development of the student. Brahmi et al. (2025) systematically review how whole-person development is being pursued through higher education in India. Four important dimensions of holistic education in Indian higher education institutions may nurture whole-person development: empathy, mindfulness, compassion, and critical

inquiry (Brahmi et al., 2025). Empirical studies on student well-being also reinforce the importance of such an approach, suggesting that students conceptualise meaningful education as a balance between academic engagement and broader dimensions of personal and social life (Douwes et al., 2023). In this regard, Christ University's model reflects a shift away from reductive measures of academic success toward a more expansive understanding of education as a process of human development (Velasco et al., 2021). Earlier institutional articulations of holistic education at Christ University emphasised the formation of the whole person through integrated moral, intellectual, and social development (Chathamparampil et al., 2005).

Four dimensions of human formation at Christ University are:

- **Intellectual formation:** Curriculum rigour and interdisciplinary exposure.
- **Moral formation:** Ethics courses, reflective practices, and mentoring.
- **Social formation:** Rural immersion, service learning, and civic engagement.
- **Spiritual formation:** Reflection and peace building.

The operationalisation of this philosophy at Christ University comes forward in its structured approach to student formation, which may be understood across four interrelated dimensions. Intellectual formation is facilitated through curriculum rigour and interdisciplinary engagement; moral formation through ethics education, mentoring, and reflective practices; social formation through service learning, community engagement, and immersion programmes; and spiritual formation through opportunities for reflection, dialogue, and peacebuilding. Together, these dimensions constitute an integrated framework through which the cultivation of humanity is embedded within institutional practice (Nussbaum, 2010).

Importantly, this model challenges the assumption that humanistic education and academic excellence are competing priorities. Instead, it suggests that the cultivation of humanity can enhance intellectual development by situating knowledge within ethical and social contexts. Alumni reflections and institutional studies indicate that such integrated

educational experiences contribute to transformative learning outcomes, particularly in relation to social awareness and value formation (Kureethara & Thomas, 2016).

While the philosophical foundations of this model are rooted in integral humanism and faith-informed educational traditions, they also intersect with global discourses on the purposes of higher education. In this context, the *cultivation of humanity* may be defined as a multidimensional educational process through which higher education institutions intentionally foster the development of critical reasoning, ethical awareness, empathetic engagement, and civic responsibility, enabling individuals to participate in social life with a commitment to justice, dignity, and collective well-being (Nussbaum, 2010). This definition aligns with broader theoretical perspectives, including Nussbaum's (1997) articulation of the capabilities necessary for democratic citizenship, as well as relational and communitarian philosophies like Ubuntu that emphasise interdependence and moral responsibility (Broodryk, 2002; Singh, 2025).

Comparative perspectives with institutions such as Rhodes University highlight convergences in this emphasis. Though geographically distant, both Christ University and Rhodes University share the belief that higher education should be a public good, a force for equity, dignity, and collective progress (D. Hornby, Director: Community Engagement, personal communication, January 2025). While Rhodes University situates community engagement within post-apartheid transformation discourse, Christ University frames its approach within integral humanism and faith-informed educational philosophy. Although these institutions emerge from distinct historical and epistemological contexts, both position higher education as a transformative force oriented toward societal well-being.

10.3 Key Initiatives by Christ University for Cultivating Humanity

In sum, Christ University's philosophical orientation provides a foundation for understanding how the cultivation of humanity can be conceptualised and practically enacted within higher education. By embedding this

commitment within both its institutional vision and its operational structures, the University offers a model in which human development is not peripheral but central to the purpose of education.

Various programmes and projects encourage the active engagement of students with their communities. Christ University's commitment to community engagement is reflected through its social action activities, which are described below. These programmes function not as isolated initiatives but as interconnected mechanisms embedded within the University's governance, curriculum, and co-curricular frameworks. Collectively, they illustrate how institutional design can translate normative commitments, such as social responsibility, sustainability, and human dignity, into sustained educational practice.

Christ University adopts a structured and multi-dimensional approach to community engagement. Its interventions are organised mainly across six core vertical projects through the Centre for Social Action (CSA) and other initiatives, including Child Sponsorship Programme, Student Volunteerism, Community Development Projects, Parivarthana, and International Relations. Several institutional initiatives complement the institution's vision for community service. Together, these vertical projects and programmes encompass a wide spectrum of activities spanning education, health and well-being, environmental sustainability, social entrepreneurship, and community empowerment. Christ University's community engagement projects extend its commitment to both rural and urban development contexts. The initiatives described in the following sections are situated within this integrated framework, illustrating how these vertical projects collectively translate into targeted projects and programmes that foster sustainable and inclusive social impact.

10.3.1 Centre for Social Action (CSA)

The Centre for Social Action (CSA), established in 1999, serves as Christ University's principal institutional mechanism for community engagement. It integrates student learning with sustained social interventions. Through structured programmes such as child sponsorship, community development, women's self-help groups, and waste management initiatives, CSA aims to cultivate civic responsibility and leadership capacities. Studies

of Christ University specifically also report effective transfer of institutional core values into student attitudes and practices. Alumni reflections suggest that structured social exposure contributes meaningfully to their developmental experience (Kureethara & Thomas, 2016).

CSA operates through the following six key vertical projects, focusing on social impact, namely the Child Sponsorship Programme, student volunteerism, community development projects, the waste management process called Parivarthana, and international student exposure programmes. This structure reflects an institutional effort to align student engagement with broader developmental priorities, including the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and in ways that enhance the development of students' cognitive, social, and ethical competencies while contributing to community well-being (Compagnucci et al., 2020; Chan & Chen, 2022; Douwes et al., 2023).

Child Sponsorship Programme

The Child Sponsorship Programme run by the Centre for Social Action at Christ University has been a flagship initiative since 1999. This programme supports underprivileged children by providing essential educational materials, healthcare, and opportunities for personal development. It aims to help them grow towards future employment, holistic development, and quality education (Christ University, 1999).

From an institutional perspective, the programme exemplifies a model of sustained, rather than episodic, engagement with community stakeholders. Its alignment with global development frameworks, particularly the SDGs related to education and poverty reduction, situates it within broader discourses on inclusive development. At the same time, student involvement in the programme facilitates experiential learning, enabling participants to engage with issues of inequality, access, and social justice in concrete ways.

Student Volunteerism

Student volunteerism at Christ University is characterised by a high degree of organisational structure and pedagogical integration. Coordinated through CSA, volunteer activities are organised into thematic cohorts, each aligned with specific areas such as education, health, environmental

sustainability, and social entrepreneurship. This cohort-based model incorporates leadership roles, peer mentoring, and faculty guidance, thereby transforming volunteerism into a developmental process rather than a purely service-oriented activity.

Several studies indicate that when service is integrated into classroom learning, students are more likely to continue with education, graduate, and actively participate in their communities throughout their lives, having developed civic agency, leadership skills, and reflective agency (Valamarthi et al., 2024). Various student engagement models in higher education settings emphasise students' overall development (Abdelsamea & Bart, 2016; Payne, 2019).

At Christ University, students are engaged through six cohorts, in which every cohort is led by two representatives and guided by a mentor. Each cohort is further divided into five programmes and multiple teams, to ensure its smooth functioning. The volunteers, who are part of the cohort plan, undertake the activities in alignment with the focus areas of the government and the institution. Six cohorts of student volunteerism are:

i) **Education and skill development** with a motto: Learn, Ignite and Discover.

ii) **Health, hygiene and well-being** with a motto: Care, Nurture and Support.

iii) **Environment and sustainability** with a motto: Revive, Resurge, and Restore.

iv) **Child sponsorship programme** with a motto: Educate, Empower, and Elevate.

v) **Social entrepreneurship** with a motto: Initiate, Innovate, and Inculcate.

vi) **Media & advocacy** with a motto: Create, Express and Reform.

All cohort activities are aligned with the respective Sustainable Development Goals (Christ University, 2023a).

Community Development Projects

CSA facilitates an array of development programmes in rural, urban, and tribal areas across various states in India. Developmental activities in sectors like health, education, social/community development, empowering community-based organisations (CBOs), land development, and agricultural development are implemented in urban and rural areas. These activities aim to strengthen communities by empowering women to be socially, politically, and economically active and independent (Christ University Community Development, 2008).

Christ University also partners with external agencies to implement community-based projects. CSA's operational area currently covers 134 villages and 10 urban slums within the project region across India, emphasising education, health, social inclusion, economic stability, skill development, and livelihood initiatives. There are projects in both rural and urban settings (Christ University, 2022).

