

Enhancing community engagement initiatives through moderate communitarianism

Zayd Waghid¹

Received: 15 May 2024 / Accepted: 5 August 2024

Published online: 08 August 2024

© The Author(s) 2024 [OPEN](#)

Abstract

Community engagement initiatives, which include ideas of social change and collaboration, seek to value and use students' knowledge in real-world situations. However, a lack of connection between academic learning and the community environment may result in disengagement on the part of students. The article argues that, by including the philosophy and practice of moderate communitarianism in CEI, it is possible to balance individual rights with community obligations, in this way bridging the existing divide between the two. Based on Kwame Gyekye's thoughts, this article presents a conceptual framework that highlights the importance of humanity in the African sense (Ubuntu), interdependence, communalism, and respect and dignity concerning CEI. I argue that these four aspects have the potential to provide a harmonious relationship between individual autonomy and society's requirements and, in so doing, to improve educational outcomes and, in turn, the advancement of social equality.

1 Introduction

University students have come to be generally expected by their university educators to learn by doing rather than passively absorbing knowledge. While practical learning would include university educators and students together using discursive resources to analyse distinct practices in authentic learning environments, university educators expect students to learn about specific and/or their immediate contexts. Authentic learning has been shown to enhance student's learning experiences and, in particular, their employability skills, their ability to communicate, think critically, and engage in problem-solving [1]. Such learning is said to challenge students to take ownership of their learning engagements in ways that cultivate their capacity to link practice to theory [2]. Through such learning, I contend, students would be more adept at understanding society's complex and distinct nature and the nuances associated with diverse challenges facing marginalised communities, such as social and economic inequities, than they would be through passively absorbing knowledge.

Community engagement initiatives (CEI) embody the principles of situational and practice learning, as they align with the foundational principles and values of community-university engagement. These include social change, collaboration, and identified community needs [3], all of which are significant for students since the acquisition of these is seen to have increased their potential to apply their acquired knowledge and competencies to authentic rather than abstract or theoretical situations. However, a disconnect between such forms of learning through CEI presents several challenges. If one accepts the argument of education scholars such as Laurillard [4], learning is context-dependent and thus any learning experience which is unrelated to students' real-life contexts may appear

✉ Zayd Waghid, waghidz@cput.ac.za | ¹Global Institute for Teacher Education and Society, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa.



abstract and disconnected from real-life situations, in particular from their particular social and cultural contexts. This in turn leads to a lack of engagement and interest on the part of students as they may not see the relevance or value of curriculum content to their lived experiences.

In addition, while university educators may undertake to familiarise themselves with their students' immediate social and cultural contexts, ascertaining their students' understanding of global issues stands to inhibit their capacity to develop empathy and understanding of diverse cultures and communities, including the particular 21st-century challenges faced by various global communities. Thus, the 'lived curriculum', which, according to (Aoki [5]: 261), embodies "the more poetic, phenomenological and hermeneutic discourse in which life is embodied in the very stories and languages people speak and live", becomes more significant, particularly within the context of CEI.

CEI's strong emphasis on communitarianism shares similarities with the ideals of the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which is premised on communal values, developing mutual respect, and advocating for social justice. While there is an interconnectedness between the principles of Ubuntu and the notion of CEI, there are certain differences. Drawing on the seminal thought of Kwame Gyekye [6], this article is guided by the following question:

- How can the implementation of moderate communitarianism contribute to the enhancement of the impact of CEI on student learning and social justice outcomes?

2 Challenges of integrating ubuntu philosophy into CEI

Archer-Kuhn and Grant [7] highlight the importance of contextual factors, such as power dynamics and conflicts among stakeholders, in influencing the efficacy of university-community connections. Their findings are consistent with the perspectives of Clifford and Petrescu [8], who emphasise the need to take into account internal, external, and personal factors in order to sustain engagement between the university and the community. This encompasses the task of addressing and rectifying power inequalities and promoting a shared feeling of belonging, together with collective identity within a community. Nkoana and Dichaba [9] highlight the need for strong conceptual and analytic frameworks to assess and execute university-community engagement, particularly within the context of a South African unequal society. These studies emphasise the need for implementing a holistic strategy for community engagement, one that takes into account power dynamics, strengthens community capabilities and is based on clearly defined conceptual frameworks.

