‘Africanising’ assessment practices: Does the notion of ubuntu hold any promise?

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Abstract

Changes in assessment theory and practice have become commonplace in many education systems across the globe. Many of the changes are evident in state education polices, which have implications for the ways in which teachers/lecturers perform their work. Calls have been made for more authentic ways of assessing learning and for assessment to become integral to teaching and learning processes. However, shifts in assessment theory and practice remain largely framed within a Western paradigm and increasing globalisation might lead to greater homogenisation of assessment practices. In this article we examine whether current shifts in assessment theory and practice provides space for accommodating the socio-cultural backgrounds of African learners. We further invoke the notion of ubuntu to explore its potential to provide a more nuanced understanding of authentic/alternative forms of assessment and examine ways in which the idea of ubuntu might contribute to disrupting the hegemony of contemporary assessment theory and practice, given its strong Western base. We specifically will look at implications that the Africanising of assessment might have for teacher education practices in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Given South Africa’s unprecedented racist history it is not surprising that debates on Africanisation and Africanism are privileged in contemporary discourses on South Africa’s development and future. But debates on Africanization and Africanism have a long history in Africa as a consequence of centuries of colonial rule and legacies of colonialism still evident in African countries post independence. Prah (2004, 104) suggests that the term Africanization and Africanism are often used interchangeably, but perhaps incorrectly so. For Prah (2004, 99) Africanization involves the systematic and deliberate deployment of
Africans in positions which enable them to gain control of society – that African majorities need to be demographically represented in all areas of social life. Although Africanisation may serve as the basis for Africanism, the latter concerns more than just demographic representation and additionally is concerned with making African culture the centre of Africa’s development. Or as Prah (2004, 105) succinctly puts it: ‘... African culture should occupy a central position in the overall social activity of Africans...’

Pendlebury (1998, 334) points out that education, which was a primary site of contestation under apartheid, now is a primary site of transformation. She argues that transformation is not only paramount for education’s own sake but also because education is recognised as crucial for transforming other spheres of social life. Our aim is to explore transformations in one educational phenomenon, *assessment*, and in particular possibilities for Africanising assessment practices, that is, to explore how African cultural values may occupy a more central position in assessment practices. Along with Prah (1994) we, however, do not believe that Africanism involves abandoning or jettisoning the cultural attributes and practices of the West since no culture exists in pristine form outside of the influences of other cultures. For us, Africanising of assessment practices is concerned with the value that African cultural practices/ideals such as *ubuntu* might add to transformations that have already occurred within Western assessment theory and practice. It is not our intention to argue that Western assessment theories and practices are inadequate unless informed by *ubuntu* principles, but rather that principles that guide African ways of thinking might be invaluable in making assessment processes more accessible to African learners. Such an understanding might enhance the process of rolling back the alienation that is so prevalent when learners and teachers are submerged into ways of thinking not developed within their context.

In this article we explore points of resonance and tension between *ubuntu* and a contemporary notion, *assessment as learning*. In so doing we divide the article into four sections. Firstly we discuss shifts in understandings of assessment over time from an emphasis on types of assessment to more contemporary concerns about purposes of assessment. Secondly we review recent debates on *ubuntu* and clarify our own (dis)position in relation to it. Thirdly we discuss the possible relationship between assessment and *ubuntu*, proposing assessment practices that give primacy to humanness and that adopt a more holistic view of learners through giving credence to the qualitative dimensions of their learning instead of merely reducing learner’s abilities to quantitative indices. Finally, we explore some implications that our discussion has for teacher education practices in (South) Africa.

**(TRANS)FORMATIONS OF ASSESSMENT THEORY AND PRACTICE**

Assessment theory and practice of the past few decades have been marked by change. The change concerns efforts at (re)imagining and implementing alternative
forms of assessment to those often described as traditional. We argue that assessment change is not an event but rather a process aimed at achieving more authentic ways of assessing. Also, that assessment change should not be represented in binary terms of summative/formative, single-measure/multiple-measure etc., but rather as occupying a continuum of change from traditional to more authentic forms of assessment.