- **Urban projects:** Urban development initiatives aim to uplift marginalised communities by emphasising education, skills development, and health awareness. The project concentrates on holistic child development, vocational training, digital literacy, women's empowerment, and career guidance, while also promoting health and sanitation and fostering long-term social and economic growth.
- **Rural projects:** Rural development initiatives focus on sustainable livelihoods, healthcare, and education in underserved villages and tribal areas. They emphasise women's empowerment, vocational training, and income generation while supporting child development, nutrition, and early education. Additionally, they work to improve healthcare access and sanitation, fostering long-term community well-being. Other community-focused initiatives under CSA include awareness campaigns, workshops, and exposure visits that raise awareness of critical social issues. These efforts collectively reinforce CSA's dedication to inclusive development, empowerment, and nurturing transformative leaders.

Research on university-community partnerships emphasises that sustained, participatory, and co-designed interventions are essential for achieving both meaningful student learning and durable community outcomes (Drahota et al., 2016; Chan & Chen, 2022). The Christ University model reflects these principles through its emphasis on continuity, institutional funding, and multi-sectoral interventions. By engaging with over a hundred villages and urban settlements, the University demonstrates how community engagement can be scaled while maintaining a focus on local relevance and impact.

Parivarthana – waste management unit

Parivarthana, established in 2008, represents the University's institutional approach to environmental sustainability and circular economy practices. The initiative encompasses waste segregation, recycling, composting, water reuse, and biogas generation, with the aim of transforming the campus into a zero-waste ecosystem. At the core of Parivarthana's operations are the dedicated women within the unit, supported by student volunteers and university administration.

From a scholarly perspective, Parivarthana can be understood as a 'living laboratory' for sustainability education, where operational practices are integrated with student learning and community engagement. Research on campus sustainability initiatives highlights the importance of participatory models that involve students, staff, and local communities in achieving environmental goals (Rodríguez-Guerreiro et al., 2024; Giurea et al., 2025). Parivarthana promotes environmental sustainability through campaigns and projects on waste management, clean energy, and conservation practices. This arm motivates students to become advocates for greener lifestyles and responsible citizenship (Christ University, Institutional Distinctiveness, 2022).

This "Trash to Treasure" initiative has evolved into a sustainable waste management model that focuses on waste reduction, recycling, and socio-economic upliftment. The programme engages student volunteers and women, fostering a circular economy while promoting environmental consciousness (Christ University, 2008b). Parivarthana champions the **3Rs: Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle**, ensuring sustainability through four activities:

- **Paper recycling:** Transforming wastepaper into notebooks, greeting cards, and eco-products which students can purchase.
- **Composting & organic manure:** Converting organic waste into nutrient-rich compost, used for university gardens and generating revenue.
- **Water treatment & recycling:** Recycling 3–4 lakh litres of water daily for vegetation and gardening.
- **Biogas energy generation:** Processing 1,44,480 kg of food waste into 6,556 kg LPG-equivalent biogas.

International Student Exposure Programmes

International relations extends CSA's influence beyond national borders, providing students with opportunities to engage in cross-cultural learning and global social action. By collaborating with like-minded organisations worldwide, CSA improves its approach to community engagement and knowledge exchange. CSA partners with international universities, including HAN University of the Netherlands, ZHAW – Zurich University of Applied Sciences from Switzerland, NORD and VID Universities from Norway, to promote global involvement in community development and student exchange programmes. International students from these universities are placed in rural and urban communities in India for a period of three to six months to understand the local issues and bring out possible solutions. This initiative empowers students to become influential changemakers, bringing meaningful transformation to communities.

Students from partner universities engage in practical learning experiences that immerse them in real-world social issues. These internships and projects last from at least one month to over a year, enabling in-depth involvement and lasting impact. This programme not only benefits communities but also broadens students' perspectives by encouraging cultural exchange, social responsibility, and leadership development.

So far, Christ University has raised awareness among over 18,000 students on environmental issues. It has reached more than 15,000 families through community projects and programmes in 134 rural villages and 10 urban slums. Its activity centres, set up in slum areas, supported over 12,000

students from economically poor backgrounds to complete their elementary education. It has supported more than 8,000 individuals in continuing education and life skills. It engages over 800 university students in volunteering each year. Additionally, it has supported more than 4,000 women through entrepreneurship and self-help group trainings. (Christ University, n.d.)

10.3.2 Other Initiatives

Service Learning Integration

Service learning at Christ University is a structured academic programme that combines meaningful community service with reflective thinking (Christ University, 2023c). Students apply discipline-based learning to real-life, community-identified needs and then reflect on that experience. Christ University sees this as part of developing the vision "Excellence and Service", which emphasises the holistic development of students so that they become socially responsible. Christ University's service learning is implemented via the Centre for Service Learning (CSL), which is part of its social engagement strategy. As a pedagogical innovation, Christ University incorporates service learning into its curricula. Courses are designed to include reflective community engagement, enabling students to connect theoretical knowledge with real-world social issues and fostering both intellectual and moral development (Christ University, 2023c). A detailed institutional account of this pedagogical framework highlights how service learning at Christ University integrates reflective assessment, community partnership models, and credit-based evaluation systems into mainstream curricula (Jose & Sahu, 2023).

Incorporating service learning into higher education has been increasingly recognised as a pedagogical strategy that links academic instruction with meaningful community service and critical reflection (Salam et al., 2019). Research indicates that such programmes foster not only discipline-based learning, but also the development of soft skills such as empathy, communication, civic mindset, and ethical reasoning, thereby supporting the holistic development of students (Culcasi & Paz Fontana Venegas, 2023). Service learning is part of broader institutional commitment to sustainability and societal impact, yet its effective implementation requires

institutional alignment, curricular integration, and reflective assessment (Álvarez-Vanegas et al., 2024).

Environment and Sustainability Commitments

The University promotes eco-consciousness through sustainable campus practices and environmental clubs. The Sustainable Development Goal cell was started in the university in the year 2023 to coordinate and implement SDG-related activities on all the campuses. Students engage in tree planting, waste segregation, green audits, and awareness campaigns that instil ecological responsibility. A sustainable way of academic nurturing and eco-clubs cultivates ecological consciousness and responsibility towards nature (Christ University, 2023d).

Centre for Life Skills Education (CLSE)

This centre offers life skills training that promotes empathy, critical thinking, self-awareness, and emotional intelligence, aiming for holistic personal development beyond academic learning.

Centre for Social and Policy Research (CSPR)

This centre encourages critical engagement with societal issues through participatory research that promotes civic responsibility and policy-level awareness among students and faculty.

Centre for Academic and Professional Support (CAPS)

This centre develops interpersonal and emotional intelligence skills by training students on empathy-based leadership, nonviolent communication, and ethical workplace behaviour.

Research and Publications on Humanity

The Centre for Publication encourages action research on marginalised communities, peace studies, ethics, and developmental issues. Departments at Christ University collaborate with NGOs and international bodies to produce impactful community-based research.

Rural Immersion Programme

Students are encouraged to participate in rural camps that allow them to live and work in marginalised communities. This immersion fosters humility, understanding, and a first-hand appreciation of structural inequalities.

10.4 Aligning with the theoretical framework by Martha Nussbaum

Christ University's institutional model for the cultivation of humanity aligns closely with Nussbaum's (1997) framework of education for human development. Nussbaum identifies three capacities for cultivating humanity: critical thinking, cross-cultural understanding, and narrative imagination. Collectively, these capacities enable individuals to engage reflectively with diverse social contexts to contribute to a more just and inclusive society.

This section analyses how Christ University's institutional initiatives align with these theoretical dimensions through structured pedagogical and engagement practices.

10.4.1 Critical self-examination

Nussbaum (1997) emphasises the importance of cultivating the capacity for critical reflection as a foundation for democratic participation. At Christ University, this dimension comes forward in pedagogical practices that require students to engage reflexively with their own social positioning and values. Service learning programmes especially function as critical sites for such reflection, as students are encouraged to connect disciplinary knowledge with lived social realities.

The integration of reflective assessments, such as journals and experiential learning assessments, ensure that engagement extends to critical interpretation. These practices aim to foster reflexivity and self-examination.

10.4.2 World citizenship

The second dimension of Nussbaum's framework highlights the importance of cultivating a sense of global citizenship, in which individuals recognise their interconnectedness and entanglement with others beyond national or cultural boundaries. Christ University advances this objective through both local and global engagement strategies.

The CSA engages students in community development and social justice work, connecting local issues with global concerns such as poverty, gender equity, and sustainability. Whilst this approach seeks to establish a commitment to and embeddedness in the local, international collaborations and exchange programmes expose students to global cultures and academic environments. SDG-based engagements, especially with Christ University positioned as a nodal university for SDG 5 (Gender Equality), encourage students to understand and act on global challenges.

