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Academically Based Community Service and Communities of Difference

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CHALLENGING THE ORTHODOXIES: ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO EDUCATION

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ACADEMICALLY-BASED COMMUNITY SERVICE/COMMUNITIES OF DIFFERENCE

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Abstract
Academically-Based Community Service (ABCS) is used as an educational philosophy through which learners in my classrooms engage with social issues within and beyond the classroom/university. ABCS is based on the idea that higher education institutions are of primary importance in any society and especially so in a globalising world – in short what we, as academics and students, do matters and makes a difference in society/the world. Students are facilitated to realise that through their studies they are exploring the means by which they can be of service to their communities and world. ABCS allows them to engage with this process consciously. Students are therefore introduced to the idea that they, as individuals, are significant stakeholders in Higher Education Institutions and that who they are and what they do through their studies actually really matters. The methods that underpin participatory action learning and teaching, the approach that supports ABCS, encourages students to engage actively with the academic subject matter being studied towards the important goal of developing a ‘community of difference’ in the classroom as learners come to appreciate that there can be unity-in-diversity. This goal is important especially for the Human Resource Management students taught. Self-reflection, sense-making and dialogue are the primary tools used to facilitate real and relevant learning.

Introduction

“You are a human being. And so you have a philosophical view of existence – whether you realise it or not. About this you have no choice. But there is a choice to be made about your philosophy, and it can be put in these terms: is your philosophy based on conscious, thoughtful and well-informed reflection? Is it sensitive to, but not chained by, the need for logical consistency? Or have you let your subconscious amass an ugly pile of unexamined prejudices, unjustified intolerances, hidden fears, doubts and implicit contradictions, thrown together by chance but integrated by your subconscious into a kind of mongrel philosophy and fused into a single, solid weight, like a ball and chain in the place where your mind’s wings should have grown? It is not the answer that enlightens but the question.” (Ionescu, 1997)

At an international conference earlier this year a colleague from my own institution introduced himself to the audience gathered for the workshop he was offering as teaching in a ‘black university’. This was an interesting insight for me as I had not been myself aware of the HEI in which I work as being synthesised in this way in the minds of any of my white colleagues. What does it mean I wonder to work in a ‘black university’? What does it mean as a ‘white’ person to work in a ‘black’ university? No doubt this introduction was loaded talk between ‘whites’, I was the only ‘black’ person in the room, given that no-one questioned what he meant by ‘black university’. I admit I did not raise the question either, but nevertheless wondered what it meant for me to be a ‘black’ person working in a black university. I
was acutely aware of my solo status in the room as a ‘black’ person and lacked the
courage to ask the question publicly. I lacked the courage because I was still
pondering the question this same colleague had asked me just the day before when he
had approached me after I had given my own presentation to ask the question: are you
from a slave background? Clearly this colleague has ‘race’ as it pertains to skin-
colour and slavery on his mind in terms of what he does as a lecturer working in a
‘black university’. My immediate response was ‘pardon’ as I sought to make sure I
had heard correctly given that the question had seemingly, from my perspective that
is, come out of the blue. Had my slave ancestry and the invisible legacies of slavery
revealed themselves in some unwitting way I had been unaware of as I gave my
presentation, I wondered, even as I pondered the motivation behind the question. On
reflection clearly this is a ‘white’ colleague who is responding to the experience of
working in a diverse environment in his own way – from the perspective of white
culture and his own colonial and enslaving legacies. I am left with the question,
however, of what impact does the way he has correlated the black skin colour,
slavery, diversity and difference make to how he approaches teaching and learning in
the diverse classroom. What might his personal philosophy mean for the students in
the diverse classrooms he teaches?

My own research and teaching struggles over the years has been to carve out a niche
for myself in higher education as a perceived ‘black’ woman who is able to live
authentically as a woman of British African-Caribbean (BAC) heritage without
recoiling from the shame of being identified as being of slave ancestry, black and
therefore stigmatised. Most importantly, because of my slave ancestry I can be
perceived to be without historical authority to be in the classroom, something which
can be perceived as a scandalous paradox by some ‘whites’ (Arthur et al, 1989).
Palmer (1992) points out:

> When our fears as teachers mingle and multiply with the fears of our students,
teaching and learning become mechanical, manipulative, lifeless. Fear, not
ignorance, is the great enemy of education. Fear is what gives ignorance its
power.

