

# Higher Education Community Engagement: The CULTIVATION of HUMANITY Dialogue

**MY HUMANITY IS BOUND UP IN YOURS FOR WE CAN ONLY BE HUMAN TOGETHER**  
- Desmond Tutu

During the COVID19 pandemic and for some time after, there was a surge of discussions in academia through webinars and social media about the reimagination of universities and the purpose of higher education. The concern for humanity was at its peak because the uncertainty about life itself became the core issue. The post-COVID silence or changes, if any at all, have not made much difference to these pressing issues in higher education, even though the pandemics of violence, corruption, socioeconomic injustice and inequality, among other forms of dehumanisation, continue to prevail. We have once again settled into a false assuredness of the 'certainties of life and living', which higher education is complicit in perpetuating, to a substantial extent, by preparing students for a living, a job or career.

This dialogue titled: **Higher Education and Community Engagement: The Cultivation of Humanity**, is based on the premise that higher education has the responsibility to educate students for life and a living. We propose that the foundation for both purposes of higher education is rooted in the cultivation of humanity and that the core function of community engagement has the potential to serve as a platform for educating students, specifically for life, through its various forms of expression. The aim of this dialogue is to answer the question:

## **HOW CAN HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROMOTE THE CULTIVATION OF HUMANITY?**

The Education White Paper 3 (RSA, DoE 1997: 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 and core 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” (ibid: 11). Explicit in “common citizenship” “commitment to a common good” and “social responsibility” is the conception of humanity because the collective understanding of these terms suggests benevolence, compassion, empathy, and kindness, all of which evoke caring.



Keeling (2020: 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 (Bringle & Hatcher 2002 in Stewart & Alrutz, 2012: 45), in a transactional relationship. 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 and the promotion and application of learning (Karasik, 1993 in *ibid*).

Similarly, Favish and Simpson (2016: 241) argue 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 ecologies of knowledge. More importantly, student participation provides opportunities for nurturing critical and democratic citizenship and helps build a commitment to shaping an equitable social order through reflection on the socio-economic realities that characterise South African society.

**IN CURRENT TIMES, THESE REALITIES INCLUDE HALF OF ALL SOUTH AFRICANS LIVING IN POVERTY, WITH LITTLE TO INDICATE THAT THE POOREST WILL SEE A REVERSAL IN THEIR MISFORTUNES IN THE COMING YEARS CONSIDERING THAT POVERTY HAS BEEN RISING SINCE 2011 (FRANCIS AND WEBSTER, 2019: 788).**

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 the development of communities, the higher education sector has ‘an unmatched obligation’ to play a significant role in community and society building (RSA, WP. DoE 1997).

Community engagement, as noted, encapsulates in word (and spirit) the concept of humanity which resonates deeply with the values and principles of Ubuntu, defined as African humanism comprising the intricate relationship between people, country, environment and spirituality. In other words, the whole group experiences what the individual does and equally the individual experiences what the whole group does, summing up to ‘I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am’ (Mbiti, 1969 in Mugumbate et al, 2024: 1124). Thus, this relational worldview which undergirds Ubuntu, embodies the essence of how community engagement in South Africa should be practised. In this way, engagement with communities is thoughtfully responsive, heartfelt and empathetic.

While the conceptual understanding of humanity that derives from Ubuntu is rooted in Africa and African traditions, experience and history, there are points of convergence in Nussbaum’s cultivation of humanity based on the Classics and Western philosophical tradition. Notwithstanding, both value the primacy of the cultivation



of humanity for the advancement of society, which this paper argues should underpin the practice of community engagement. In her seminal work on cultivating humanity, Nussbaum (1997: 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 reasons; **(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 principle of critical examination that demands traditions and beliefs be interrogated rationally needs to be grounded in the development or flourishing of the individual as posited by Banda (2019), but this process must occur within the overarching ideology of communalism. The second and third principles find common cause with the tenets of Ubuntu in the interconnectedness that the worldview advances and the empathy that is fostered through relational and communal values and practices.

**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.**

Finally, there is little doubt that community engagement has evolved over the years and its practice has grown incrementally. Despite its various iterations in individual institutions in the past and present, this dialogue seeks to highlight the critical inclusion of humanity for caring responses and relationships with communities. In cultivating humanity, the principles of the indigenous Ubuntu worldview that draws on African humanism for interconnected communities and Nussbaum's three essential skills of critical self-reflection, understanding and transcending local problems and developing empathy have been presented as integrated possibilities.

Perhaps the final thoughts should be Desmond Tutu's reminder of the entanglement of humanity for human coexistence and James Yoonil Auh's questions, What do we truly value in society, and what kind of world do we wish to build?



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