Importantly, assessment practices are embedded in theories of teaching and learning and therefore linked to shifts in understandings of teaching and learning. For example, behaviourist theories of pedagogy focus the debate on effective teaching rather than learning. Dann (2004, 143) argues that the tendency of behaviourism is to prioritize teaching objectives rather than processes so that learner achievement is viewed as an outcome of teaching. Put simply, a cause-effect relationship between teaching and learning is assumed, that is, that teaching causes learning. Assessment within such a paradigm is viewed as an activity separate from teaching and learning and usually takes place at the end of a learning activity and referred to as summative assessment. Whereas, with constructivist theories of learning the emphasis shifts from teaching to learning and assessment in this paradigm involves ways in which assessment tasks/activities inform learning, an assessment type referred to as formative assessment.

Along with Tanner and Jones (2003) we find it more useful to focus on the purposes of assessment rather than types of assessment so that we speak of assessment of learning (‘summative’) and assessment for learning (‘formative’). The shift from assessment of learning to assessment for learning is a progressive one, but Dann (2004, 142) argues for a more radical perspective which she refers to as assessment as learning. She points out that assessment as learning recognizes that the learner is central to learning and that processes of self-regulation and understanding is fundamental to learning. She writes:

Whereas much research and discussion have linked formative assessment to ways in which teachers have tried to inform their own practice so that pupil’s needs are more specifically met, there has been little or sustained analysis of the ways in which pupils participate in this process . . . . Pupils are often incorporated into the discussion on assessment as users of assessment information – through processes of feedback. There is little account taken of the ways in which assessment processes (rather than outcomes) influence learning processes.

Dann (2004) brings important insights to our attention which shifts the debate from understanding assessment as a technology to viewing assessment as a learning process. However, we argue that Dann (2004) does not take the debate far enough because much of her discussion remains framed within individualism that characterizes much of Western thought. In this regard we raise two points of critique. Firstly, it is not only learner’s participation in assessment processes that are crucial but also what they bring to such processes, that is, there prior
knowledge informed by their socio-cultural backgrounds. Secondly, assessment as learning, that invokes notions such as self-assessment, self-regulation, and so on, may be blind to the centrality of learning in relationship to the other and the other’s role in learning. In Africa where lived experiences are based on communalism, assessment of/for/as learning should crucially be informed by the socio-cultural backgrounds of learners. In this regard we now introduce the African notion of *ubuntu* so as to explore ways in which it might enhance assessment practices in (South) Africa.

**A WORD ON UBUNTU**

The term *ubuntu* has gained prominence in post-Apartheid South Africa. In part, its prominence might be understood as an attempt to (re)discover African cultural values eroded by both colonialism and apartheid. Also, it is a term that has become popularised, bandied around loosely and (ab)used for both political and economic gain. *Ubuntu* is an African word comprising one of the core elements of a human being. The African word for human being is *umuntu* which is constituted by the following: *umzimba* (body, form, flesh); *umoya* (breath, air, life); *umphefumela* (shadow, spirit, soul); *amandla* (vitality, strength, energy); *inhliziyo* (heart, centre of emotions); *umqondo* (head, brain, intellect), *ulwimi* (language, speaking) and *ubuntu* (humanness) (Le Roux 2000, 43). The humanness referred to here finds expression in a communal context rather than the individualism prevalent in many Western societies (Venter 2004, 151). However, *ubuntu* does not discount the importance of the individual.

Battle (1996, 99) presents the concept *ubuntu* as a concept that originates from the Xhosa expression: *umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye Bantu*. He writes: ‘Not an easily translatable Xhosa concept, generally this proverbial expression means that each individual’s humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others and, in turn, individuality is truly expressed. Or a person depends on other persons to be a person.’ Ubuntu then, is to be aware of one’s own being, but also of one’s duties towards one’s neighbour. According to Venter (2004, 156) *ubuntu* is a concrete manifestation of the interconnectedness of human beings – it is the embodiment of (South) African culture and life style. The whole education process centres around *ubuntu* as a philosophy or set of ethical principles that captures the belief system of most (South) Africans according to which people take responsibility for other people but also accept the authority and guidance of those who have reached a higher level of knowledge and understanding in order to progress.