What I do and how I do it as an educator is a direct response to this life experience.
How do I transcend the stigmatised legacy of slavery that history and my ancestors
have bequeathed me as the descendant of enslaved Africans to be the best that I can be?
How do I not become trapped by the hidden agendas of others, such as my
colleague? How can I leave the world a better place than I have found it? How can I
transmit a life-enhancing legacy to the young of my own ethnic group in particular
that leaves them feeling valued and respected in the world instead of interlopers?
How can I facilitate all learners towards the goal of realising unity-in-diversity?
These are the teaching and learning questions that matter for me.
Teacher Authenticity and Integrity

It has been in the process of searching for my own authentic purpose for being as a ‘black’ woman that I came across the logic of personal and collaborative action research/inquiry research methodologies as a human inquiry approach to life. Human inquiry (Marshall, 1984) is basically about living consciously and evaluating one’s life experiences through sense-making (Weick, 1995) in order to understand them (i.e. engaging with education as philosophy). Issues of teacher authenticity and integrity resulted from my taking on the challenge of no longer eclipsing my life experiences (and therefore self) as a British African-Caribbean (BAC) in order to fit into the traditional university structure which positions me as a black member of staff as inferior, powerless and marginal to British society because of my ‘black’ skin-colour and slave ancestry. Over the years I have worked at ridding myself of the ethnic/race cleansing I have found necessary to surviving in the university setting as well as diversifying the university curriculum by presenting myself authentically to myself and so to students/learners. This is as opposed to presenting an ‘imposter self’ in order to gain acceptance and to feel that I fit in. It is about doing what I know is right as opposed to doing what I am told or what I think is expected of me in order to gain acceptance. It is about living consciously and making choices daily for myself that I take responsibility for. It is about creating a legacy for future generations that I am satisfied with as a human being in the here and now (Kotre, 1983). Engagement with these issues led me to understand the extent to which I was actually unfree within myself and the realisation that this was also the unwitting legacy I was role modelling to learners in my classroom – ‘black’ and ‘white’. I am additionally challenged by the notion of not being a victim of the ‘social capture’ process (Fisher & Lovell, 2004) whereby as a descendant of enslaved Africans (DoEA) I am represented as a black ‘token’ as opposed to being recognised as a human being in my own right, because of the unexpected academic achievements that I have made. Adopting authenticity and integrity as a way of being facilitates this because of its ‘movement’ as opposed to ‘organisational’ ethos (Palmer, 1992). Palmer identifies the logic behind movements as being initiated always by isolated individuals who decide to stop leading ‘divided lives’. My own experience of making the decision to stop living a divided life is very eloquently stated by Palmer when he describes what he calls the ‘Rosa Parks Decision’:

“... Rosa Parks sat at the front of the bus because her soul was tired of the vast, demoralising gap between knowing herself as fully human and collaborating with a system that denied her humanity. The decision to stop leading a divided life is less a strategy for altering other people’s values than an uprising of the elemental need for one’s own values to come to the fore. The power of movement lies less in attacking some enemy’s untruth than in naming and claiming a truth of one’s own.”
The Free Within Ourselves ABCS Research Project

Within the human inquiry personal and collaborative action research/inquiry paradigm can be found the idea of Academically Based Community Service (ABCS) developed by the Center for Community Partnerships, University of Pennsylvania in the US. ABCS places the spotlight on higher education as a key societal institution that is responsible for producing new knowledge, developing experts and new inventions but which is frequently found to be a part of the societal problem. ABCS, is service, rooted in and intrinsically linked to teaching and/or research. It consists of problem-oriented research and teaching, as well as community service learning emphasizing student and faculty reflection on the service experience conceptualised in our project as ‘being the change I want to see in my community/the world’ (Gandhi).

The central importance of ABCS for me in its strategic focus is its purpose of bringing about structural community improvement (i.e. developing social quality (Phillips & Berman, 2003) in the BAC social category (the strategic focus of my research) through student learning in the university and with community members and organisations). In this sense the approach goes beyond "traditional" notions of service learning with its emphasis on the learner to strategic academically based community service learning and research, in which both students and academic staff contribute to the well-being of people in the BAC community (both in the here and now and in the future) as a primary goal along with advancing student learning and improving scholarship and teaching. The ABCS approach is, therefore, an active, engaged pedagogy that encompasses learning goals, community service, reflection and assessment. Community service (in the form of research and dissertation) is integrated with academic instruction in a way that enables students to pursue academic course goals and community service simultaneously. In short learners in the Ethical Management unit and ABCS dissertation/research route are facilitated to engage with the problems of the BAC community as a means of providing a meaningful community service to it through their academic endeavours and so contributing to its transformation.

