

The cattle herd, the good coloured and the failed pharmacist: Telling tales of triumph

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Abstract

This conversation piece is intended to provoke thought on the relationship, if any, between education and thinking. It suggests that thinking requires more (perhaps less) than education.

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It is perhaps odd to continue to speak of a post-apartheid South Africa eleven years after formal democracy. At some stage we may stop thinking of ourselves as a post-apartheid nation, but I believe now is not that time. In retaining the identifier of post-apartheid, I believe that we hold a sense of the particular challenges that continue to plague us, and in claiming this identifier I am simultaneously signalling a premise of this conversation – that while as a nation we share commonalities with education development across the world, it is our peculiarities that I am concerned with here.

As a start let me confess my personal particularities. For more years than I can remember, I was an anti-apartheid activist. This history profoundly shapes who I am today; it shapes the kind of academic I choose to be, and indeed underpins my reading of the challenges that confront education in this country. However as an activist I had easy answers to the most perplexing social challenges. As an academic today I have only questions. That is good, and here is a question that has been plaguing me: Is there a relationship between education and thinking? Unlike days of yore I have no answer now, just thoughts that puzzle me.

I confess that I am a product of apartheid education. I went to an all-Indian¹ school, and even to a university that was designated for Indians. I learned from textbooks specially sent to Indian schools and was taught by Indian teachers. I am a product of apartheid living. I lived in an Indian area, shopped in Indian shops, ate Indian food, prayed in a temple, played with Indian children on the streets of our township and have a clear memory of my shock at seeing a white person close up for the first time in my life. Needless to say white people were invariably the

¹ I use the term Indian because it is how we were officially designated even though we were committed to being South African.

bosses of our parents who came to our homes to eat curry. The same was true with respect to my first encounter with white people. Not surprisingly, I have no recollection of the dinner we had that night. I do however recall many other dinners in my home. Those in which we spoke of the social injustice that was part of our lives, those in which we had long conversations about the ideals we fought for, those in which my parents instilled in us a strong sense of fairness, of equality, discipline, of rightness and moral goodness, those in which I was never conscious of any limitations imposed on me because I was female, those in which I learned to respect my parents while still enjoying the certainty that I did not have to agree with them in order to be loved. I also remember being proud of being a communist if communism meant food, shelter and security for all. Ironically, these were the conversations inspired by apartheid. This was family life inspired by apartheid. And this was character building inspired by apartheid. I learnt none of these in the Dick and Jane books I had to read in school. So while I saw Dick and Jane run, sit and catch a bus, I ambled along in my little Indian square, and in telling the telling tales of three South Africans I wonder what education did for them too.

My first tale is that of a colleague who describes himself as a skilled cattle herd, who could read the weather from the position of the moon, who knew which branches to chop down in which season for firewood, who spent days out in the *veld* being part of his environment, and who is a product of Bantu education, and has recently published his first academic text, less than three years after obtaining his doctoral degree. I am profoundly aware that despite his education he is an up and coming scholar of note. I am amazed that his Bantu education did not take him off the academic radar altogether.

The second tale is of a highly respected political leader in South Africa who began life as a good coloured. He went to a coloured school in the Cape, and obtained a diploma in engineering from the Peninsula Technikon (It was a widely held apartheid belief that technikon education was good for coloureds who apparently were most suited to hold artisan-type jobs). He tried to fulfil his role as a good coloured by working for Murray and Roberts – a big white construction company – for a while. Today he is South Africa's Minister of Finance. He is most probably the only Minister of Finance with really no significant formal qualifications in economics or any kind of finance-related degree. He has however been awarded five honorary doctorates, three of these in commerce. Currently he is being mooted in some circles as a possible candidate for the next Head of the World Bank.

And my last brief tale is of a well-known figure in South Africa, a man who began his work life as a pharmacist. His distinguishing characteristic as an Indian pharmacist in a busy part of Indian town was that his pharmacy ran at a constant loss (thereby putting paid to the stereotype that all Indians are good businessmen). He is now responsible for the greatest turn around in tax collection this country has ever seen. In 2005, under his stewardship, the South African Revenue Services (SARS) collected R12b beyond its target. Indeed it is probably a first in world history that the people of this country have gathered with enthusiasm at revenue service offices throughout the country, willingly paying their taxes. In the words of a friend who went to one of the offices, "the mood was festive". I have yet to hear of the festiveness of tax payment elsewhere in the world.

