

EXPLORING UBUNTU: TEACHING CHARACTERS IN SELECTED DRAMA TEXT AS A MEANS OF “SHARING” AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

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Abstract

The paper seeks to express “sharing” as the principle of Ubuntu in human connectedness and community mindedness. At its core, it suggests that when we share our resources, time, or knowledge, we demonstrate care for others and nurture collective well-being. In pedagogy, Ubuntu has been used to guide and promote African education using a drama text in ensuring an understanding of the responsibilities that come up with characters’ interconnectedness, that characters interact with one another to develop his or her theme and conflict, while casting aside worn-out perceptions and outdated thoughts. The aim was to establish that all the facts that are vital to the interconnectedness of characters for the success or failure of the principles of Ubuntu be identified by the students in the Setswana drama text. The study adopted a qualitative method approach. Interviews were used to enlist 22 second year students who major in Setswana as their home language to identify the characters that maintained and contravened “sharing” as the principle of Ubuntu. Data obtained from interviews were sorted and categorised into themes and analysed from the text systematically. The findings also demonstrate the importance of recognising students’ learning that through the critical analysis of literature, the characters as actors in the development of theme and conflict in drama text.

Keywords: *Drama text, sharing, characters, students, maintain/contravene the ubuntu principle.*

1. Introduction

According to Ngubane (2021), Ubuntu philosophy which is indigenous to African people, when embraced with the understanding and dignity it deserves, has the potential not only of reconnecting students in the South African education system with their indigenous values, heritage and cultures, but to learn that Ubuntu philosophy has a capacity to promote co-existence, social cohesion and inclusivity among students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. A deeper understanding of Ubuntu philosophy and its principles is essential to maintaining its cultural integrity by incorporating the prescribed selected drama text into the education system.

Reading the prescribed selected drama text in the classroom was relevant for the second-year students, in terms of vocabulary, context and principles of Ubuntu to be implemented where characters are interconnected for the success or failure of their role in the text. Students bring Ubuntu principles from their cultural backgrounds into higher education contexts, however, when these principles are not carried out into classrooms, students lose their identity and forget their cultural values. Ubuntu pedagogy reminds the Setswana second year students that, respecting others’ opinions kindness towards one another, sharing ideas and knowledge with their peers, thus helping them to understand the learning tasks. Students could realise that Ubuntu principles ensured that they relied on each other for support where they had learning challenges. Similar notions are also shared by (Goduka, 1999; 2000) who argues the proponents of Ubuntu have shown that Ubuntu could be a useful way to improve human relations in diversified learning contexts. Ubuntu principles have been viewed as a philosophy that bears a role to unify people and discourage inequalities and indignities within the academic setting. This article elaborates on how sharing as the principle of Ubuntu is implemented and experienced by students in interconnectedness, that characters interact with one another to develop his or her theme and conflict in a drama text.

2. The theoretical framework

The theoretical importance of enhancing the Collective Fingers Theory (CFT) of (Mbigi, 1997) draws from the principles of the Ubuntu philosophy. An African principle behind the CFT is that “a thumb although it is strong cannot kill aphids on its own; it would require the collective cooperation of the other fingers” (Mbigi, 1997). From this African proverb we can construe two meanings. Firstly, like fingers, individual people need to work cooperatively to achieve any aspired goal. Secondly, the fingers in the proverb can represent core African values, which when internalised and nurtured can promote a collective culture. The five core values of Ubuntu as identified by Mbigi (1997) are: survival, spirit of solidarity, compassion, respect and dignity. Survival enabled African communities, during harsh environmental conditions, to rely on each other for existence despite differences they might have had amongst themselves. Solidarity entails working together and cooperatively to achieve a common goal. The third value, compassion, refers to the human’s ability to understand other people’s challenges and problems. Compassion is fundamental to the feeling of belonging and interconnectedness among African communities. The last values of the theory, respect and dignity are important for a high regard for rights, values and beliefs for others, irrespective of diversity. Dignity is a behaviour or a trait that can earn someone respect. For Africans, if a person seeks to achieve a positive engagement with members of the community, respect and dignity are paramount requisites (Mbigi, 1997).

The CFT, becomes a collective, supportive and social process, as opposed to individual and competitive experience (Ngubane & Gumede, 2018). Furthermore, learning within the context embodied by the Ubuntu core values of survival, solidarity spirit, compassion, respect and dignity can reunite indigenous students with their African value systems. Based on these positive implications of applying the CFT, this study draws from the Collective Fingers Theory, to examine the extent to which the principles of Ubuntu philosophy can cultivate and restore African indigenous values and cultures and transform educational practices in diverse South African classroom.