In this article we wish to explore the value that *ubuntu* might add to assessment theory and practice. We argue that *ubuntu* opens up possibilities for more nuanced understandings of assessment theory and practice and more importantly, to enable the transformations of assessment so that it more strongly reflects African culture.
ASSESSMENT AND THE IDEA OF UBUNTU

In every society in the world different worldviews interact. For example, what a student learns about the world through religion may be different from what is taught/learnt in school/university. For non-Western learners, interaction between two worldviews characterizes much of their educational experience, complicating the learning process, and potentially resulting in cognitive conflict or as the literature describes: cognitive dissonance/perturbation. In Africa, schools are the sites where most learners first experience the interaction between African and Western worldviews. It is therefore crucial that teachers (particularly Western teachers) are aware of this interaction and understand the way it could complicate the learning process. Jegede (1999, 119) suggests that the culture of a learner’s immediate environment plays a significant role in learning because it determines how concepts are learned and stored in the long-term memory as schemata. If, as Dann (2004) suggests, assessment should be viewed as a learning process, then in an African context assessment practices might only be meaningful if it takes into account the culture of the immediate environment of the learner. It is here that ubuntu comes into its own, and if integrated into assessment practices, could significantly contribute to enhancing learning.

In Western(ised) countries assessment of learning (summative assessment) has dominated assessment practices. Such an approach separates assessment activities from teaching and learning activities and as a consequence produces relationships between teachers/lecturers and learners that are aloof. Summative assessments tend to present results in the form of quantitative indices reducing learner’s abilities/potential to mere numbers and more disturbingly learners who do not attain required pass marks are labelled failures – the effects of summative assessment could be described as inhumane. An education system where summative assessment practices dominate, disadvantages certain learners and more so in an African context, where such practices are in conflict with the lived experiences of most learners.

As mentioned, in Western countries efforts have been made to ensure that assessment practices are more authentic and humane. There now is a better understanding that assessment demands an involved relationship between teacher and learner. Assessment is not only about making a judgement (in an aloof manner), but rather about being with the learner every step of the way and being prepared to recognise learning difficulties in a respectful and dignified way. Through genuine sharing of acquired knowledge and skills with compassion to the achievement of the intended outcomes. Efforts that have been made in Western countries to introduce assessment practices that are more authentic and humane are commendable but dominant values such as competitiveness and individualism could militate against such efforts. It is here that ubuntu could add value so as to deepen such efforts at ensuring greater authenticity and humaneness in assessment practices and in so doing contribute to the Africanising of assessment practices.
The core values of *ubuntu* as described by Broodryk (2002, 32) provide a supportive basis or frame of reference from which both teacher and learner can engage in the assessment process. We shall elaborate on some of these core values of *ubuntu*, in relation to assessment.

The first two values, *humanness* (warmth, tolerance, understanding, peace, humanity) and *caring* (empathy, sympathy, helpfulness, and friendliness) capture the spirit in which assessment might be conducted. Humanness towards and caring unconditionally for learners, are fundamental to effective teaching and learning. Learners are likely to experience assessment as positive only when they are sure that the teacher/lecturer who guides the learning process, is a humane and caring person who is fully aware of their fears and difficulties.

Assessment demands the exercise of discipline not only on the part of learner, but also on the part of the teacher, as it involves the core value of *respect* (dignity, order). Accepting the dignity and integrity of all parties involved, demands that the assessment process is transparent. It requires of both the assessor and the assesssee to be clear about what is assessed and what is expected of the learner so as to demonstrate achievement. If we assume that all learners have the ability to learn but that they learn at different paces in different spaces, then it is important that the process of preparing the learner is characterised by inclusiveness and respectful adherence by the teacher to feedback from the learner and vice versa. Teachers’ respect of themselves and their learners disposes them to use assessment information in such a manner so as to enhance the quality of both teaching and learning. But, this requires of teachers to constantly reflect on their own practices so that they use the most effective teaching and support strategies for all learners.

