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Part 7

Geographic cultural systems

Broader perspectives
Remodeling learning on an African cultural heritage of *Ubuntu*

Rebecca Nthogo Lekoko and Oitshepile MmaB Modise

**Introduction**

This chapter comes at a critical moment in Africa’s development, a time when some critics are debating the role of learning in the development of Africa. It is a time when Africans desire to know better what in current learning systems works and what does not work for them. Among the many criticisms of the current educational and learning systems in Africa is the one-dimensional approach to learning proposed by some proponents and supporters of modernization of education in Africa. They understand learning as preparation for formal employment. Little attention goes to understanding learning as a lifestyle and preparation for civic responsibility. Learning would be dangerous if understood only in relation to tokenism or elitism needed for formal employment. As Searle (1981) observed, in situations where learning is viewed in “… tokenistic manner; as fringed activities divorced from daily or community life, such learning would last only for as long as school lasts” (p. 3). Learning that truly fits the African lifestyle is that which is lifelong and culturally sensitive. This chapter thus presents a model for developing culturally sensitive learning activities by drawing principles from the African cultural heritage of *Ubuntu* strengthened by the principles of *Botho*.

Currently, there is a cry for community-responsive learning. Lessons that are imprinted by some learning experiences are alien and of no use in African learners’ local environments (Chambers, 2003). Some formally educated people are misfits, as they cannot find formal employment and are unprepared to suit communities’ ways of living, like in agriculture. In Botswana, the exodus from rural to urban centers increases with each person’s desperation to find formal employment and live a better life (Lekoko and Modise, 2011). Schools have not helped them to be productive in their own local communities. Thus, the question of relevance arises here, as formal schooling does not fully prepare learners to understand their community’s way of life and to make the best use of their local environment. A different approach is thus desirable, especially in relation to what Africa needs to develop. To this end, learning needed by Africans is that which suits their cultural heritage of communalism, group solidarity, compassion, respect, human dignity, and survival skills like learning oral traditions, weaving, pottery, fishing, mining, forestry, and agriculture, just to mention a few. Useful learning for them is that which brings back values of relevance and functionalism, which are said to have been eroded by foreign learning systems (Teffo, 2000; Preece, 2009). As Wittgenstein (1980) observed, people’s ways of thinking or learning are rooted in their ways of life; therefore, Africans’ ways of life should become a framework for their learning. To this end, the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, supported by *Botho*, can assist Africans to develop learning systems that draw from their culture.
As Pityana (1999) states, “Ubuntu is a moral principle that promotes social responsibility and solidarity and the vision of a society founded on justice and equality” (p. 144). On the other hand, Botho is a philosophy that means humane behavior. In the Setswana culture, it gives an idea of a person with a well-rounded character, well mannered, courteous, and disciplined. It defines a process for earning respect by first giving it, and for gaining empowerment by empowering others. It encourages people to applaud, rather than resent, those who succeed and “disapproves antisocial, disgraceful, inhuman and criminal behavior” (Republic of Botswana, 1997: 8). Ubuntu and Botho combined are virtues that Africa needs so much to develop. When learners are armed with these traditional virtues, they become useful in their communities, whether at home, in the community, and at national and international levels. This chapter, therefore, proposes learning for sustainable community vibrancy and resilience, rather than learning for a narrow goal of employment or status.

**Background**

The twenty-first century has shaped modern African learners with the commitment and interest to strengthen their sense of social responsibility. They want to see a connection between what they learn in the classrooms with what they do in real life situations. Failure to establish this link has resulted in some criticisms about current learning systems in Africa: that they lack relevance, functionalism, and respect for people’s ways of life. Critics such as Preece (2009), Teffo (2000), and Semali (1999), and especially those of the African Renaissance, insist that all critical and transformative learning activities should embrace an indigenous African world view and root the nation’s educational paradigms in indigenous socio-cultural and epistemological frameworks (Higgs, 2003). There is a need to link learning institutions with real lives of communities. In this way, learning will draw from the social context in which acquisition of relevant skills is meaningful, usable, and sustainable.