While Ubuntu originates from African philosophy, there may be significant challenges in incorporating it into CEI in non-African contexts. One of the most significant challenges is how to adequately communicate the complex aspects of African culture in diverse environments where the underlying principles may not be easily understood and valued by those unfamiliar with these principles. CEI has a particular focus on communitarianism in African environments, in contrast to Western contexts that historically prioritise individual achievement and personal advancement. Thus, any expectation of a seamless integration of communal and personal principles should be based on an understanding of the complexity of such a process.

It is crucial to recognise that both Ubuntu and CEI may not consistently address structural inequities in a clear-cut and explicit way. Mwipikeni [10] contends that the existing global institutional system, which prioritises the interests of global capital, restricts the applicability of the Ubuntu-CEI notion and undermines the economic interests of poor black Africans. Proponents of individualism may subject Ubuntu to further scrutiny, arguing that its implementation would need comprehensive strategies to address systemic issues, such as racism, economic inequalities, and social injustices. Furthermore, whereas the evaluation of CEI usually depends on measurable outcomes, critics of Ubuntu may argue that its focus on intangible principles such as empathy, reciprocity, and human dignity cannot be measured. While there may be unanimous agreement that Ubuntu is essential as a guiding principle for decolonising educational practices, particularly in a country like South Africa [11], a central challenge remains. Although Ubuntu and CEI strive to address and dismantle unequal power dynamics within communities, there is a possible risk of perpetuating current power dynamics in the process. Failing to adequately analyse these dynamics could hinder the development of truly beneficial relationships between the university and the community.

3 Integrating moderate communitarianism into community engagement initiatives

With reference to the question: How can the implementation of moderate communitarianism contribute to a beneficial impact of CEI on student learning and social justice outcomes?, I present a conceptual framework for CEI, in which moderate communitarianism emphasises four key elements: humanity towards others (Ubuntu), interdependence, communalism, and respect and dignity.

First, regarding Ubuntu, Gyekye [6] argued in the 1990s for a form of moderate communitarianism, whose aims are to harmonise individual rights with communal responsibilities. For (Gyekye [6]: 40), moderate communitarianism emphasises individuals' significance and dignity, highlighting their uniqueness and commitment as 'social beings by nature'. This implies that the individual cannot develop outside the framework of the community and, similarly, the community cannot dispense with the talents and initiatives of the individual [6]. According to this argument and definition, any curriculum designer or policymaker attempting to develop CEI needs to consider the balance between communal and individual values, goals, and aspirations. This balance should reflect the interdependence of individual success and communal progress, which is premised on individual growth alongside communities with equal moral standing. Clarifying individual rights and communal obligations would have the benefit of alleviating possible disputes and could bridge and harmonise differing expectations through the implementation of CEI.

Concerning potential resistance from students who are accustomed to individualistic cultures, it is crucial for university educators need to integrate case studies of CEI that reflect diverse cultural perspectives. These case studies should showcase both individual and communal efforts in addressing social ills, thereby underscoring the significance of understanding and valuing unique cultural viewpoints.

Second, in the education context, concerning the interdependence of, and balance between, communal and individual values through such CEIs, we should encourage students to take active roles in such initiatives, at the same time providing a space for personal agency and decision-making within the community. Such an approach could foster a sense of student ownership and responsibility, in the process enhancing the CEI's beneficial effect at both individual and communal levels. For CEIs to be authentic, spaces need to be created where students may be more inclined towards addressing social injustices within communities, a space that would extend beyond curricula or course requirements. I argue for the necessity of this kind of approach in university education to foster a sense of ownership and responsibility among students, allowing for personal agency and decision-making in the process of realising individual and communal aims. Concerning the potential resistance from students who are accustomed to individualistic cultures, it is vital for university educators to promote open dialogue between university students and the community. Such dialogue would encourage students to share their individual experiences while also learning from the communal experiences of others.