Two further values, *sharing* (giving unconditionally, redistribution) and *compassion* (love, cohesion, informality, forgiving, spontaneity), are seen from an African worldview as the characteristics of the ideal person (see Broodryk 2002; Beets and van Louw 2005). It could be argued that these are qualities that all teachers should have and that are necessary to ensure quality teaching and learning through assessment. Possessing these characteristics reflects the social commitment of a teacher to share with others what he/she has gained through the efforts of others. Crucial in the process of assessment is the sharing of information, not only with parents or other stakeholders, but more particularly with the learner. Reported research in schools has identified feedback and feedforward (which is the informing of the next steps to be taken in learning) as the variables that have the greatest impact on students’ achievement – more than any other aspect of teacher behaviour, or curriculum design (see Gibbs 2003, 126). Feedback, given as part of formative assessment, helps learners to become aware of any gaps between their desired learning outcome and their current knowledge/understanding/skill, and guides them through actions necessary to obtain the outcome. While feedback generally originates from a teacher, learners can also play an important role in formative assessment through self-assessment (Boston 2002, 2). Crucial here is how sharing takes place, and we suggest that it might be done in more supportive
and humane ways so that learners’ and their communities’ dignities are edified and respected. To achieve this teachers/lecturers are required to commit themselves to understanding the culture of the immediate environment of the learners.

It is evident from the above discussion that *ubuntu* as a philosophy (or set of ethical principles) might enhance learning in African settings if it is integrated as a core value in assessment practices because it strengthens interdependence between teacher/lecturer and learner, which is likely to improve both teaching and learning.

**SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING EDUCATION PRACTICES**

The word ‘assessment’ is derived from the Latin verb *assidere* which means ‘to sit beside’. It indicates a much deeper involvement of a teacher in the development and progress of the learner which includes guidance, recognition of the learner’s context (physical, emotional, intellectual, cultural, economic), reflection on own practice and continued support as he/she walks besides the learner on the road to achieving the expected outcomes. Teachers/lecturers, in the nature of their profession, are in a special relationship with their learners and the community they serve. Their work involves more than just being connected to other people because of the job they do. It is about the commitment of the teachers ‘to sit beside’ the learner and in that way also ‘to sit beside’ the community/society. Sincerity and level of commitment expresses the individual teacher’s/lecturer’s humanity in relationship to all those he/she serves. *Ubuntu* might serve to enhance relationships between teachers and learners as well as among learners. According to Letseka, cited in Venter (2004, 156), this humanness (*botho* in Sotho and *ubuntu* in Nguni) which refers to communally accepted and desirable ethical (educational) standards, is acquired by a teacher/lecturer through his/her life.

Efforts to transform assessment practices in schools depend crucially on the kinds of pre-service and in-service education programmes made available to teachers. If an objective is to integrate African cultural values in assessment practices in schools then these values need to be reflected in teacher education programmes and in the cultures of higher education institutions more generally. Imperatives for change in South African higher education institutions are not only curriculum ones but also need to take into account financial considerations, managerial and staffing issues as well as social and political considerations. According to Samuel and Pillay (2002, 3) the great challenge for teacher education in South Africa is to balance on the one hand ‘reconceptualisation’ and on the other hand ‘restructuring’. They see reconceptualisation as the prioritisation of the need to re-look at what and how teacher education is organised, managed and experienced by staff and students engaged in the curriculum programme at institutional level. Restructuring, they claim, focuses on the development of the systemic forces within the broader society which influence the pattern of
relationships between different teacher education providers, as well as between teacher education institutions and the teaching/learning sites where student teachers practice as novice and later as qualified teachers.

Africanising teacher education generally and by implication assessment practices involves both the mentioned processes. Although assessment is seen as mainly a curriculum issue and therefore should be dealt with under reconceptualisation, its nature, purpose and uses straddles this artificial dichotomy. Taking into account its formative, summative and ipsative purposes, in supporting and guiding students in their preparation to take up the teaching profession, assessment should be one of the key aspects to consider when rethinking the relationship of teacher education departments/faculties of universities with sites of teaching and learning. The ethos of understanding and respecting each individual student’s ability and showing humaneness in the process of supporting each student to the successful achievement of required learning outcomes should be emphasised. As indicated the reconceptualisation process demands action on two levels.