Using Searle’s (1981) words, learning becomes a true asset if what happens in institutions is “never cosmetic or merely symbolic; it must be capable of being extended and applied to the social and political conditions present outside its classroom walls” (p. 3). As Searle (1981) metaphorically expresses it, Africa needs learning institutions “where the textbook is the hoe, the exercise book is the pick; the pencil is the good hammer; and the rest, spade, bucket and screwdriver” (34). Some current learning systems are not fully equipped and ready to rise to this challenge. They might give a false impression of providing relevant intellectual capital. Africans must refuse to indulge in self-flattery of being well served where they are not. Relevant learning is what Africa needs.

Whether or not it is possible to achieve, relevant learning is that which builds on or is embedded in our everyday ways of life. Currently reforms have not succeeded in fully addressing this pressing issue of relevance. The malady of education that alienates the educated from their local communities can be cited; many Batswana have relied on and thrived with agriculture for a long time, and this sector can be improved through relevant learning. As for now, the education system does very little, if not nothing, to prepare learners for this community’s way of life (Lekoko and Modise, 2011). This is due to reliance on borrowed systems that have “dictated the marginalisation and disqualification of non-Western knowledge systems” (Escobar, 1995: 13) like traditional African learning, which puts communities as critical knowledge resources.

In situations where the local context and contents are shunned, learners are only taught to think, interpret, and produce abstract knowledge which they are unable to apply in a real world situation like the workplace or communities (Kincheloe, 1999). The greatest goal for the twenty-first century and beyond is the application of learning strategies that ensure that learning is a pathway to civic responsibility and employment. This calls for learning that draws from the community’s way of life, like culture and local resources, and the community’s challenges (Semali, 1999). The goal is to produce learners with broad competences to fit into their community’s ways of life, for example, in self-employment and farming.
Searle (1981) advises that viewing learning as a preparation for employment turns learning into a tokenistic activity. The danger is that:

after leaving school and the release from such tokenistic productive tasks, the ex-students would settle down for business of achieving niches where they could sit on the heads of the people, smother real revolutionary economic and social changes, and manipulate their position of society for their own ends and the benefit of a new elite.

\[\text{Searle, 1981: 3}\]

Africa does not need this type of elitism. Africa needs learning “characterised by the goal to produce useful members of society” (Preece, 2009: 39).

The challenge for culturally sensitive learning in Africa is that it is built on a “deep layer of colonial inheritance, not only the old student mentality … but the old pedagogy, the parrot learning, the teacher-centered classroom … the timidity of parents, the primacy and tyranny of examinations, the repressive and undemocratic discipline and hierarchy” (Searle, 1981: 4). This, according to Searle, poses profound obstacles. He likens it with a “ghost rising from the past” to interfere with Africans’ effort to embark on learning that feeds their ways of life. While this is daunting, it is not impossible: “all of us with hands clasped, eyes to the future, hope stamped on our faces,” can help reform learning systems in Africa. Some countries have laid good foundations for ideas discussed in this chapter. For example, the use of education with production in Botswana (Van Rensburg, 1991) and education for self-reliance in Umojah (Kenya), the application of the principle of self-liberation in Mozambique (Searle, 1981), and others. All must stand up to support efforts directed at developing learning approaches embedded in challenges of our development. This cannot be possible without learning approaches that are culturally sensitive.

Perspective on the notion of culturally sensitive learning

The first thing to appreciate is that culture is a lifestyle. Culture in this context refers mainly to values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors influenced by existing technology (skills and tools needed to engage in community development); economic climate (effective ways and means of production and allocation of community resources); political climate (prevailing ways of making decisions concerning development of communities); and perceptual belief (such as the rationale and justification that residents cite for engaging in specific community development activities (Cleaver, 2001)). Culture, therefore, is embedded in all aspects of life, providing a strong argument to view it positively as a basis for functional learning. It cannot be a residual element, but central in any learning.

The notion of culturally sensitive learning is not new. Advances on it are traceable in the works of a number of authors including Searle (1981), Hughes and More (1997), Mamdani, (1999), and Ntuli (1999). The ideas of these writers are summarized in Table 52.1.

Many more authors have earned the reputation for supporting these tenets of culturally based learning approaches. These tenets are the basis on which we propose a learning model. Typically, our model is founded on perspectives from the literature, especially on views from African writers on a culturally sensitive learning approach as discussed below.