Third, according to (Gyekye [6]: 66), "[t]he communitarian ethic acknowledges the importance of individual rights, but it does not do so to the detriment of responsibilities that individual members have or ought to have toward the community or other members of the community". Gyekye [6] argued that moderate communitarianism is an ethical stance that is firmly established and prioritises the dignity and respect of every individual. It guarantees that any collective actions taken are consistently evaluated in light of moral integrity and fairness. By incorporating ethical considerations into the process of establishing and implementing CEIs, which are founded upon principles of respect, dignity, and equity for all participants, it may be possible to prevent these initiatives from unintentionally prioritising community needs over individual rights or vice versa. Concerning the potential resistance to CEI which may be perceived as top-down in communities where there is a history of racial segregation or economic inequality, it is crucial for university educators to include students and communities in the co-design and implementation of CEI. Adopting such a participatory approach is essential in ensuring that CEI is relevant to the cultural contexts of communities.

Lastly, concerning respect and dignity, Gyekye's [6] philosophical position on moderate communitarianism can be attributed to its adaptability to diverse cultural contexts, particularly non-African contexts. His balanced approach acknowledges the necessity of adjusting to, and using, beneficial and humane practices from diverse cultures without compromising the fundamental principles of the societies into which one integrates. Given the ethical considerations embedded within moderate communitarianism, it is essential for CEI to consistently adopt a significant degree of moral responsibility to foster mutual respect and mutual understanding among diverse cultures. In this instance, those engaged in the process of CEI would be able to strengthen its ability to foster a learning and exchange process that has the potential to reduce cultural disputes and promote mutual enrichment by encouraging dialogical engagement between diverse cultures. Although Gyekye [6], almost three decades ago, did not explicitly address the

tangible outcomes associated with moderate communitarianism in the manner in which CEIs function, it is essential to evaluate the effectiveness of such initiatives, an evaluation based, not only on tangible outcomes, but also on the adoption of a comprehensive approach that takes into consideration the intangible impacts of community cohesion and individual empowerment, and their symbiosis. University educators, in particular, need to re-evaluate the effectiveness of CEI, drawing on critical feedback from both students and the community. Such reflective practice can assist in identifying areas of resistance and adapting appropriate strategies.

Acknowledgements I acknowledge the financial contribution made by the South African National Research Foundation in supporting the publication of this article.

Author contributions Z.W. was the sole author of this article.

Funding South African National Research Foundation.

Data availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License, which permits any non-commercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this licence to share adapted material derived from this article or parts of it. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

References

1. Sokhanvar Z, Salehi K, Sokhanvar F. Advantages of authentic assessment for improving the learning experience and employability skills of higher education students: a systematic literature review. *Stud Educ Eval*. 2021;70: 101030. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.STUEDUC.2021.101030>.
2. Freire P. *Pedagogy of freedom: ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. 1998.
3. Morton MA. Practicing principles of community engaged scholarship in a fourth-year seminar. *Teach Learn Innovat*. 2013: 16.
4. Laurillard D. The processes of student learning. *High Educ*. 1979;8:395–409. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01680527>.
5. Aoki TT. Legitimizing lived curriculum: towards a curricular landscape of multiplicity. *J Curric Superv*. 1993;8(3):255–68.
6. Gyekye K. *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press; 1997.
7. Archer-Kuhn B, Grant J. Challenging contextual factors in university-community partnerships. *J Commun Engage Scholar*. 2014;7(2):40.
8. Clifford D, Petrescu C. The keys to university-community engagement sustainability. *Nonprofit Manag Leadersh*. 2012;23(1):77–91.
9. Nkoana E, Dichaba M. Development and application of conceptual and analytic frameworks for community engagement at a South African higher education institution. *South African J Higher Educat*. 2017;31(6):177–96.
10. Mwipikeni P. Ubuntu and the modern society. *South African J Philos*. 2018;37(3):322–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2018.1514242>.
11. Waghid Y, Waghid F, Waghid Z. *Rupturing African philosophy on teaching and learning: Ubuntu justice and education*. London: Springer; 2018.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.