10.4.3 Narrative Imagination

The capacity for narrative imagination, the ability to empathise with the experiences of others, is central to the cultivation of humanity. At Christ University, this dimension is cultivated through both curricular and co-curricular initiatives that expose students to diverse perspectives and lived experiences.

Cultural festivals, literary engagements, and performing arts allow students to engage with diverse narratives through literature, performance, and storytelling. More significantly, immersion programmes and community engagement initiatives place students in direct contact with marginalised communities, where they encounter social realities that differ from their own. We argue that these experiences promote empathy and perspective-taking, as they challenge students to move beyond abstract understanding toward relational and affective engagement.

10.4.4 Interconnected capacities for the cultivation of humanity

While each of Nussbaum's dimensions can feel distinct, Christ University's institutional model demonstrates that these capacities are deeply interconnected. Programmes such as service learning and community

engagement simultaneously foster critical reflection, global awareness, and empathetic understanding. This integrated approach reflects a holistic conception of education in which intellectual, ethical, and emotional development are mutually reinforcing.

10.5 Challenges and Constraints

At the same time, the analysis suggests that the effectiveness of this alignment depends on the depth of student engagement and the quality of reflective processes embedded within programmes. Without sustained reflection and critical facilitation, there is a risk that participation may remain procedural or prescriptive. The following challenges are therefore best understood not simply as operational obstacles, but as structural conditions that shape the limits and possibilities of the model:

i) **Resource constraints:** The sustainability of the various community engagement, and environmental initiatives depend on consistent financial support. Activities such as field immersion, community development, waste management, and student outreach require significant logistical investment. In this respect, the establishment of dedicated units such as the CSA is important because it provides organisational capacity, financial support, and accountability mechanisms. However, the need for such dedicated infrastructure also emphasises that institutional commitment to social responsibility must be matched by sustained resource allocation.

ii) **Curriculum rigidity:** Inflexible academic timetables make it difficult to integrate such initiatives without overburdening students. In professional and technically- oriented disciplines, where credit structures are often tightly prescribed, opportunities for service learning specifically and community engagement generally may be limited by timetabling constraints and competing curricular demands. Additionally, integrating service learning across disciplines presents structural tensions. There is also the risk that when engagement becomes mandatory, it may be treated as procedural compliance rather than reflective learning.

iii) **Departmental buy-in:** Varying levels of enthusiasm or understanding among academics in the different departments about the value of cultivating humanity can be another challenge. The success of initiatives aimed at cultivating humanity depends significantly on faculty perceptions of their relevance. Yet disciplinary cultures differ in the extent to which community engagement is viewed as central to academic work. In some fields, especially the humanities and social sciences, reflective and socially engaged approaches may be more readily integrated. In others, particularly where curricula are professionally regulated, such activities may be perceived as peripheral. This variation reflects deeper epistemological differences concerning what counts as legitimate knowledge and meaningful learning. Institutional directives can encourage participation, but sustained transformation requires faculty to regard humanistic formation as integral to academic excellence rather than as an optional addition.

iv) **Scalability of community partnerships:** Ensuring meaningful and sustainable community collaborations at scale is another challenge. The other risk factor is community fatigue. It is difficult to involve the local community from the very beginning in all the project areas to build community partnerships and create a feeling of ownership among the community. Scaling community partnerships also raises ethical considerations, including the risk of extractive engagement, uneven power dynamics between university and community actors, and potential community fatigue when the same sites are repeatedly utilised for student immersion.

10.6 Conclusion

Christ University seeks to institutionalise the cultivation of humanity in its core functions. To cultivate humanity is to teach students to think critically but also to feel deeply. Grounded in the philosophy of integral humanism and aligned with Nussbaum's (1997) work on human development, Christ University seeks to equip students with tools of inquiry and reflection, but also with the moral imagination to envision a better world.

Rather than positioning ethical formation and social responsibility as peripheral to academic life, the Christ University approach demonstrates how these dimensions can function as central organising principles of institutional design. A key contribution of this model lies in this emphasis on institutionalisation. Through centres such as the Centre for Social Action, structured service learning frameworks, and sustainability initiatives such as Parivarthana, the University translates normative commitments into operational mechanisms.

At the same time, an analysis of the programmes illustrates that the cultivation of humanity cannot be reduced to programme design alone. Their effectiveness depends on the depth of student engagement and the nature of relationships between the institution and the communities with which it engages. The challenges identified in this chapter, including curriculum constraints, uneven faculty engagement, and scalability of partnerships, highlight the necessity of ongoing critical evaluation. While the Christ University model demonstrates alignment between institutional vision and structured engagement practices, its replicability depends on contextual adaptation, leadership commitment, resource allocation, and sustained faculty engagement. These tensions suggest that the cultivation of humanity is not a static outcome but a continuous and unfinished process at both individual and institutional levels.

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11. Introducing Echo-Autoethnography: The Weaving of Wholeness in Community-Engaged Praxis Across the Atlantic

| Shilohna Phillanders

Abstract

Amidst a growing need and call for critical reflexivity in community-engaged scholarship, this chapter introduces **echo-autoethnography** as a narrative methodology that weaves wholeness and humanity into research and practice. Echo-autoethnography extends the roots of autoethnography, expanding the research method's reflexive practice beyond internal dialogue to include relational, dialectic, and collective dimensions of community-engaged scholarship and inquiry.

The echo-autoethnographic method captures the layered interplay of power, place, and positionality of educational research and community practice through the author's context as a Caribbean native from Trinidad and Tobago. Centring relationships between self and others, and between researcher and community, as foundational to knowledge production, echo-autoethnography frames research as a process of humanisation that is guided by empathy, dignity and reciprocity. This chapter argues that echo-autoethnography reflects Ubuntu's assertion that: "I am because we are." Through emphasising the 'echoes' that emerge within and between researchers and community narratives, echo-autoethnography enables the co-creation of meaning across positionalities, power dynamics and lived experiences.

This chapter also considers the echoes that transcend postcolonial histories and borders across oceans. The author's Caribbean roots and experience connect to broader African experiences through a shared colonial history manifesting as present-day challenges in both contexts. Echo-

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autoethnography foregrounds these connections, inviting shared reflection and amplifying voices marginalised in traditional research frameworks, advancing an ethical, dialogic, and transformative approach to community-engaged scholarship and practice.

Key words: *Echo-autoethnography; Ubuntu; Critical reflexivity; Community-engaged research; Narrative inquiry; Epistemic justice*

"Ubuntu means I am because we are.
If I am to be better, we should be better.
If I want you to be better, I should be better."
– Tiisetso Malomo

11.1 Voices That Cross Borders: Weaving Narratives With Ubuntu

In the tapestry of life, every thread connects us to a larger, more vivid picture and the assertion that our experiences are truly shared. Our stories and experiences are interwoven threads of histories, lives, and perspectives that cross borders. Our humanity is rooted in this idea of collective holism. As transient beings, we can consider ourselves to be part of the whole, and the whole is a part of our existence.

Ubuntu offers us a lens to situate this chapter which introduces **echo-autoethnography** as a research method attending to the relational and dialectical dimensions of knowledge and reflection. Ubuntu highlights that the self is never detached from the collective, and that learning and knowledge acquisition are gained through shared experiences. Goduka (2000) describes Ubuntu as a worldview embedded in the oneness of humanity as a collective, with cultural and spiritual values which pursue respect and dignity for all.

In her 2016 presidential address to the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES), Professor N'Dri Assié-Lumumba described education as a social institution shaped by varying epistemologies which continually evolve. Within this description, she highlighted the importance of the philosophy of Ubuntu in understanding and shaping the policies and practices of education orientated towards distinctly African futures. In relation to cross-border contexts with shared histories of colonial pasts, questions still holding relevance are: "Whose paradigms will guide us? Who has the agency and legitimacy to define the methodologies that we use to comprehend educational and social processes?" (Assié-Lumumba, 2017, p. 2).

For societies that share entangled colonial histories, across Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the broader global dominant spaces, Assié-Lumumba's questions resonate. These questions persist as epistemic challenges to dominant ways of being and knowing in academic systems. They invite us to *re*-create the narratives that tell our own stories, amplifying often silenced lived experiences and relational ways of knowing and the acknowledgement of that knowing. It is within this space that **echo-**

autoethnography emerges as a methodological response which is grounded in interwoven narratives, co-created knowledge, and reflexive engagement with community.

Echo-autoethnography can be defined as the intentional engagement of the autoethnographic process with individualised community narratives to deepen the co-creation of knowledge to support social reflexivity and change (Phillanders, 2025). It expands the iterative reflexive practice of autoethnography beyond internal dialogue to include relational, dialectic and collective dimensions of community-engaged scholarship and inquiry. Through humanistic and relational engagement, it acknowledges the researcher-self, community, and historical intersections of learning and transformation. It seeks to flesh out the nuances of shared experiences, illuminating how personal stories transcend borders, histories and identities. It is situated within a movement to reclaim stories and lived experiences in research to support the holistic growth of the researcher-self and her communities.