African voices on culturally sensitive learning approaches

While it may not be accurate to present all African voices under the umbrella of an African Renaissance, it is certain that they address culturally sensitive learning approaches. The principles underlying these culturally sensitive approaches are relevance and applicability of what is learned to the living environments of the Africans. Thus, it is not only the term, Renaissance, that captivates, but more the gist of what the movement
stands for. Authors suggesting the rebirth of our learning system do so on a trans-historical foundation (pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial experiences) and its outcome in Africa. According to Ramose (2002): colonialism in Africa provided the framework for the organized subjugation of the cultural, scientific, and economic life of many on the African continent. This subjugation ignored indigenous knowledge systems and impacted on African people’s way of seeing and acting in the world. The African Renaissance should be seen as a strong force attacking this erosion and debasing of our cultures. Using the words of Amilcar Cabral, the leader of the nationalist resistance movement in Guinea-Bissau, as cited by Mbigi and Maree (2005) “a people who free themselves from foreign domination will not be culturally free unless, without underestimating the importance of positive contributions from the oppressor’s culture and the other cultures, they return to the upward paths of their own culture” (p. i). This statement demonstrates the consequences of neglecting one’s culture or being uncritical when embracing foreign cultures. It comes, therefore, not as a surprise that many Africans call for education that promotes “an indigenous African world view and roots educational paradigms in an indigenous socio-cultural and epistemological framework” (Higgs, 2003: 7). Like Mbigi and Maree (2005): they say that Africa needs to draw on its triple cultural heritage from Africa, the East and the West. The starting point should be our roots, if we are to meet the challenge of development and reconstruction (p. i). wa Thiong’o (1993) observes that independence was about people’s struggle to claim their own space, and their right to name the world for themselves, rather than be named through the rose-tinted glass of the Europeans. This is a constant reminder, therefore, that,

the African voice in education at the end of the twentieth century is the voice of the radical witness of the pain and inhumanity of history, the arrogance of modernisation and the conspiracy of silence in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 52.1 Central tenets of culturally sensitive learning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning as a social goal</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>It is learning that shifts attention from values of grades and competition to the development of community skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Soft issues / competence mostly valued</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>This promotes learning that develops intangible assets of social capital, that is, community skills (solidarity, trust, respect, networking and shared values).</td>
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<td><strong>Learning seen as a social process</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>It is a process that shifts community from a conventional individualistic model to a new paradigm of social learning, in which learning in all its forms is recognized, celebrated, and invested in as a social and empowering process for all.</td>
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<td><strong>The focus is on learners and learning, rather than on teachers and teaching</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>This recognizes that there are many paths to learning. Learning and teaching processes use learning styles and strengths of learners developed within their cultural contexts.</td>
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<td><strong>Lifelong learning strategies as guiding principles</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning in a micro sense on the classroom floor is not better than learning in the macro sense of the community’s challenges or ways of life and, in this way, learning never ends. Learners learn to keep on learning.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Interactive dialogue is one of the critical learning strategies</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Learners have a passion for discussion to broaden their perspectives and apply what they hear to their social world. Learning strategies include interactive friendship, voluntarism and self-organisation.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Learning is essentially for continued day-to-day existence: you learn or you starve</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is learning that prepares a person to fit into his or her own community. As Searle (1981) says, what happens in schools must never be cosmetic or merely symbolic. It must be extended and applied to the social and political present outside the classroom walls.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Culture as a thread weaving together learning and public trust</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>“To be effective, skills and competencies must be acquired in harmony with our own cultural values, identity and choice of lifestyle, whether we reside in an urban, traditional community or homeland centre” (Hughes and More, 1997). Learning is imbuing learners with tools for self-criticism, and pride to identify with and a strong sense of belonging to their community.</td>
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Learning survives on the rich soil of real and lived experiences.
academic disciplines towards what is organic and alive in Africa. It is the voice of ‘wounded healers’ struggling against many odds to remember the past, engage with the present, and determine a future built on new foundations. . . . It also dares educators to see the African child-learner not as a bundle of Pavlovian reflexes, but as human being culturally and cosmologically located in authentic value systems (Hoppers, 2001 cited in Higgs, 2003: 7).