3. The implementation of Ubuntu principles in a drama text

The focus of the implementation of Ubuntu principles was on the development of the interconnectedness of characters for the success or failure of the principles of Ubuntu be identified by the students in the drama text. Students were divided into four groups, reading of a drama text, using the principles of Ubuntu to critically reflect on issues raised in the text and engaging on activities that critically challenge the ideas emerging from the text. Before the implementation, students were given open-ended questions in which they were asked to provide their understanding of the concept of Ubuntu and prepare them to establish that all the facts that are vital to the interconnectedness of characters for the success or failure of the principles of Ubuntu in the text be identified. Responses were consolidated into a summary and discussed before the class commenced. Once the students internalised the concept of Ubuntu interconnectedness, the principles were made into posters and pasted on the walls to remind, guide and assist the incorporation during learning. This way activities mediated academic reading, critical thinking and supported the development of specific discourse among the students.

To introduce critical reading of the text, questions were posed by the lecturer, to analyse the characters in the text for the success or failure of the role they are playing when using Ubuntu principles of sharing. The questions were to assist students gain insight into the author’s purpose of writing and for detection of possible bias in the text. Critical reading and analysis also entailed that students could differentiate between the fact and author’s opinions and learn to challenge questionable assumptions and unsupported claims in the text. Through questions while reading and after reading, the lecturer guided students to identifying contradictions and competing claims and evaluate evidence presented by the author. It was also important to encourage students to draw own conclusions instead of accepting the author’s words. Van Wyk and Greyling (2008) argues that academic literacy involves skills to interpret different kinds of text type, understanding the meaning they convey and the target audience; make meaning texts beyond the level of sentences; knowing what counts as evidence for an argument and making distinctions between essential and non-essential information, fact and opinions. The lecturer designed the questions and for some articles, questions were provided for students to critically engage with the text. After each reading, questions were posed to groups to ignite interactions and discussions and to stimulate critical thinking processes. In small groups, students were encouraged to challenge and question authors views and opinions and through debates and discussions. Students attempted questions, summarising each other’s ideas, asking each other for clarification on their ideas, challenging each other’s opinions in a more respectful manner and appreciating each other’s way of thinking and beliefs.

4. Data collection

Qualitative data collection techniques were used in this study using Interviews. Interviews were conducted with 22 second year students who major in Setswana as their home language to identify the characters that maintained and contravened “sharing” as the principle of Ubuntu. Data obtained from interviews were sorted and categorised into themes and analysed from the text systematically. Discussions were held with students to point out the challenges they encountered during the reading and understanding of the drama text. Responses were analysed to identify similarities in the responses as well as differences. Similar ideas were grouped into themes. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted randomly from the group. The purpose of the interviews was to explore the students’ perceptions to identify the characters in the drama text that maintained and contravened “sharing” as the principle of Ubuntu for their support programme. All interview responses were tape recorded and transcribed immediately after the interviews. Interview questions sought to understand how students felt about using sharing as the principle of Ubuntu for their learning, to explain the aspects that they felt promoted in establishing interconnectedness of characters for the success or failure of the principles of Ubuntu in their prescribed drama text.

5. Results and discussions

All 22 students responded to the open-ended questions and were analysed. At the end of the lesson, interviews were used to collect the data from 11 students. Data from the interviews were analysed with the indication that prior to the lesson, students had their own understanding of what the concept of Ubuntu means. Out of 22 responses on the questions of how sharing is used as the principle of Ubuntu to develop the interconnectedness, that characters interact with one another in the selected drama text, 11 respondents indicated that after reading with understanding, and the explanation they got from the lecturer, they could easily analyse the characters when reading that their behaviour and attitudes could tell that they succeed or fail in the implementation of using sharing as the principle of Ubuntu in the selected drama text. From the responses the students provided, one could see that students understood and enjoyed reading the selected drama text. This is how four participants responded when asked how sharing is used as the principle of Ubuntu to develop the interconnectedness, that characters interact with one another in the selected drama text:

Student 1:

“Using sharing as the principle of Ubuntu in the drama text, refers combined effort of individuals for the survival of their community. The existence of and the survival of the indigenous of African communities was maximised by interdependence and interconnectedness among community members. The principle of sharing entails the commitment and willingness by community members to abandon the acts of individuality and ‘self’ for the mutual flowering of the entire group. For example, in the drama text, Tiroeng was very considerate to slaughter the cow and share it amongst the community so that every household could have food on the table. There should no one to be left with hunger in the village they lived in”.

Student 2:

The principle of sharing thrives on unity, unconditional love and respect for one another, mutual interest for collective survival and responsibility towards fellow members as opposed to selfishness and competitiveness towards or among African community members. One student in the group explained further that the spirit of sharing is best epitomised by a metaphor that “one finger cannot crush a grain of wheat on its own, it needs the help of the other four fingers” in her explanation; the ability of humans to interdependently pull together in a ‘one for all and all for one’ spirit is the value of sharing. In this context, she refers to Tiroeng who is very rich in the village, he is warm and loving, he cares for his community and is always willing to help.