This chapter presents echo-autoethnography as a humanising method, which weaves personal and collective stories into a shared understanding of self and society, connecting this approach to the principles of Ubuntu and holism. This deepening of the relational perspective lends to the autoethnographic voice a reflective foundation of creating bridges which connect communities and contexts often depicted as inherently different. In so doing, echo-autoethnography is a tool for cultivating more humane research relationships.

11.2 Autoethnographic Voice as the Reflective Foundation

Reflection as a human process has a long intellectual lineage. As Wilson (2008) states, the concept of the reflective process has been a part of the human existence for millennia, connecting to Aristotle's discussion of reflection and moral action. It is furthermore attributed to Dewey (1938) in his iterations and formulation of the experiential learning model in education, and Schön (1983), also in relation to education particularly that of

the *reflective practitioner* (Schön, 1983). Wilson (2008 p. 177) identifies Schön's (1983) expression of the reflection process as having two main concepts; *reflection-on-action* (after activities) and *reflection-in-action* (during activities).

Schön (1983) focused on the reflective practitioner who was considered a professional in their field and their epistemological standpoints of professional knowledge. In attempting to understand practitioners' epistemology, Schön (1983) saw the *reflection-on-action* process as one where the practitioner would reflect on activities after its completion, whereas the *reflection-in-action* process involved active reflection while in the process of activities (Wilson, 2008).

Reflection, and particularly self-reflection, is a key component of community-engaged scholarship. It is a fundamental aspect of the work of the practitioner-scholar, as it lends to the central practice that supports critical thinking, ethical awareness and the deepening of learning for themselves as well as the students they support. This process of reflection is also a central practice for students who are engaged in service-learning and other community engagement activities. This action of questioning and internalising can be humbling and insightful. Reflection illuminates biases, personal preferences, and unchecked assumptions. Reflection can also shine light on inner worlds and shortcomings that might otherwise go unchecked.

Autoethnography is identified as a critical and cultural analysis of a person's lived experiences; it applies analysis and cultural interpretations to narrative research (Ellis, 2004). Marechal (2010) describes autoethnography as a researcher's use of self-reflection and writing to explore their lived and personal experiences in relation to wider issues of culture, politics, social meanings and understandings. It is a structured methodology by which practitioner-scholars in the field of community engagement can interrogate and explore their own inner-dialogue and experiences as it relates to the community.

Autoethnography was the initial basis for my doctoral study from which the methodology of echo-autoethnography was later conceptualised. The initial study focused on a critically reflexive understanding of community

engagement from the perspective of a practitioner. It aimed to explore the influence community engagement has on practitioners' holistic development.

Autoethnography was thus initially chosen as a methodology that would enable an exploration of my personal experiences. The investigation drew upon my role as a community engagement coordinator within a Caribbean higher education institution. I drew on autobiographical writing and artifacts to critically examine my social position and perspectives to find insight and clarity about personal assumptions as well as to identify and analyse the emotions attached to my institutional position (Luttrell, 2010). These highly personalised accounts drew on my own experiences to further explore and expand social understandings of community engagement (Sparkes, 2000). There were numerous tensions and stored memories which I knew needed greater investigation and analysis, particularly as I sought to find ways to enhance understandings of community engagement within the Caribbean region.

As a practitioner-scholar beyond the United States, the use of autoethnography allowed for my positioning as an *othered* voice in community engagement. The field of community-engaged practice and research, as a deepening of educational outcomes and social action, is dominated by scholarship from the United States (Clayton et al., 2022). Amplifying voices outside of this American context is crucial as we see the adoption and adaption of community-engaged frameworks in spaces where the scholarship is less dominant. Autoethnography is useful as a research methodology which gives voice to an *other* (Smith, 1999) and therefore a choice which many more researchers from varied global contexts can adapt in the telling of stories of social action aligned with educational outcomes within their own societies.

Autoethnography creates space for researchers from marginalised or othered communities to speak for themselves. By utilising dominant academic spaces to amplify the voices of their own people, autoethnography gives voice to previously unheard perspectives, providing an opportunity to better share an understanding of cultural relational practices, common values, and beliefs (Maso, 2001). Ellis et al. (2011, p. 3) highlight a need for

diverse voices in research where, "[f]or the most part, those who advocate and insist on canonical forms of doing and writing research are advocating a White, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper-classed, Christian, able-bodied perspective." Through autoethnography, I chose to challenge the general narrative often seen in community-engaged research and practice; I chose to embolden my voice as a young, black, Caribbean woman.

Voice can be seen as a powerful counter-narrative in research. Smith (1999) identifies issues associated with 'voice' and 'visibility', 'silence' and 'invisibility' as salient concerns as women participate in academia. It is also necessary to consider the views we adapt in research, often shaped heavily by the sources of our knowledge and our epistemological grounding. As a researcher in community engagement in higher education, my goal is to engage and enhance knowledge that can legitimise the experiences of Caribbean and other emerging societies' institutions and people. Autoethnography legitimises the experiences of othered voices in community engagement, identifying their experiences as knowledge (Smith, 1999).

11.3 From the Autoethnographic Voice to Echoes: Unearthing Echo-Autoethnography

Autoethnography on its own served as a means to analyse and interrogate my experiences as a community engagement practitioner in the Caribbean setting. Autoethnography, unlike many other scientific research methods, considers subjectivity, emotions, and the influence of researcher bias (Ellis et al., 2011). This is not necessarily a weakness: attention to subjectivity and specificity can be strengths of research. However, one of the major critiques of autoethnographic research is that it can be considered self-indulgent in nature, where the researcher draws meaning from their own experiences (Chang, 2008). Chang (2008) argues that researchers in the field need to be conscious of five pitfalls:

i) Excessive focus on self in isolation from others.

ii) Overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation.

iii) Exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source.

iv) Negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives.

v) Inappropriate application of the label 'autoethnography'. (p. 54)

To ensure the validity of work as an autoethnographer it is important to step back and limit the emotions of writing solely from the viewpoint of personal experiences. With the storytelling nature of autoethnography, it is imperative that researchers hold themselves accountable to the mission of cultural interpretation and analysis (Reed-Danahay, 1997). I sought to defend and strengthen this methodology through the inclusion of interviews with others in the field. This study included 9 semi-structured interviews from varied global spaces. Participant selection utilised the cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2016), largely influenced by the constraints of conducting research during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic while based in China. That period of our collective history was globally constrictive and caused many to reassess how processes were conducted, my doctoral process included. Challenges of travel, time, finances, and many other factors along with forced isolation living in China, led me to an even more reflective space where every experience mentally catalogued over my years of practice in service-learning and community engagement resurfaced.

These participants were community-engaged practitioners with no less than 5 years of practice and included participants from the United States (3), Trinidad and Tobago (2), South Africa (2), mainland China (1), and Chile (1). As they shared their narratives while I reflected on my own experiences, we bonded and resonated within the isolation of the pandemic while identifying echoes across the flicker of digital screens.

Serving as the basis for comparative reflection and triangulation, the semi-structured interviews played the most substantial form of merit in ensuring validity of my study. In addition to personal accounts of short narratives, vignettes, poems, and conversation exerts, interviews of other practitioners from varied settings were incorporated. This added rich context and comparative elements to the body of research.

The use of semi-structured interviews was initially an attempt to strengthen and triangulate the research, yet it led to something deeper. The study moved from personal interrogation to hearing and feeling the reverberations across the experiences of people in various spaces. As I sat with the interview participants, reviewed the transcripts, and analysed the data, there were more than just slight convergences in the data between my own autoethnographic data sets and that of the interview participants.

A resonating vibration started with one echo and amplified as I conducted further interviews, across continents, regions, cultures, and heterogeneous institutions. Within community-engaged work, dialogue, reciprocity, relationship building and shared meaning making are deeply embedded, creating space for the expansion of autoethnography. Echo-autoethnography was a method borne of the recognition that autoethnography did not fully encapsulate work which connects directly to the community and shared narratives. It was a deepening of the autoethnographic process that showcased the power found in acknowledging and sharing personal narratives. Reflection when contained within the self can risk becoming internal monologue; echo-autoethnography thus supports a deeper analysis through shared meaning making and iterative dialectics.