So here's a provocative peculiarity to ponder – how does one get from cattle herd to a new academic with a published text, from the apartheid-inspired limitations of artisan to probable Head of the World Bank, from failed pharmacist to the Commissioner of SARS. How did they get to where they are despite their education, or lack thereof? Can we understand them any better if examine some of the lessons we did not learn at school. For one we did not learn about democracy at school. But we lived it.

It is widely believed that democracy came to this country when we held our first national elections on 27 April 1994. We can mark it by date and probably even the moment the first vote was cast. And truly it was a momentous occasion. But we do ourselves a disservice by not recognising

the living of democracy as it breathed through the numerous anti-apartheid organisations of the time. We learned about democratic decision-making in these organisations, a form of democracy that held far more weight than numerical superiority. For example in the early 1980s the political left was faced with the question of whether to participate or not in the tricameral parliament² that the National Party was offering. For a period of six months secret and open meetings were held in every area across the country. Heated debate and discussion went on long into the night. The ANC in exile was also consulted and finally a consensus decision in the left was developed. There was no vote to count. Many influential political figures in the left did not agree with the final decision, but we all threw our weight behind it and pulled off one of the most successful political campaigns the country had ever seen. The Don't Vote campaign of 1984 saw only 16.2% of eligible Indian voters participate in the tricameral elections. Nobody was prevented from voting, but over a period of more than six months political activists visited every house in every potential voting district and meetings were held with individual families. That was democracy at work. As a political activist of the time I know we lived democracy in our organisations. Indeed the formation of the United Democratic Front³ was probably the loudest expression of democracy the country had ever seen – and this in a politically repressive and violent context. We practiced democracy in an undemocratic country; in the absence of institutionalised democracy, we learnt democracy.

So as an educator at a higher education institution I find myself drowning in a deluge of literature on the role of higher education and its imperative to transform society. In its discussion document titled "Re-inserting the 'Public good' into Higher Education", the CHE (2001) strongly argues for a moral role for higher education in South Africa. Singh, Director of the Higher Education Quality Commission (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education (CHE), makes the following point:

The re-insertion of public good issues into the notion of higher education responsiveness requires the identification of a series of strategic choices for higher education, beyond the expression of nostalgia for some romanticised past. Choosing between justified cost efficiency imperatives and broader social development priorities should not be the only option for countries like South Africa which is in the process of reconstructing a new social order that is not only economically more enabling than its predecessor, but also socio-politically more emancipatory (11).

Ten years prior to Singh's call for the re-insertion of the public good into higher education, Coombe (1991) made a related observation on the role of higher education.

Despite the brains that have been drained out of them over the years, and the compromises they have been compelled to make with their own standards, universities remain great national storehouses of trained, informed, inquiring and critical intellects, and the indispensable means of replenishing national talent. They have considerable reserves of leadership and commitment on which to draw. Impoverished, frustrated, dilapidated and overcrowded as they may be, they have no substitutes (1).

In the African context, the development role of universities has historically had sway. At its first conference of the Association of African Universities 1969, in Rabat, Kinshasa the theme was The University and Development. Yesufu (1973) points out that "the term 'development' sums up in one word the challenges posed by the problems of poverty, and the need for social rebirth, cultural discovery and political identity, which confront African countries individually and collectively" (5).

² The National Party had set up a racially divided parliament in which each race group voted for its 'own' house in parliament.

³ A broad-based organisation comprising a number of affiliated organisations, which was launched in August 1983. Its guiding objective was to oppose apartheid and to strive for democracy.

No government, taking seriously its responsibilities for developing its human and material resources, can ignore the development of higher education. Higher education is an expensive facility. The government invests a good proportion of the national income in it and have certain expectations of their investment. (15).

In a rare moment of cohesion between the World Bank and developing countries, the World Bank (2002) makes the following observation with respect to higher education:

The role of tertiary education in the construction of knowledge economies and democratic societies is more influential than ever. Indeed, tertiary education is central to the creation of the intellectual capacity on which knowledge production and utilisation depend ... The recognition of the need for a balanced and comprehensive view of education as a holistic system that includes not only the human capital contribution of tertiary education but also its critical humanistic and social capital building dimensions and its role as an important global public good (xvii and xix).