Student 3:

For me, the principle of sharing is the ability to live with others in harmony. It is framed by mutual Ubuntu values of respect, one of the educational goals is to promote peace and coexistence in educational settings. Coexistence thrives on mutual independence among members of the group, cooperation and mutual respect. Sharing as ubuntu principle is more concerned with the fact that as human beings we cannot exist in isolation. Tiroeng know very well that no man is an island. He is surrounded by people who work for him and give advice with honesty.

Student 4:

I understand this question regarding the characters in the text that; the sharing as the principle of Ubuntu asserts that human ability to understand others dilemma and challenges is compassion. For

me, compassion promotes feelings of belonging and interconnectedness observed in African communities. Compassion is probably one of the most important principles of Ubuntu philosophy and the indigenous African way of life. It is a sense and feeling of care, sympathy and concern for another person which becomes evident through helping another human being, sharing and showing sympathy towards others. Showing kindness through sharing and sympathy towards another human being is important in African cultures. Sharing what you have with another is confirmation of belonging and brotherhood in African cultures. The student further explains that compassion explains love and caring for one another and motivates feelings of “I cannot have all while you have nothing”. Tiroeng could not afford to see his village people starving while he has plenty at his disposal. He would share what he has with his people because he cares and loves them.

Student 5:

The value of the spirit of sharing embrace principles of social justice. My understanding is that social justice relates to principles of equality, equity and fairness towards members of a community or individuals who have been previously marginalised, disadvantaged or excluded economically, politically and socially based on their race, gender, social class, language, religion, sexual preference and beliefs. Equally, where Ubuntu principle is recognised, there is respect for diversity in religion, race, gender, beliefs, sexual orientation and language. Lecturers practising within Ubuntu perspectives provide all students, irrespective of their cultural, linguistic, social class, religion and sexual orientations, with equal opportunities to develop and to exercise their full capacities. The student refers to the teaching of characters in the drama text, that lecturers do not favour and student when teaching, she is treating all students equally so that they all enjoy and understand the content of the drama text. Tiroeng, as the main character, he values every member of the society, he respects them and makes them feel that they all belong to the community.

Data show that students understood the role of ubuntu in the creation of conducive teaching and learning environment. Important data for this study also came from the question on how much Ubuntu is practiced in their classroom. On this question, data from participants differed. On one side, some students felt that ubuntu practices were evident in their classroom because they could analyse the themes and give example from the drama text. On the other hand, the lecturer was kind and helpful to them, she was showing solidarity and compassion. Data from the other side to establish that all the facts that are vital to the interconnectedness of characters for the success or failure of the principles of Ubuntu indicated that students felt that “no one is an island in higher education” said one participant, Tiroeng needs people to help him even though he is rich and has everything at his disposal. One person cared about the next person” responded another student. The study implemented sharing as the principle of Ubuntu to establish that all the facts that are vital to the interconnectedness of characters for the success or failure of the principles of Ubuntu in engaging students to participate in the classroom where they could analyse themes and provide examples from the textbook. Students are motivated to interconnect the characters in the drama text by using Ubuntu principles. They are encouraged and inspired to compare the use sharing as the principle of ubuntu in the drama text. While the drama text was used to promote critical reading and critical thinking, cooperative learning groups and open-ended critical questions based on the text was used to stimulate debates and discussions among group members. It was within these activities that the researcher was interested in understanding how students would utilise the principles of ubuntu to engage with the tasks and to learn. At the end of the lesson. students were interviewed to solicit their experiences of Ubuntu principles within their teaching and learning context. Data from interviews indicated that students enjoyed the Ubuntu-centred teaching and learning environment. It also showed that positive academic benefits for students as they indicated that the learning environment was more supportive. Students established that all the facts that are vital to the interconnectedness of characters in the selected drama text are for the success.

6. Conclusion

The investigation has indicated that ubuntu remains an important component of African way of life, including education. Ubuntu principles of solidarity, respect, communalism, compassion and love hold high impact for promoting respect among students, sharing of ideas and knowledge, cooperation, caring for one another and fostering of feelings of unity and love towards fellow students as findings from this study indicated. These aspects can bring peace and social cohesion among university students and encourage success for all. The study revealed that a higher education learning setting that bases its practices through sharing, diligence, respect, dignity, caring and support, and integrity is highly likely to yield better learning outcomes that will hopefully increase student success in the interconnectedness of the characters in the selected dram text. Hence, sharing as Ubuntu principle could be an attempt to combat the problem of high failure and attrition rates among second-year students. Students established that all the facts that are vital to the interconnectedness of characters are for the success.

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