Echo-autoethnography is a relational extension of autoethnography that redefines reflexivity beyond the solitary voice of the researcher-self to include reverberations from the community. Traditional autoethnography identifies self-reflection as the main source of meaning making, whereas echo-autoethnography perceives the researcher-self as embedded *in context*, which in turn serves as a resonant space. This is a space where narratives of self may echo and mirror broader narratives of the community. The researcher's acceptance of their narrative, grounded in relational responsibility, interweaves external voices with personal experience, affirming that we are all interconnected: "I am because we are."

The table below serves to highlight the shifts from traditional autoethnography to the emergence of echo-autoethnography.

Table 1: Comparative Table of Autoethnography and Echo-Autoethnography

Traditional Autoethnography	Echo-Autoethnography
Centres the personal narrative of the researcher	Centres relational resonance between the researcher and community
Reflexivity centred on internal dialogue	Reflexivity extended to dialogic and collective engagement
Researcher interprets personal lived experience	Researcher responds to and co-constructs meaning with others from lived experience
Emphasis on voice and visibility	Emphasis on voice, echo, and ethical accountability
Socio-cultural interpretation through self-analysis	Socio-cultural interpretation through relational threads

The table showcases movement from the solitary space of autoethnography to the relational reverberation found in echo-autoethnography.

The term echo-autoethnography was thus borne out of personal autoethnographic study which engaged my experiences as a practitioner in the field of community engagement. The study sought to critically reflect and expand upon social understandings of community engagement, to enhance the already existing body of research, adding novel takes on practitioner experiences from an emerging society while utilising an *othered voice*.

The was an embodied narrative inquiry. Menary (2008, p. 64) describes this approach as allowing us to make "more sense of ourselves as complex biological, historical and social beings whose experiences and action are ready for narration." The embodied narrative form allowed me, as the researcher, the opportunity to tell my story while connecting with the narratives of others (Collins, 2009; hooks, 1981, 2011).

Without explicitly identifying as a researcher with a Caribbean identity, my initial study exploring community engagement could have been lost in the sea of related studies of service-learning pedagogy and community-engaged

research. Though the field is one with continuous emerging works, what separated the study from others was the prevailing voice being that of *an other* in a field saturated by epistemologies and ontologies of dominant academic paradigms. In this sense, it is of significant value that researchers outside of that dominant academic setting clearly identify their academic contributions, particularly in the field of community-engaged work. I posit that the autoethnographic approach to research, widened by echo-autoethnography, supports this need in academia to enhance the voices of traditionally underrepresented academic contexts.

In addition to encouraging the amplification of traditionally marginalised voices in community-engaged research and practice, echo-autoethnography also provides contexts for greater collaborative action between researchers and practitioners from dominant academic paradigms and those of emerging and traditionally underrepresented academic contexts. This collaboration can also extend between various traditionally underrepresented academic contexts, a shared co-creation of research and knowledge.

11.4 The Art of Critical Reflexivity

Echo-autoethnography requires critical reflexivity, drawing on Freire's (2000) work on critical pedagogy. The basis of critical pedagogy is to educate in ways that expand self-awareness and self-determination, so that individuals better understand their place and space in life and society and how these interconnect (Scherr, 2005; Freire, 1998, 2005; hooks, 1994). For the context of this chapter, this emphasis on self-awareness, self-determination, and spatial and positional awareness allow the community engagement practitioner to see themselves broadly connected to the world outside of themselves.

More than just a tool in building knowledge and social understanding, community-engaged scholarship premised on critical reflexivity contributes to understanding the workings and perceptions of the society and communities, creating systems to improve them. Scherr (2005), drawing on the Frankfurt school of thought, positions education as a means of

cultivating self-reflection (Adorno, 1970, as cited by Scherr, 2005, p. 146). From this perspective, education should enable individuals to critically interrogate dominant societal ideologies and become conscious of their own emotions and positionalities in relation to the broader social context. These principles underpin a socially responsible education system.

However, when such reflexivity is absent, the role of the university risks reproducing problematic dynamics. The notion of the university and its members being associated with that of an ivory tower, which sees communities as test-labs (Bond & Paterson, 2005; Chatterton, 2000; Anderson, 1996) becomes particularly evident in short-term, performative engagement activities. In these contexts, a *saviour complex* may arise, wherein individuals go into community engagement activities with the idea that they are there to 'save' the people of said communities while gaining some internal leverage through their altruistic actions, reinforcing oppressive systems (Murphy, 2021). In the Caribbean experience, where international groups and organisations often enter local communities in this way, there is a pressing need for heightened awareness and critical engagement with these conditions to avoid perpetuating inequitable and extractive relationships (Phillanders, 2021; 2025).

Additionally, Mitchell (2008) identified problematic aspects of service-learning which automatically assume benefits to communities and students involved, whilst neglecting power dynamics between these groups. From this understanding, the concept of critical service-learning was established. The concept of critical service-learning disrupts traditional patterns, inviting institutions and practitioners to "turn the mirror to themselves" and reevaluate programming and their own positions (Latta et al., 2018). Reflection, with a specific goal of identifying personal biases, misconceptions and shortcomings related to global socio-cultural interactions within the field of service-learning and other forms of community engagement, is crucial.

Critical pedagogy and the wider understanding of critical educational studies, seek to shine light on power dynamics and inequalities in the systems of the world inclusive of social, cultural, and economic inequalities, and educates individuals both formally and informally to counter these

narratives (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2003; Giroux, 1997). Critical pedagogy can be seen as a means of transgressing, or a move against and beyond boundaries, creating a space for education that translates to the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994). Without critical pedagogy, there cannot be critical service-learning and community engagement generally. The understanding is that the implementation of praxis creates the space whereby individuals can work towards what Apple (2009, p. 3) identifies as "radical shifts in one's social commitments". This is the art of criticality which the theory of echo-autoethnography builds upon.

11.5 The Emergence of Echo-Autoethnography as a Theorised Methodology

Echo-autoethnography emerged as a description of intentionally merging the autoethnographic process with the interviews conducted in my doctoral study. This dynamic and intentional engagement of the autoethnographic process with the interviews set the groundwork for the co-creation of knowledge via the researcher and research participants. It is through our engagement with communities from which knowledge already exists that we better understand the systems of society. This co-creation of knowledge in the form of legitimising and amplifying various voices, while providing equal standing in their vocalisation, was an exciting turn of events in the initial research.

To me, the image of an echo symbolised that I was not alone in my experiences, thoughts, and hypotheses. The understanding that there was a reverberation in the wider field gave way to this methodology of echo-autoethnography. The imagery relayed that the process of the study aided in the reflexive process of the researcher as it allowed a moment for additional voices to be brought into the process of the data collection and overall research. The external voices, through the interviews, echoed sentiments identified by the researcher while also providing a mirror to see oneself through the reflected experiences of others. By sharing autoethnographical experiences and research with a wider body of practitioners through semi-structured interviews, I was additionally able to achieve some distance and

objectivity to my own experiences (Kotsi, 2018), countering the self-indulgence of autoethnography identified by Chang (2008).

The use of supporting global reverberations to enhance the autoethnographic experience beyond the researcher's personal datasets sets the tone for echo-autoethnography. Intentionally utilising interviews allowed for the expansion of understanding of a service-learning practitioner outside of my personalised scope. It allowed for my recognising other voices and spaces in the field. These included voices and spaces like my own Caribbean setting of Trinidad and Tobago, and entirely different contexts, and even within those in dominant spaces, there was an echoing of experiences and thoughts. This process of including echoed reflections through the interviews allowed me to recognise my biases and perceptions of community engagement when looking through the understanding of an emerging, traditionally underrepresented academic context.

11.6 Core Principles of Echo-Autoethnography

Echo-autoethnography is grounded on the premise that relational resonance meaningfully extends traditional autoethnographic practice. While personal experience provides a critical lens through which social and cultural structures can be interpreted, echo-autoethnography affirms that knowledge is relationally constituted and co-constructed through intentional, dialogic sharing. Six core principles emerged as the initial study blossomed, which can be utilised by other researchers to guide this approach:

- **Relational Reflexivity:** Reflexivity extends beyond solitary introspection and is intentionally interwoven with participant narratives. Meaning is generated through structured, dialogic engagement rooted in shared and intersecting experiences.
- **Positional Accountability:** The researcher maintains continuous interrogation of their positionality, authority, privilege, and vulnerability. This ongoing reflexive posture acknowledges bias, complicity, and ethical responsibility within the research relationship.
- **Reciprocal Vulnerability:** Intentional narrative sharing fosters relational trust and dialogue openness between researcher and

participants. This challenges hierarchical norms often embedded in traditional research practice by unmasking power differentials through shared vulnerability.