As I adopted the ABCS approach and used it creatively to meet our specific needs in our context, the idea of being ‘free within ourselves’, taken from Dewey’s understanding that learning how to be free within ourselves is the fundamental purpose of education, occurred to me to be the logical goal for DoEAs to attain, beginning with the individual. It is also an acknowledgement that the unresolved historical issues related to being DoEAs and living in the midst of our previous enslavers and colonisers results in members of this social category being basically ‘unfree’. This unfreeness is not least because of the existence of the race taboo and our, therefore, enforced invisibility as a particularised grouping as we collude with the taboo for a variety of reasons. The ‘race taboo’ can be understood as one of the hidden controls of British culture (Smith, 1991). The race taboo also works to make ‘whites’ ‘unfree’ too as it effectively prevents cross-‘racial’ dialogue about the issue. The fundamental hypothesis of this research project is that when learners (black and white) develop conscious bicultural competence (and in this way engage with their
unique history) (Bravette, 1997) they will also become free within themselves to realise their highest aspirations for themselves. In the diverse classroom learners from all ethnicities are facilitated to see that investigating the BAC experience is a means of studying the human experience and gaining more insights about themselves and their own ethnic culture at the same time. ABCS can be understood in terms of the contribution it makes as pedagogy, philosophy and as an educational model.

**ABCS as Pedagogy**
The biggest contribution that this pedagogy makes to democratic action is that it exposes the diverse student population to the challenge of working with people and the issues they face who function on the margins of educational communities. For many learners this will mean engaging with their own lives as members of these communities and likely someone who was hoping that gaining HE qualifications would be an escape route from their own communities. Ethnic minority learners in particular are reminded of the contribution they could be making to their own communities as a means of contributing to the whole. As teacher I have positioned myself as an intrinsic member of British society in the 21st century who recognises the responsibility of citizenship and the challenges faced by members of ‘ethnic minorities’ in carving out a respected place for themselves in the wider society. A critical interaction with societal inadequacies and injustices is adopted to empower students to take action as citizens and in order to conscientise them about diverse real life issues. A valuable outcome of this type of learning is that the students get the opportunity to test their knowledge experientially in the classroom. Their learning becomes contextualised in the sense that they are provided with an environment in which to acquire organisational and problem-solving skills and attitudes necessary for future work and learning (Brown, 1998). The student's exposure to the idea of service is structured and guided by the lecturer so that the student learns to experience and understand the world at a deeper and more critical level. Learning interactions are facilitated by a series of reflective guiding questions during the period of study. These reflections are interwove through discussions, presentations, listening, reading and writing based on the experience of developing a ‘community of difference/inquiry’ in the classroom. Learners are in this way co-opted as co-researchers.

ABCS as pedagogy has its roots in social reconstructivism, which encourages the student to analyse issues and to engage in efforts to solve them. This pedagogy also draws from Paulo Freire's critical theory, as ABCS is also about social justice and change, and the conscientisation of the learner (Freire, 1994; Kanpol, 1994) about the world. In a critical theory approach the learners' consciousness are raised when their own social reality is challenged and confronted through philosophical readings, ‘discussions’, self-reflective and critical thinking, ethical dilemmas and in this case engaging with issues related to ‘race’ through focus on the black social category. The unit has, therefore, been designed to facilitate the growth of student consciousness by engaging them in dialogue with one another and, mediated by the outcomes of conscientisation, a process is created in which students assume the role of subjects in
the process of transforming their worlds. In other words, they start making the switch from being uninvolved students to becoming active citizens. This is a challenge for most learners studying business management.

**ABCS as Philosophy**
As a philosophy ABCS reflects the belief that education should develop both faculty and students’ personal and social responsibility and accountability directing us to become involved citizens in democratic life. As a teaching method ABCS utilises the diverse community context of the university as the site for ‘developing the community in the classroom’ (as opposed to sending students to outside agencies) in order to assess real community needs in the context of a world community enabling students to learn through active engagement with issues, beginning with the self. As noted earlier, Gandhi’s idea that we must be the change we want to see in the world is an important underpinning theme. The community service that students and faculty offers through the ABCS is different from voluntary work in that it joins theory with experience and deliberation with action. In voluntary work the primary focus is on providing a service and the primary beneficiary is the service recipient. In ABCS the student accomplishes tasks which meet human need in combination with his/her conscious educational growth. Thus bringing service (community work) and learning (curriculum) together to provide critical experiential learning opportunities for students is an effective pedagogical strategy.

