Liberatory classrooms: Reimagining teaching, learning and research through community engagement

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The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn (Alvin Toffler)

In Europe universities have stood for continuity and conservation; in Africa universities are powerful instruments for social change (Eric Ashby)

Learning is a lifelong process. In other words, the whole of life is a learning process. Firstly, learning requires an *awareness* that it is a lifelong process and, secondly, every human being should be *open* to learning. And when we are open to learning, then we are also open to unlearn and relearn. The discipline-based format of higher education, however, predominantly educates students for a career, a living, and not for life. Compartmentalised academic disciplines and inflexible institutional cultures preclude unlearning and relearning. The potential for individual, collective and organisational 'learning, unlearning and relearning' is lost within this polarising framework of higher education.

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks (1994) argues that the classroom is the most radical space of possibility within the academy. Teaching, she asserts, is a performative act. Classrooms, therefore, are capable of change: they can become sites of democracy and reciprocity, where both students and teachers contribute to one another's learning. In her reflections on the possibility of the classroom, hooks draws inspiration from Paulo Freire's (1972) critique of traditional classroom structures underpinned by the *banking model* of education, whereby teachers deposit information into the minds of students who are seen as empty vessels. This model, Freire argues, fails to develop *critical consciousness*: the growing awareness of and commitment to challenging oppressive structures around us (Freire, 1972, p. 73).

Freire's *problem-posing education,* an alternative to the *banking model*, is based on the recognition that people are not empty vessels, but conscious beings actively engaged with the world. In this model, teachers and students become critical co-investigators, exploring the issues of modern society through dialogue (Freire, 1972, p. 81). Problem-posing education also opens the possibility for transforming higher education itself, equipping students with the knowledge necessary to expand or challenge academic disciplines and institutional

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cultures. Consequently, classrooms or learning spaces at universities can continue to reproduce oppressive structures or provide the conditions for their deconstruction.

On the African continent, classrooms have historically served as sites of oppression as colonial legacies continue to influence educational experiences. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2012) notes, part of the process of colonialism involved placing Europe as the beginning of history and knowledge, while simultaneously constructing the African continent as bereft of history and significance prior to European influence. wa Thiong'o (1986, p. 9) remarked:

> *Berlin of 1884 [i.e., the partition of Africa into different colonised territories] was effected through the sword and the bullet. But the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom.*

Conversely, education spaces may be filled with liberatory potential. Education may expand individual and collective capabilities, facilitating democratic spaces for knowledge generation and sharing (Sen, 1999, p. 42). This connection between liberation and education also comes forward in the writing of Julius Nyerere (1976, p. 6):

> *Education has to liberate both the mind and the body of [hu]mans. It has to make [them] more of a human being because [they] are aware of [their] potential as human beings, and are in a positive, life-enhancing relationship with [themselves], [their] neighbour and [their] environment.*

Education – specifically the dialogical processes of teaching and learning – may thus simultaneously reproduce injustice and provide the conditions for its critique, with the nature of the classroom space significant in determining its impact. A question thus emerges: *What is the classroom?* Learning does not only occur within the confines of traditional brick-and-mortar lecture halls. In fact, the most liberatory classrooms may fall outside traditional educational institutions, within community settings. South Africa's Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) emerging during apartheid provides a striking example of this kind of classroom. Led by Steve Biko, the BCM shifted the focus of the freedom struggle toward mental liberation, highlighting the need for a transformation of consciousness alongside political freedom. Biko argued that apartheid did not only produce material effects but also "spiritual poverty" among Black communities (Biko, 1987, p. 22).

Linda Hull (2017) argues that this 'spiritual poverty' functions as a kind of *hermeneutical injustice*, the distortion and marginalisation of Black histories, cultures, and knowledge under apartheid. In response, the BCM thinkers emphasised conscientisation and the reclamation of African identity, history, and ways of knowing (Gibson, 2011, p. 67). The BCM extended beyond university campuses, connecting students with broader community struggles in schools, townships, and beyond. This approach to higher education, rooted in epistemic and political liberation, fostered a sense of solidarity and a commitment to social transformation.

Currently, the inclusion of community engagement as a core mandate of higher education in South Africa, further challenges the traditional boundaries of the classroom, and this movement against and beyond boundaries could become a powerful transgression. Community engagement, when paired with a problem-posing approach to education, has the potential to nurture critical consciousness in students. This connection between the classroom and society – what Freire would call *praxis* – becomes transformative when community engagement is integrated into the learning process, rather than treated as separate from it. As the nexus between teaching and research, community engagement readily provides pathways to learn, unlearn and relearn through the relationships between students and academics; between academics and academics; between students and students and importantly between academics, students and communities outside of the university.

The integration of mutually beneficial community engagement relationships in learning processes may also reinforce dialogic and integral learning, where the university and local communities both grow from the experiences. This reciprocal learning process may challenge traditional models of education, emphasising the shared growth of students, academics and communities.

Overview of contributions in this issue

The papers comprising this issue demonstrate that learning through community engagement is not merely an academic exercise, but a transformative practice that shifts paradigms, fosters dialogue and innovation, and facilitates mutual learning.