- **Dialogic Knowledge Creation:** Narratives merge as echoes between the researcher-self and participants. Rather than an extractive practice, echo-autoethnography is grounded in reciprocal knowledge exchange, affirming the co-construction of insight through shared engagement.
- **Amplification of Marginal Voices:** Echo-autoethnography intentionally centres voices from underrepresented contexts, particularly those historically excluded from dominant academic discourse, affirming their epistemic legitimacy and authority.
- **Temporal Echoic Resonance:** Reverberations unfold across time and space as narratives align, diverge, unsettle or affirm between researcher and participants. These echoes resound, extending beyond the immediate study, creating space for future praxis and layered interpretation.

As the primary source of data in echo-autoethnography, the researcher is an amplified voice, speaking from a place of known experiences and sharing this space with other community voices. As the speakers reverberate off each other, the data provided stands as a communal way of experiencing and knowing. They speak on personal experiences as they internally conduct critical reflection, coming to a greater understanding of the moments that shaped mutual experiences. This is an epistemology stemming from shared amplified voices, a reshaping and countering of the dominant epistemologies of knowledge and how we accept the existence of community knowledge. Voices in autoethnography, when utilised from emerging societies, can be seen as coming from a space distinctly separated from dominant academic paradigms and societies. Pairing these voices with interviews solidifies that notion of the co-creation of knowledge in emerging spaces, heightening those traditionally underrepresented in knowledge-creating and knowledge-identification spaces.

In the initial study, personal concerns, grievances and successes were shared across the varied spaces, roles, and experiences, returning as echoes to personal reflections. They became the echo and reflection of my

autoethnographic experience, solidifying that greater consideration for this kind of research was necessary. This was the impetus and justification for solidifying this methodology, depicted in **Figure 1,** below.

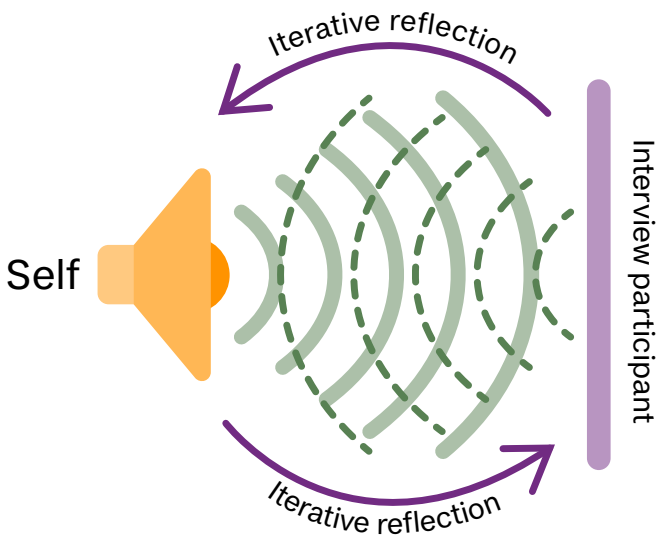


Figure 1: Illustration of the Echo-Autoethnographic Framework. *Note: This figure represents the author's original conceptualisation of echo-autoethnography as a research methodology.*

To interpret the above figure, one must visualise the process of an echo while acknowledging its cyclical and dialogic nature. At its core is the understanding of the connection between the researcher-self and the interview participant who is the co-creator of the knowledge experience. The illustration showcases the birth of the concept, with the researcher-self speaking into what was initially thought to be a void. Instead of a one-way dialogue where the researcher interacts with the interview participants, extracting knowledge, we see that there is a communicative process taking place with a shared cyclical, iterative relation amongst parties They are engaging *with* each other and employing reflection to understand the dialogue, across the space of a perceived void.

The concentric layers signify the outward-reaching engagement of the researcher-self with the community voices, who are identified in this initial iteration as interview participants. This engagement spans historical context and structural influences, layered and amplifying as they reach across to each other, indicating reciprocity and an intentional movement of voices The more voices are amplified, the stronger the reverberation. Moreover, amplification of voices is not a stand-alone feature in the process but rather a part of a layered process of iterative reflection that creates a system where there is no true end or beginning of the process but rather one that remains open for further discussion, research and knowledge creation. There is also the acknowledgement that even differing perspectives own a place of knowledge creation in the process, as all parties seek to relationally understand and co-create understanding.

11.7 Epistemological and Conceptual Framing

Echo-autoethnography is rooted in in an iterative, reflective process. Reflection is not a solitary act but rather a dialogic process, extended outward to engage the perspectives and experiences of others in the research context.

This action of sitting with oneself *in* the process of community-engaged practice aligns with the tenets of autoethnography, while also reflecting after or *on* doing the activities, with others, can constitute the echoing aspect. This is a critical component in advancing community-engaged research and practice. Ongoing and post-activity reflection enables the iterative improvement of programmes, fostering enhanced effectiveness and impact within the field. Such reflexivity allows practitioners across all levels of engagement to identify strengths, limitations, and differing perspectives, informing strategies for future planning and implementation. Moreover, embedding accountability within this relational and participatory framework ensures not only institutional responsibility but also the reciprocal growth and transformation of all stakeholders involved. This framing of the iterative reflexive process as a supporting element of the echo-autoethnographic process is illustrated below in **Figure 2**.

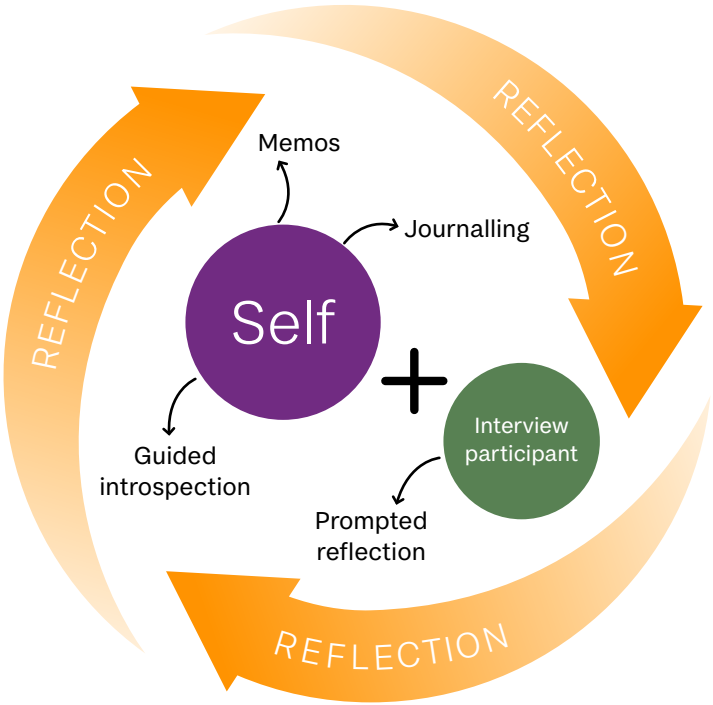


Figure 2: Illustration of the Echo-Autoethnographic Iterative Reflection Process.
Note: This figure represents the author's original conceptualisation of echo-autoethnographic utilisation of the iterative reflection process.

Figure 2 illustrates the *echo-autoethnographic iterative reflection process*, a conceptualisation of how reflection unfolds across time and relational interactions.

The model highlights repeated analysis of data to identify patterns, differences, and points of resonance, ensuring that meaning is co-constructed rather than assumed (Khanam, 2015). The iterative reflection process is an important tool in ensuring validity and triangulation when carrying out research methodologies such as autoethnography and is especially crucial in community-engaged research that is positioned to counter extractive practices, as is the case of echo-autoethnography.

As the illustration identifies, there is simultaneous iterative reflection between the researcher and the interview participants. The reflective process comes as a natural part of autoethnographic work while the other participants of the research, through the interviews, are guided through the reflective process. By engaging in this iterative reflection process, the researcher is forced to critically acknowledge and understand their own experiences in relation to the simultaneous reflection process of the other participants in the research. The reflections of others in the field support or refute the researcher's understandings and assumptions as an ongoing process. Unlike traditional reflective models, the framework intentionally and purposefully integrates the voices of research participants, creating a reciprocal and cyclical process in which reflections inform, challenge, and amplify the researcher's own understanding.

Through the centring of iterative, dialogic reflection as a core element, echo-autoethnography fosters relational accountability and collective growth. Relational accountability ensures that the process is social justice-based, with the researcher engaging in an ethical and thoughtful manner. This supports the wider community in taking accountability in shaping knowledge production and sharing in meaning making. Not only does this advance the research process but also the wider ethical and transformative potential of community-engaged scholarship.

11.8 Methodological Implications for Researchers and Practitioners

Echo-autoethnography is situated beyond reflexive orientation; it allows researchers and practitioners to adapt research across community-engaged and qualitative research contexts in ways that counters extractive practices. Significant implications to this methodology include:

- **Situated Reflexivity:** The process begins at reflection, with honest articulation of one's positionality, experiences, and motivations for conducting the research. The researcher acknowledges that they are both an instrument and site of analysis within the shared context of the study.