**ABCS as an Educational Model**
ABCS as an educational model could be instrumental in reconstructing education for a better more effective functioning British society. The pedagogy provides a thoughtfully organized experiential learning experience for both student and faculty. The community/university partnership via The Free Within Ourselves ABCS research project at LSBU provides a unique opportunity to build ethical and leadership assets in students as well as making service and engagement in public life an integral part of education, and not just something to practice if students have extra time or if the mood strikes them. Learners are also facilitated towards developing a global community consciousness; work towards addressing unmet community needs while simultaneously developing academic knowledge and skills; this approach awakens student interest in community issues (Israel & Hoover, 1996). Being a community oriented university LSBU is well placed to be an academic institution that facilitates the critical entry of its diverse human and intellectual resources into the broader community.

**The ABCS Student Experience**
One key element of a successful ABCS course is the opportunity for learners to reflect on their learning experiences in relation to who they are and the concerns of what it means to live in ‘community’ both within and outside of the classroom. Effectively, learners bring the community into the classroom and the classroom into their community – which in the early stages will be the community of self (Akbar,1985)
extending to their families and social networks as they share learning beyond the classroom. In this way we move beyond what Boomer (1987) refers to as the ‘elsewhereness’ of scholarship. While engaged in this learning experience of bringing human real life problems for deeper academic and intellectual scrutiny into the classroom learners will also be identifying future work while simultaneously embedding the ideas of a strong ethos into their families and social networks. Common reflection exercises to underpin learning might include: reflective essays, journals, directed writings, electronic discussion groups, peer review assignments, student portfolios and class discussions. The end results are intended to be engaged problem solvers, a more dynamic classroom, and a community enriched by meaningful contributions. Key to the learning experience that learners will undergo is that of transformative learning as a means of facilitating the shift in consciousness that Einstein has noted is necessary to overcoming problems. O’Sullivan (2003) describes ‘transformative learning’ as involving individuals:

‘... experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body awarenesses, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy.’

Transformative learning facilitates learners towards the awareness that the reasons for our failures are within ourselves and not outside of us. Our individual context is our hidden strategy for dealing with life and it determines all the choices we make (Page, 1995). Transformative learning therefore seeks to get the individual to engage with the here and now and to take personal responsibility for their lives. Individuals are introduced to tools to aid a personal reengineering process that involves the examination of contradictions, discovering tensions, noticing instead of ignoring feelings of discomfort and asking ourselves questions opening up to valuable learning. The outcomes are that the learner begins to see the world and themselves in it with new eyes, ears and sounds. In short they are facilitated towards achieving a metanoia.

Developing ‘Communities of Difference’ as a Teaching, Learning and Research Legacy via the ABCS Route

Creating community in the classroom is the theme of the Ethical Management unit in which second year undergraduates are invited to participate in the Free Within Ourselves Academically-Based Community Service Project with a strategic focus on the British African-Caribbean community and for which I am research fellow. Ethical Management as a unit is situated in the context of a global world consisting of one human race whose members can be seen to be interdependent. Ethics basically seeks to answer the question through academic study: how do we live in community (with a
sense of obligation and responsibility to one another) as human beings? What does it mean for us to experience this idea of community in the ethical classroom across our human differences? In other words: how do we develop a community of difference in this class? As learners who have chosen the human resource option I present a human-centric perspective of the human being in the organisational context which is in many ways opposed to the idea of human beings being ‘resources’ to be exploited. This is especially the case when these human beings have been placed on a hierarchical ladder based on ‘difference’ and ‘status’ in terms of their human worth.

The strategic focus on DoEAs as a social category enables learners to have a specific sample group on whom to apply the ethical theories studied throughout the course of the unit. Focussing on the issues that relate to this group means that learners have to take a critical perspective to themselves and others even when they choose not to acknowledge this overtly. In terms of the strategic focus, the idea is posed to learners that if one member of the larger family is not functioning well that this will have a knock-on effect on the family system as a whole in much the same way the human body is affected if one of its members is not functioning well. From this perspective learners are enabled to see that they have responsibilities beyond merely themselves and those they identify to be like themselves. This is especially important for those learners who believe that the ‘Afro-Caribbean problem’, or any other group for that matter, is a group one that members of that group have to resolve for themselves.