Nigel Machiha opens this issue with a discussion of the Nine-Tenths Mentoring Programme which pairs Rhodes University mentors with final year learners at marginalised high schools in Makhanda, South Africa. Drawing on the insights of the programme's former 'mentees', this research paper considers both the possibility and limitations Nine-Tenths holds as a vehicle for decolonising higher education and enhancing epistemological access – the ability to engage meaningfully with academic knowledge – of historically disadvantaged students. Machiha thus connects a community engagement programme to contemporary discourses on higher education decolonisation and the decentring of knowledge and ideologies produced in the Global North in teaching and research practices. Drawing on conversations with 12 former mentees, Machiha concludes that the programme plays a crucial role in increasing access to higher education, an important aspect of higher education transformation. This transformation, however, is incomplete. Machiha argues that, to ensure that decolonisation efforts go beyond surface-level changes, it is important for universities to implement meaningful and sustained curriculum transformations that genuinely reflect diverse epistemologies. In this reflection, Machiha reminds us that, although the reciprocal learning experiences enabled through community engagement mentoring experiences are significant, we must not turn our attention away from the ways in which traditional university classroom spaces may not be living up to their liberatory potential.

Grey Magaiza, Geoffrey Mukwada, Jesse Lutabingwa, and **Jerit Dube** turn our attention to how we can cultivate reciprocal learning in academic processes by presenting a methodological approach for collaboratively engaging youth in a study on social entrepreneurship in the rural community of Thibella, South Africa. The participatory approach to research described in this paper illustrates the practice of co-creating a context-specific youth development approach. The paper details a variety of creative research techniques such as storytelling, collage making and photovoice, that serve to enhance data collection in engaged research. This paper highlights the importance of community-university partnerships (CUPs) in framing new methodologies for community engagement and recommends that CUPs be embedded in community-informed knowledge generation processes. The authors argue that community-university partnerships, based on dialogue, mutuality, and respect for local knowledge, are key enablers for positive transformation. Through this process of reciprocity, collaborators – those associated with community *and* academic settings – learn from one another and give meaningful expression to liberatory knowledge democracy.

Lindsay Kelland's reflections on the SHAER-Storytelling for Health, Acknowledgment, Expression and Recovery-intervention extend the discussion of methodologies that cultivate liberatory 'classrooms'. Reflecting on SHAER's implementation in Makhanda, South Africa, Kelland argues that collaboration with local partners was not only desirable but essential, given the need to hold a space both constituted by women survivors of gender-based violence and directed toward supporting their mental health after trauma. Kelland identifies unexpected outcomes that reshaped her learning. Despite the intervention's aims, no 'trauma stories' were shared, and her collaborators did not primarily identify as victims or survivors. Instead, they centred their narratives on their roles as mothers and community carers. This focus on agency, particularly through the identity of motherhood, may resonate with African philosophies, where motherhood is often a source of power, agency, and social status. Based on these outcomes, Kelland proposes that SHAER can be reimagined not merely as a mental health intervention but as a transformative, critical service-learning course, oriented toward empowerment and participatory democracy. Importantly, she emphasises that SHAER need not be restricted to trauma recovery: in its broadest form, it can function as a model for critical conscientisation.

The paper by **Margaret Aringo** and **Odhiambo Kevin Odongo** from Tangaza University in Kenya is based on a community engagement study from a faith-based perspective. The study highlights how students from the Franciscan School of the Institute of Spirituality and Religious Formation at Tangaza University engage with the Kiambiu small Christian communities through service learning, and the importance of biblical teachings in the application of the pastoral cycle methodology in service learning preparation and implementation. This paper introduces the pastoral cycle, an innovative, contextually grounded methodology for service learning. Designed to deliberately link action and reflection, the pastoral cycle deepens students' understanding of social justice and enhances

their ability to collaborate with communities for transformative change. In this way, Aringo and Odongo's approach powerfully advances the development of critical consciousness from a faith-based perspective. This case study is a significant example of learning through engagement. Students do not just passively consume knowledge; they actively contribute to the community's development while reflecting on their own learning journey. This two-way process embodies the liberatory potential of the classroom as a site of democracy and reciprocity, where students and communities learn with and from one another from a faith-based perspective.

Adding further nuance to this discussion, in his review of *Bridging Knowledge Cultures: Rebalancing Power in the Co-construction of Knowledge* (2023, edited by Lepore, Hall, and Tandon), **Peter Clayton** turns our attention to the challenges faced by researchers and community partners in community-university research partnerships. The book under review addresses power dynamics in knowledge production and the core question of how to rebalance power between universities and communities in co-constructing knowledge. A key strength of the book, as noted by Clayton, is its diverse case studies from various regions, brought together to offer transferable lessons to the reader. Central to these insights is the reflection that learning in this way requires the valuing of multiple – context-specific but often connected – ways of knowing, relationships and dialogue in knowledge-making.

Concluding remarks

The contributions to this issue illuminate the powerful role that community engagement can play in reimagining teaching, learning and research as emancipatory practices. The diverse articles demonstrate that learning does not only occur within university walls, nor does it flow in one direction. Instead, liberatory classrooms, broadly conceived, are created wherever knowledge is co-produced, and reflection is inseparable from action.

By embracing community engagement as a core mandate, the capacity of individuals to be open to learning – to learn, unlearn and relearn – is promoted and enhanced. And our higher education institutions can help dismantle colonial legacies, cultivate platforms for mutual learning, and foster more democratic spaces. Yet, as several contributors remind us, realising this potential demands sustained, critical work, not only through community engagement initiatives and partnerships, but also through continuous self-reflection, and within our curricula, pedagogies, and institutional cultures.

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