- **Dialogic Engagement:** Interviews, focus groups, and reflective dialogues are used to intentionally incorporate participant narratives; not as add-ons but equal elements in the autoethnographic process. These narratives are expected to respond to, challenge, and/or resonate with the researcher's reflections which fosters a dynamic, reflexive dialogue.
- **Iterative Reflexive Cycles:** Reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action are embedded into the research design, collection, and analysis. Researchers systematically document reflexive engagements, capturing relational dynamics at the various stages of the research.
- **Resonance and Divergence:** Researchers identify and examine moments of alignment, tension, contradiction, and silence; the "echo" that reverberates across narratives. Echo-autoethnography creates uninterrupted space for both resonance and divergence, acknowledging that thematic consensus emerges naturally rather than being forced.
- **Relational Return:** Relational accountability is reinforced through the intentional return of findings to the participants. They are invited to respond, extend or reframe interpretations, sustaining meaning making and co-creation in the research process.

Table 2: Research Phases in Echo-Autoethnographic Application

Research Phase	Echo-Autographic Application
Research Design	Articulation of positionality and relational intent
Data Collection	Structured dialogic exchanges conducted through interviews, focus groups, and guided reflexive discourse
Data Analysis	Iteration and resonance cycles
Dissemination	Community feedback loop

Table 2 guides the researcher in the implementation stages of utilising echo-autoethnography in their research process. It engages the phases of research and the relational interactions between the researcher and the community.

11.9 Echoes Across the Atlantic: Caribbean and African Dialogues in Community Engagement

Across the Atlantic Ocean, the shared experiences in community-engaged practices echo loudly. They reverberate the sounds of a shared colonial past, broadly extractive research practices, and a desire to create an education system rooted in our own cultures and narratives, shaped for our future. Despite shared histories of rupture, displacement and disconnection, there also exists a living archive of echoes that shape ideologies, philosophies and ethos. Though separated by geography, spaces are interwoven by threads of memory, resilience, and a deep awareness of the power of education for multifaceted development despite oppressive histories in our spaces. Resounding across the waters we find a terrain ready and emerging with epistemologies of humanity, rich in liberation and self-determination, where there is a reclaiming of self, stories and knowledge.

Apple et al. (2009) reminds us that the threads of what we now label as *critical pedagogy* were never confined to one global space but instead arose from multiple struggles of the collective human need to challenge oppressive systems long before we knew how to label them. It may always be human nature to imagine and create more socially just narratives and systems as counter-narratives to the voices of oppressors. Chisholm (2021) observed that Caribbean educational landscapes have long been shaped by counter-oppressive and liberating pedagogies. These practices have shaped a society that utilises education to resist domination and promote agency for those historically and structurally silenced.

This resistance parallels the voices of African scholars and revolutionaries. wa Thiong'o (1986) asserted that educational systems in African space sought to colonise the consciousness of its recipients, perpetuating oppressive power dynamics not just through economic and political means but, very importantly, through language, and the understanding of what knowledge looks like. The processing of what and whose knowledge leads society, and the reality that it rarely is localised, is deeply embedded in the truths and realities of post-colonial societies globally.

This shared epistemic struggle and desire to reclaim our voices, education systems, and knowledges as a means of liberation rather than control connects the African and Caribbean experiences across the Atlantic. This struggle extends beyond the threads of African and Caribbean linkages; Eatman et al. (2018) remind us that people of colour globally have long engaged in struggles to shift oppressive education systems to systems for transformative change and social justice. These understandings are opportunities for new realities to be created, rooted in new epistemic reimaginings of community, belonging, and humanity.

Echo-autoethnography therefore is more than a methodology, representing an epistemic bridge between the researcher-self and their communities. This methodology honours the researcher-self who may also find themself positioned outside dominant academic spaces. Echo-autoethnography acknowledges the strength and resonance of one's story while not forgetting the larger whole; "I am because *we* are." Across the Atlantic, the African and Caribbean realities centre the importance of our localised knowledge and stories, and how these connect in shaping futures which recognise our histories of resistance and imagine more humanising ways of being together.

11.10 Beyond the Echo: Toward Reflexive Futures

The conceptualisation of echo-autoethnography emerged out of a recognition that my experiences as a community-engaged practitioner-scholar were not isolated. My challenges and triumphs reached beyond my own borders as a Caribbean scholar, echoing into times and spaces that both resembled, and countered my own. The initial hypothesis, rooted in the experiences of a practitioner in community engagement from a traditionally underrepresented academic context, also deeply resonate with those from dominant academic paradigms. Echo-autoethnography represents more than methodological innovation; it is an invitation to re-imagine the ways in which community-engaged research and practice is enacted, interpreted, and sustained.

The intentional practice of utilising personal and community narratives to enhance knowledge co-creation and generate deeper insight into social and

cultural issues defines echo-autoethnography. It requires the researcher's explicit acknowledgement of their own biases, positionality, authority, and privilege, holding them accountable through a sustained process of iterative reflexivity. This reflexive commitment unfolds through dialogic engagement with research participants, where the shared narratives interact, echo, and produce both resonance and divergence. As a methodological framework, echo-autoethnography extends rather than replaces the practice of autoethnography; it broadens the field by positioning community voices as epistemic equals in narrative research. It also serves to embed relational accountability within the core of knowledge production and co-creation.

Through dialogic engagement and reflexivity as both an ethical stance and methodological commitment, the field of community-engaged practice can foster transformative action and humanistic growth (locally and globally). By engaging practitioners, institutions, students and communities in on-going co-creative dialogue, the field of community-engaged practice stands to better support systemic change. With a call for the deepening of commitments to justice-oriented engagement, the implications of echo-autoethnography are set to be an asset to engaged scholarship. Practitioners, institutions, and other stakeholders are positioned to step into a space of structured, iterative reflexivity as a collective.

In societies shaped by histories of entrenched power differentials and extractive community research, this methodology offers an alternative which acknowledges the local knowledge sources and amplifies them in addressing social and cultural issues. Echo-autoethnography also strengthens broader qualitative research traditions, supporting narrative inquiry and enabling the identification of interwoven threads across research contexts. Furthermore, echo-autoethnography presents a generative landscape for continued methodological development and applicability. Its dialogic and reflexive outlook lends itself to adaption within digital ethnography, participatory action research and transnational, cross-cultural collaborative studies where asymmetries of power can often shape knowledge production.

Future inquiries may also explore how echoes unfold across temporal spaces, tracing how narratives of the past reverberate into present practice,

informing future community-engaged decisions. There is also scope for comparative applications, testing the framework across diverse contexts. Echo-autoethnography is meant to remain intentionally open, inviting expansion, adaptions, and critical engagement as it evolves within the wider scope of qualitative research traditions. Ultimately, the strength and resonance of echo-autoethnography lies in its commitment to listening with critical attentiveness, where reciprocity and co-creation guide the work. We are not alone in this work; together, our echoes shape how we listen, engage, and co-create meaning across borders.

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12. Concluding remarks

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The cultivation of humanity is not a completed project, nor one that can be neatly resolved within the confines of a single book. Instead, the contributions of this book have opened space for an ongoing dialogue, for us to reimagine higher education institutions and our role within them. In the preceding chapters, we have argued that the cultivation of humanity is not an optional supplement to higher education, but a necessary educational, moral, and political imperative. This claim is especially urgent in South Africa and across the Majority World, where the legacies of colonialism, apartheid, inequality, and exclusion continue to shape institutions and communities alike.

It is also, however, a global claim. Higher education institutions everywhere continue, in many instances, to reflect and reproduce the very inequalities and forms of dehumanisation they otherwise seek to address. Shaped by colonial histories, racialised hierarchies, and increasingly by neoliberal and bureaucratic institutional cultures, universities often privilege forms of knowledge, modes of being, and measures of value that narrow rather than expand our collective humanity. A reorientation is thus necessary.

Across the chapters in this volume, community engagement has emerged as a significant, although not uncomplicated, mechanism through which such a reorientation may be imagined and enacted. The theoretical contributions, reflections, practices and relational pathways offered throughout this book suggest that community engagement may act as a humanising force in our higher education institutions, transforming not only surrounding communities but also the pedagogies and knowledge generation processes of higher education institutions themselves.

This potential, however, is not automatic nor guaranteed. It requires a different consciousness, awareness, and the sustained work of building relationships – often counterintuitive to dominant academic incentives – as well as a willingness to be wrong, to learn and unlearn, and a courage to

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change direction. Even then, such efforts may still fall short. From these conditions of possibility and constraints, a set of guiding principles begins to take shape.