Firstly it deals with, the educational framework/structures in which teacher education takes place. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act of 1995 stipulates that the parameters for teacher education qualifications on a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is to be outcome-based, underpinned by a strong constructivist epistemology. According to Parker (2002, 13) this epistemological base has been rigorously criticised by Muller in ‘Reclaiming Knowledge’ (Muller 2000) and in a number of articles contained in ‘Changing Curriculum’ (Jansen and Christie 1999). He points out that outcome-based education has favoured the non-constructivists, because most if not all teacher education qualifications now have longer ‘whole qualifications’ that are assessed in far more subjective and inferential ways. Furthermore, stronger rules of combination and complex outcomes could produce an assessment milieu which militates against the integration of the ubuntu principles discussed earlier.

Secondly, at an institutional level, infusing ubuntu principles will depend on a willingness of academics to plan courses that ensure quality not only based on narrow academic imperatives, but also on social and political imperatives. In a scenario of a growing African student population, preparing teachers to work in school contexts where there is a majority African learner population, necessitates that consideration be given to ensuring that teaching practices are in line with the value systems and worldview(s) of such learners. The manner in which university courses (in this instance teacher education courses) are structured and lecturing delivered should reflect assessment practices which have integrated principles of ubuntu.

In a current context where summative assessment dominates higher education practices, greater efforts could be made to assess students more authentically through formative assessment methods. An important element of this type of assessment should be more detailed feedback on strengths and weaknesses shown in terms of indicated course/learning outcomes as well as feedforward focusing on
measures taken (by student or lecturer) to guide and support the student in achieving the expected or higher level outcomes. It is through thorough feedback that students will be given the metacognitive knowledge (sure of what they know and understand and what they are still unsure of) and metacognitive skills (able to choose a strategy to deal with the problems) to reach the stage where they use assessment to take ownership of their own learning. However, it is not merely putting in place the mechanisms of feedback and feedfoward that is important, but rather the manner in which these takes place. Assessment practices underpinned by ubuntu can ensure that feedback and feedfoward occur in more humane ways.

The balance of reconceptualisation and reconstruction which Wideen and Grimnet (in Samuel and Pillay, 2002, 3) regard as essential to successful teacher education reform appears to be more achievable if it is driven by a common philosophy, a philosophy that is African based, but also includes tenets of philosophies of education from other parts of the world. The challenge lies in unlocking the latent potential of all human participants which form part of the teacher education landscape. The ubuntu principles of sharing, compassion and respect could better assist us in dealing with issues of competition, intolerance, arrogance and self-claimed superiority which characterise so much of modern social life and the education practices embedded in it.

**CONCLUSION**

African culture has many social technologies which are subtle, profound, and embedded in a deeply communal and spiritual social context (Nussbaum 2003, 2). In this article we have touched the surface of what the worldview/philosophy of ubuntu entails. The challenge for all teacher education providers who are mostly ‘non-African’ and who are committed to infusing African values into their practices, lie in understanding traditional roles of African values, how these are linked to cosmology, spirituality, and artistic and expressive cultural forms.

Wilhelm Crous in his foreword to Lovemore Mbigi’s *ubuntu: The African Dream in Management* captures this problem and its possible solution so aptly when he argues that ‘Worse still, there seems to be an inability to really unlock the latent potential of our human resources. It is my belief that we focus much too much on Eurocentric (educational) management philosophies and principles. There has to be a greater understanding and appreciation of our African cultural heritage – and the transfer of that knowledge to the workplace’ (Mbigi 1997, ix). Although we are suspicious of the invocation of ubuntu as panacea for all African societal ills and that it is an idea(l) in which all Africa’s hopes are seated, we share Mbigi’s sentiment that African values should be better understood by all (South)Africans and should be reflected more strongly in social practices/institutions.

Assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning in (South) African educational institutions calls for a sensitivity to local contexts. We have suggested in this article that recognizing the ‘characteristics’ of ubuntu as the voice, values
and thinking of the majority of South Africans, might contribute to enhancing education (teaching and learning) through assessment. Moreover, that if assessment is to be understood as a process of learning, then in the African context cognizance should be taken of the culture of the immediate environment of the learner, which is informed by traditional African values. But, teacher’s understanding of these matter depend to some degree on how traditional values are reflected in teacher education programmes, which in South Africa are designed and delivered in higher education institutions.

NOTES

1 In South Africa universities are responsible for the delivery of teacher education programmes.

REFERENCES