From the outset of the unit learners are guided towards qualifying terminology through the careful selection of words and the ideas they are seeking/wanting to convey as they come to realise through discussion, dialogue and the creation of a safe and rehumanising environment that what we think matters as thoughts invariably result in action/outcomes. Consequently, when the term ‘race’ arises in respect of the human family a discussion is raised about the nature of the human race. It is interesting to note that ‘black’ students generally think ‘race’ and ‘black’ are synonymous whereas it is always the ‘white’ student who acknowledges that ‘there is only one human race’. ‘Black’ students are invariably taken aback by this insight. The use of the terms black and white races must, therefore, be incorrect but is nevertheless widely used by both ‘whites’ and ‘blacks’ alike. Further discussion ensues about the consequences of this incorrect use of the term for the human family and which results in division and conflict based on an untrue statement. Prime focus in the unit, therefore, is on thinking and the importance of thinking. Critical thinking underpins the unit with learners being given a definition of critical thinking to use throughout the unit (and hopefully afterwards).

The diverse classroom proves to be an enormous resource in that so many people from such diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, experiences, cultures and qualification levels have come together enabling learners to experience both similarities and differences through discussion and dialogue. The internal resource I bring of having worked through these internal processes myself to be at a point where I am comfortable with differences, love people unconditionally and am able to see beyond
superficial differences such as skin-colour is an important resource in facilitating this form of learning. Authenticity and sincerity are trademarks of my work as are appreciation and valuing the unique differences and contributions/‘gifts’ we individually bring to the context.

One challenge that learners are set in the ethical classroom is that of re-seeing themselves not as ‘blacks’ or ‘whites’ but as human beings born into a particular ethnic family as seen in their physiognomy and historical journey and to become aware of the visible and invisible legacies with which history/their ancestors has bequeathed them. Seeing ourselves in this way enables us to see the ethnic other as they have been uniquely shaped by historical and cultural influences. From this perspective we are able to look at ourselves as the recipients of certain legacies that we have a responsibility to build on as is appropriate to the legacies we have received. We can also look at the ‘ethnic other’ and see them in the same light – people who have life issues to work through and people who are seeking their happiness in the same way we are. The space in the classroom is created for us to extend our comfort zones and to take the experiential risk of learning from one another and life as seen in the following student responses from units in previous years.

“She was very down to earth, her attitude and style of teaching was very different from all the other lecturers in the University ... I think everyone was excited about the unit and the freedom of speech. I became very excited because I could give my own opinion and express myself on the topics that I found interesting.” (YS, mature female student)

“One aspect of the unit that I particularly struggled to grasp was the idea of critical thinking ... (it) was something I lacked until this unit ... throughout my education I have always listened to whatever the teacher tells me without questioning it. I can honestly say that the majority of my education so far as entailed me writing down what a teacher says and then memorising it to re-iterate it in the exam.” (female student)

“Looking back on my first ethical management lesson, I noticed that it would be a lesson where certain changes would need to be made in order to have a greater understanding; changes such as being open. I was reluctant to openness as I didn’t feel that always expressing myself or accepting everyone’s views was an important part of my learning experience ... my views quickly changed ...”

“I used to take the quiet or neutral position, meaning that things are as they are, so why bother if there is not power to change them.”

“In Spain we do not share class with other peoples of other nationalities and races ... this subject has given me the opportunity and I believe that in a future
not very distant I take advantage of it in my working place, especially when to

treat the persons like that they are, human beings, who must not be judged for
the colour of their skin or for their religion.”

“I thoroughly enjoyed taking part in this unit and I have learnt so many
valuable lessons that I can take with me and implement in the rest of my life.”

Conclusions

My teaching, learning and research practice is predicated around issues relating to
authenticity and integrity as a teacher and includes me taking the risk of bringing
myself humanly into the classroom. It is the choice of wholeness, of being divided no
more. Throughout the paper I have shared my personal journey of challenging
orthodoxies and developing alternative educational practices through being the
change I want to see in the world. It is a journey towards personal and professional
authenticity and integrity in which I have weaved together the varied and rich tapestry
of my own personal life, professional practice and historical journey to provide
learners in my classrooms with a unique learning experience as opposed to merely
transmitting knowledge so they can pass exams. Academically Based Community
Service is the vehicle and the development of ‘communities of difference’ the
underlying purpose and goal. It is after all as Palmer (1997) reminds us:

Good teaching depends less on technique than it does on the human condition
of the teacher, and only by knowing the truth of our own condition can we
hope to know the true condition of our students.
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