From the different contributions in this book, **four principles** emerge for community engagement as the cultivation of humanity. Firstly, community engagement becomes humanising when it is grounded in a ***reparative orientation***, one that acknowledges historical and ongoing injustices and commits to processes of material, epistemic, and relational healing and repair. In this sense, humanising community engagement must be orientated toward social and epistemic justice, working with communities as co-creators of knowledge and co-participants in shaping more just futures.

Unlike apolitical approaches framing community engagement as neutral partnership, this framework calls attention to how injustices endure materially and affectively unless they are recognised, spoken, and addressed (Sriprakash et al., 2020). Universities begin this work through practices of *recognition* which acknowledge and affirm marginalised communities as socially and epistemically worthy, and which value knowledge systems that have historically been excluded (Walker et al., 2023). Reparative work is *undoing* work, cutting against the unjust underpinnings of our universities to create more humane and inclusive institutions. This is not merely reform but an 'unravelling' of oppressive structures (González Stokas, 2023, p. 6).

Reparative community engagement forms part of a recognition that knowledges and experiences exist beyond our institutions, and that, to enter more fully into community (which is part of our *becoming* according to Ubuntu) we need to listen, dialogue, and reflect alongside one another (Sriprakash et al., 2020). The relationships nurtured and sustained through community engagement are thus mutually constitutive. The idea of Ubuntu depicts a relational ontology; our lives draw meaning from our collective membership in community and interconnectedness with those around us. Reparative engagement proposes a shift from instrumental interaction to reciprocal recognition and epistemic healing. This is a relational logic: universities must re-enter the histories and communities from which they have distanced themselves. Movement between university and community becomes a practice of repair and mutual constitution rather than outreach.

Secondly, community engagement becomes humanising when it enables genuine ***dialogical encounter***. This involves cultivating spaces in which students, academics, and community partners can encounter one another across difference in reflexive and ethically grounded ways. Drawing on Nussbaum's (1997) emphasis on narrative imagination and Ubuntu's insistence on relational personhood, such encounters invite those involved to recognise themselves as bound up with others in relations of mutual vulnerability and responsibility.

In relation to this, a third cornerstone of humanising community engagement is the foregrounding of ***entanglement*** and ***interdependence***. This foregrounding emphasises our entanglement and becoming with others, as our paths "are entwined, as the life of each becomes bound up with the other" (Ingold, 2011, p. 181). As Tsing (2015, p. 133) writes, "entanglement bursts categories and upends identities". Eroding enclosure requires dwelling in relation and, in so doing, working to dismantle the social categories and hierarchies, like race, that divide people.

Human life is not lived in isolation but in ongoing relation, with other people, with histories, with environments, and with more-than-human worlds. Community engagement, when approached in this way, disrupts the illusion of separateness that often underpins institutional life. It invites a recognition that universities are not external to the communities they engage but are constituted through those relationships. As Ingold (2011, p. 87) states, and Ubuntu affirms, "things [and people] *are* their relations."

The adapted Four Worlds Integral Development Model (Lessem & Nussbaum, 1996; Schieffer & Lessem, 2016), together with Lugones' (1987) notion of "world"-travelling explored in the introduction, deepens this understanding of entanglement by foregrounding the ethical and political dimensions of dwelling in relation. Travelling between worlds that have been historically segregated or socially constructed as distinct, such as the divide between 'town' and 'gown' or along racial hierarchies, requires loving perception, faithful witnessing, and a willingness to be transformed through encounter. It entails recognising the limits of one's own worldview, entering the worlds of others without domination, and acknowledging one's own incompletion in relation to others. Community engagement may be

considered a form of world-travelling: a practice through which groups of people historically and socially constructed as different cultivate modes of relationality that resist objectification and hierarchy.

Fourth, the cultivation of humanity should be understood as a ***practice*** rather than an abstraction. It is not a value that can be declared in policy or mission statements alone. It cannot be taught to students as a morality principle in a classroom. It is something that must be enacted repeatedly, in pedagogical choices, in research practices, in institutional cultures, and in everyday interactions. Community engagement, in its many forms, offers a space in which such practices of recognition and relationality deepen over time. Ordinary work, done repeatedly and with love, integrity and care, transforms the world around us.

The contributions in this book illustrate the diverse and creative ways in which this practice is already being enacted. Service-learning programmes that cultivate communities of inquiry and care, digital storytelling projects that centre lived experience as knowledge, autoethnographic and relational methodologies that challenge dominant epistemologies, and dialogical partnerships that traverse institutional and geographic boundaries all demonstrate that community engagement can be a site for the cultivation of humanity. Importantly, these practices do not only seek to transform communities. They also turn the gaze back onto the university itself, unsettling its assumptions, reconfiguring its relationships, and inviting more humane ways of being and knowing together.

At the same time, this book has been careful not to romanticise community engagement. Its humanising potential is shaped, and often constrained, by the institutional contexts in which it is located. Higher education institutions remain deeply entangled in colonial and racist logics, as well as in neoliberal and bureaucratic regimes that prioritise efficiency, competition, audit, and measurable outputs. Within such contexts, community engagement can become instrumentalised, reduced to a performative or compliance-driven activity that reproduces rather than disrupts existing hierarchies. Its potential to orientate universities towards more humane ends is therefore fragile and contested, constrained by existing relations of power.

The expanded Four Worlds Integral Development Model introduced in the first chapter of this book illustrates that the cultivation of humanity is inseparable from questions of power, resistance, and transformation. The relationships formed through community engagement are not merely sentimental but political. They are bound up with the work of resisting dehumanising structures and imagining alternative ways of being together. Community engagement, when approached as praxis, becomes a site of this critical love, where reflection and action come together in the pursuit of more just and humane futures.

However, even as we recognise these possibilities and constraints, this book insists that the work cannot be delegated to institutions alone. The cultivation of humanity is not only a structural or pedagogical project: it is also a deeply personal and relational one. It calls on educators, students, policymakers, and community members alike to ask: *How do our everyday actions, choices, and relationships contribute to – or undermine – the cultivation of humanity?*

In this sense, the work of humanising higher education is institutional, collective, *and* personal. It unfolds through academics working together within a university and between universities, institutional policies and curricula, but also in moments of listening, in acts of care, in practices of humility, and in the willingness to learn from those outside of our institutions. It requires courage to confront uncomfortable truths, patience to build relationships slowly and pause when necessary, and the commitment to sustain this work even when its outcomes are uncertain or incomplete.

The contributions in this volume do not offer a map of settled answers. Instead, they offer a set of practices and possibilities for deeper engagement. The unifying thread, across diverse disciplines, local contexts, and countries, is that the cultivation of humanity requires us to remain in the work, even and especially when it is difficult.

To borrow from Haraway (2016), it may be that what is required of us is a willingness to "stay with the trouble". To stay with the trouble is to resist both despair and premature resolution. It is to remain present to the complexities, contradictions, and tensions that shape higher education and its

engagements with its surrounding communities. It is to recognise that the work of cultivating humanity is partial and unfinished, but always necessary.

If higher education is to fulfil its higher purpose of contributing to a more just, humane, and inclusive future then community engagement emerges as a central and generative praxis. It is through such engagement that universities may begin to reconnect knowledge with life, learning with responsibility, and education with the work of cultivating humanity.

In returning to the words that opened this volume, we are reminded that our humanity is bound up in that of others. To educate and to engage, then, is to recognise our interdependence and interconnectedness, and to act upon it. It is to participate in the ongoing, imperfect, and necessary work of becoming and being human together.

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Higher Education and Community Engagement: The Cultivation of Humanity reimagines the role of universities in a world shaped by inequality, precarity, and growing dissatisfaction with the market-driven purposes of higher education. The book argues that universities must move beyond narrow neoliberal priorities of productivity, competition, and employability to reclaim their broader ethical and humanising responsibilities. It positions higher education as a space where students, academics, and communities learn to "become human together" through relationships grounded in empathy, reciprocity, and social justice. Central to this vision is community engagement, understood as a transformative educational practice that connects knowledge, learning, and responsibility to the shared project of cultivating humanity.

Drawing on frameworks such as Ubuntu, universal human values, Nussbaum's conception of cultivating humanity, and the adapted Four Worlds Integral Development Model, the book demonstrates how humanity can be cultivated through pedagogy, research, institutional culture, and community partnerships. It introduces a new lexicon into higher education discourse centred on concepts such as care, compassion, healing, love, relationality, knowledge democracy, co-liberation and epistemic justice. Combining theoretical reflections with empirical and practice-based insights, the volume offers a hopeful yet grounded vision of universities as institutions committed not only to preparing students for employment, but to nurturing ethical, engaged, and socially responsible citizens.



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