Beyond the borders of South Africa and decades before Singh and Coombe, the 1962 Tananarive Conference on the development of Higher Education in Africa proposed that universities be "viewed as key instruments for national development. They were expected to produce the skilled human resources necessary to manage newly independent countries, to generate developmentally relevant research, and to provide community service. Universities were asked to contribute to African unity, and to serve as cultural centers for their nations" (UNESCO, 1963 quoted in Ajayi *et al.*, 1996, 191).

The point is that over a period of more than forty years, and with different levels of sophistication and detail, higher education institutions in Africa have been broadly understood to have a significant role in the improvement of individuals and society. I do not want to challenge this aspiration. Indeed I fully support it. But I do want to think more deeply about it.

While I have fully agreed with the "public good" role for higher education, I am concerned about the Houdini-like status higher education has come to assume. I am concerned about Coombe's assertion that we "have no substitutes" for intellectual development and the development of national talent. I accept that universities are both sites of change and agents of change. As a site of change, the focus is on institutional transformation. In other words, what do institutions need to do to make themselves more, for example, democratic, efficient, sensitive to equity needs and so forth. What needs to be transformed within an institution is simultaneously an institutionally driven decision and process, and one that is driven by external social, economic and political factors. As the means to transformation, higher education is seen as a significant tool in transforming society. Higher education is variously seen as the means through which individuals may increase their opportunities for better paid employment, and through replication, increase the living standards of a society as a whole. It is projected as the intellectual hub of a society and in this role it is expected, *inter alia*, to be a critical commentator on government. It is expected to enable a higher quality of life for the society that it serves.

It is perhaps worth asking how it is that such demands can be made of higher education, when higher education has not proved itself to be measurably responsible for social change? In short, there is an expectation that higher education institutions, while transforming themselves, would also be able to help build a society with the calibre of individuals of whom we are today proud, in the decades to come. In other words how does higher education create a society of thinking individuals? It is relatively simple for higher education institutions to educate its people. It far more difficult to turn them into thinkers. And I think it takes more and sometimes even less than higher education to create thinkers. My contention is that while fingers point to higher education institutions to create a thinking society, and while higher education institutions ashamedly look inwards to understand their shortcomings, we have not spent adequate energy on understanding what makes thinkers. Did the three tales of people with vastly different higher

education backgrounds, indeed backgrounds which in some circumstances may be deemed subversive to learning, become thinkers through some other means? A local advertisement for Rand Merchant Bank is telling. In it a young schoolboy is repeatedly offered, by other youngsters in the school, the choice of taking three one rand coins or a five rand coin. The boy always takes the three one rands. When asked by a mate as to why he did this knowing full well the five rand had more value, his response is simple – had he taken the five rand coin, nobody would have made him another offer. In short, he makes a handsome profit because he takes the lesser amount. When the National Party capitulated in 1990, it was not because they thought the African National Congress (ANC) had more military might than they did, nor is it likely that they had a momentous and moral vision that moved them to suddenly abandon apartheid. It is probable that the ANC had no significant military might to speak of. At the risk of a reductionism that simplifies a complex historical conjuncture, I suggest that the ANC won because they were smart. Being smart is what it takes to make a society progress. The challenge for education is how to develop this kind of ability to be smart, to think, in ways that benefit not only the individual, but the nation as well. In other words, how do we ensure that as a country, as a nation, and as a people who can be proud of their history, their struggle, and their commitment to social justice, that the generation to come will be committed to social justice, to equity, to moral goodness and the benefit of society? Universities are not always the answer.

So while I grew up in a small Indian township where I studiously read Dick and Jane, I also had the privilege of learning from a family and a society that widened my horizons beyond measure. The peculiarities I speak of, that we are probably the only country where a failed pharmacist heads the Revenue Services, where a technician diplomate in engineering heads the Ministry of Finance and where a cowherd published an academic text, need attention – how and why this happens need more thought. Moreover I believe we can transform education as much as we like but we should also take a lesson from these telling tales of triumph.

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