Advocates of the African Renaissance educational discourse such as Teffo (2000) and Vilakazi (1999); and others like Searle (1981), Higgs (2003); and Gboku and Lekoko (2007) advocate learning philosophies that respect the diversity, lived experiences and cultural realities of the Africans. Never will learning truly benefit Africans until it is acquired in harmony with “our own cultural values, identity and choice of lifestyle, whether we reside in an urban, traditional community or homeland centre” (Hughes and More, 1997).

Learning that does not connect one with the past, present and future, that is culture, gives birth to some misfits in one’s local environment. The challenge in this chapter is, therefore, to demonstrate that Africa has rich cultures that can inform their learning systems, one being Ubuntu and the other Botho.

**Ubuntu: an apt philosophy for developing culturally sensitive learning activities**

It is obviously difficult for learners to learn when they are engaged in learning activities that put the interests and identities of others before theirs. Learning activities should reflect learners’ own needs, life challenges and experiences. Imported learning doctrines alone cannot do a good job for Africans. That is, foreign contents and pedagogies can be brought in where necessary, but not as a core, rather to enrich the local, because learning cannot be distanced from people’s ways of life: their culture. Culture, as already explained, is viewed broadly as a community’s ways of life (values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors/actions). Below, we explore how the fundamentals of Ubuntu fit this cultural savvy in learning.

**Fundamentals of Ubuntu**

While many African adages can play their role in the learning systems, our choice is Ubuntu, because of its substance and extraordinarily interesting principles in times when Africa needs to stand up on its own to face the challenges of its development. Characteristically, **Ubuntu** focuses precisely on important principles of collectiveness, shared vision/values, cooperation, compassion, communalism and morality. Expressed differently, Africans believe that a person is a person through other people (in Xhosa, **Ubuntu ungamntu ngabanye abantu**; in Zulu, **Ubuntu ngumuntu ngabanye**, and in Setswana, **Motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe**) (Lekoko and Modise, 2011). In English, the phrases translate to, “I am human because I belong, I participate, and I share or I am because we are; and, since we are, therefore, I am” (Mbiti, 1988: 108). These phrases resonate with Ghandi’s words, “the good of the individual is contained in the good of the community” (cited in Stone, 1996). Here, we evoke a common saying of “together we stand, divided we fall.” Africa needs learning that imbues learners with qualities that will end separation/individualism, greediness, and dependency, which in most cases lead to dictatorship, crime, war, and many of the ills that are holding back Africa’s progress to true liberation and development. Using the words of Searle (1981): we say, Africa needs to fight acts of “individualism, careerism, gangsterism of whatever kind and all mess of personal and general confusion sown and spread around by the colonial years” (p. iii). The actual choice of doing this comes with intentional efforts to engage in learning that upholds the principles of **Ubuntu**.

**Lessons from the philosophy of Ubuntu as an apt pedagogy for Africa**

The philosophy of **Ubuntu** has a deep significance and utility as pedagogy for Africans. First, it assumes that learning enshrined by African learners is strongly influenced by their culture. Specifically, **Ubuntu**’s significant
feature is pursuit of learning that is communal, functional, and constitutes an all-round active involvement. A community or society is that structure from which people gain their backgrounds and experiences. These are what they make meaning out of in the learning environment. Moreover, Ubuntu privileges learning contexts that are practical and engage learners in activities that promote their social responsibilities. To favour the principle of Ubuntu is to further recognize a learning process that builds learning tasks and structures that imbue collective responsibility, shared vision, and actions that appreciate lives as lived. Learners in Ubuntu-inspired learning environments exhibit a sense of pride for their culture and openness to learn new ideas. It is a learning process that engages learners in collaborative and transformative learning processes.

The collectiveness that we call for cannot be fully achieved without proper relationships in the learning environments. Relational aspects are at the heart of Botho. It clearly emphasizes learning activities that teach learners respect for each other and instil other humane behaviours, such as being courteous and well mannered. It talks closely to the nitty-gritties of classroom relationships such as self-discipline, harmonious cultural interchanges, respect of an other’s point of view, and dignity in social relations and practices. Botho communicates a pedagogy of behavior and discipline that attacks antisocial behaviours.

Ubuntu and Botho principles shift attention from a Western conventional learning mode dominated by values of grades, competition, and learning as an individual activity for individual purposes, to an African traditional learning approach in which learning is recognized as a social and empowering process for all. It is learning with collective respect for dignity of personhood, with emphasis on virtues of respect and dignity in social relations and practices. Ubuntu and Botho are mutually inclusive, as illustrated in Figure 52.1.

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Figure 52.1 Axis of relationship of Ubuntu and Botho

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Ubuntu is a moral principle that promotes social responsibility and solidarity, the duty of care, and the vision of a society founded on justice and equality.

(Pityana, 1998)
Axis of relationship of Ubuntu and Botho

Botho means humane behavior, a Setswana culture of the concept of a person who has a well-rounded character, who is well mannered, courteous and disciplined. It disapproves of antisocial, disgraceful, inhuman, and criminal behavior (Republic of Botswana Vision 2016, 1997).

Ubuntu is a moral principle that promotes social responsibility and solidarity, the duty of care, and the vision of a society founded on justice and equality (Pityana, 1999).

In the above discussions, a framework has been developed that can be adapted by Africans to tailor their curricula (learning structures, purposes, processes, contents, and outcomes) to fit their specific contexts.

Conclusions

As communities advance and change, it becomes difficult for them to deal with problems of development without collective spirit and respect for others’ challenges and problems as theirs. Collective action can be enhanced when community members desist from acting on outside influences rather than on challenges and problems directly affecting their communities. The embodiment of the spirit of collectivism is “Ubuntu.” The distinctive quality of this spirit is usually demonstrated in what Tyler (2007) refers to as prosocial community, that is, the one in which everyone is committed to working together for their own well being and that of the community, society, and ultimately the world. We now call for reform of learning systems.

The most significant feature of these reforms is trying to instill the spirit of collectiveness. These reforms should not privilege learning encounters that alienate learners from their local communities, but those that see Africa’s culture as a great resource for learning. Thus, the African cultural heritage of “Ubuntu ungamuntu ngabanye abantu” (a person is a person through other people) remains a moral position and a philosophy that can make it possible to address some of the most complex challenges of development facing Africa.

Applied to the learning systems, Ubuntu necessitates learning activities with the purpose of learning in and for community ways of life and benefits. This actually means eliminating the present elitist education system supported by a tendency to horde the nation’s resource for the few privileged groups – privileged because of the credentials they hold. Learning systems will ensure that everyone learns and that each level of the education system becomes useful in itself, and not simply as a means of facilitating entry into the next level of education or formal employment, but for one’s responsibility in community and national development. The task for learners is not only to study, but, in addition, to engage in community activities like farming.

In as far as competencies are concerned, learning institutions are expected to produce people with Botho (interpersonal networks, respect, trust, and relationships that can facilitate their responsibility as citizens who are expected to contribute to community development). Also, skills such as critical thinking and problem solving are needed for learners to solve their life problems. It is argued that, if abstract verbalism and textual knowledge continue to be the order of the day in learning cycles and if also the artificial separation of the world of learning from community’s ways of life remains, learning will produce learners who will fail not only to be productive outside the formal employment sector, but are a disappointment to their own societies, as they cannot be meaningfully engaged in national development. To facilitate meaningfulness and application of what is learned, learners should be given tasks appropriate to their age and learning needs. The local community should be requested to assist and guide the learners as they learn the necessary practical skills and techniques to function fruitfully in their societies. Whether learners merely cope or successfully adapt to changes in their societies is determined by the contents, processes, and outcomes of their learning. This chapter portrays learning environments as socially constructed encounters that discuss everyday life encounters and challenges. This is so because all types and forms of learning, formal, informal, and incidental, are considered useful in as far as they contribute significantly to development of the communities. We believe that true learning should remove barriers of successful learning for a
community’s ways of life such as studying a single discipline, academic competition and concern for higher grades that do not connect to school, work, and communities. In sum, this chapter puts more emphasis on practical or productive work. The goal is to produce learners with broad interests to enable them to fit into their community’s ways of life, rather than reducing the function of learning to serving the needs of the labor market.

References


