

Cultivating Ordinary Voices of Dissent: The Challenge for the Social Studies

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Abstract:

Two broad ideas emerge from reflections on my career in global and international education: first, that my “lived experience” offers both intelligence and ignorance in terms of how I view the world; and second, that the essence of my humanity is enhanced through my identification with and sense of responsibility for fellow humans. The latter idea is encapsulated in the African philosophy of *ubuntu*. These two ideas prompt my contention that the global education movement has failed to adequately convey through its literature and practice the complexity and interrelatedness of global systems, including the inextricable connections between humans and their environments. The nature of contemporary global challenges such as climate change demands that we understand how global systems are intertwined and adjust our actions accordingly. The social studies need to be at the forefront of nurturing systems-level thinking and innovation, particularly to counter the tendency arising from advances in information technology to develop cultures of conformity. Young people around the world have the potential to bring about system-wide change through their ordinary voices of dissent, a collective commitment to decision-making based on recognizing the needs of all humanity, rather than just assessing the benefits to individuals or nations.

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Introduction

As I reflect on my 40-year career in global and international education, a journey on which I have been privileged to learn from people of very many cultural backgrounds and diverse perspectives, two overarching ideas emerge. The first of these is embedded in the contradictory qualities of both power and impotence to be found in my “lived experience”; the second is neatly encapsulated in the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, the belief that my essential humanity can only be fully realized through my identification with others (Tlou, 2018). For each of us, our lived experience—the sum of all the events, thoughts, and actions that have touched our lives—is an incredibly powerful tool. It is our “window on the world,” the framework through which we view what is happening around us and with which we attempt to understand how we fit in. It develops over time and is constantly susceptible to change as we encounter new information or experience. Without it, our lives would seem chaotic and unfathomable; it is essential for our emotional and psychological well-being. At the same time, there is an inevitable—and unconquerable—impotence within our lived experience. The very “window” through which we view the world is shaped by a range of factors, including culture, ethnicity, and gender, that restricts interpretations and understanding of what we see and experience and leads us to derive conclusions that are always biased. Exposure to new information or experience can certainly broaden that window but, given the incredible diversity and incessant growth of collective human experience, will only constitute a fraction of the sum of possible interpretation. Our lived experience affords us, at the same time, both intelligence and ignorance.

At the heart of the philosophy of *ubuntu*, states Desmond Tutu, is the idea that “my humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together” (1989, p. 71). In societies such as Canada and the U.S., where individualism is prized and rewarded, the notion that our essential humanity is dependent on our connections with and understanding of others is often obscured by the relentless pursuit of self-fulfillment, fueled by economic and education systems that promote competition over collaboration. The negative consequences of such pursuits, seen in the current wave of personal alienation, xenophobia, and suspicion of “the other,” engender a belief that human progress is best achieved through “going it alone” rather than in partnership; “Brexit” might be considered the poster child of this movement. Paradoxically, the cult of isolationism occurs at a time when humans have never been so connected through information technology and when cross-border migration, whether by choice or necessity, is at a peak. Harnessing the

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power of *ubuntu* remains, for the moment, the province of alternative movements that operate on the margins of health, education, and social systems.

Emerging from these two key ideas is my contention that the global education movement, despite its undeniable successes, has failed to deliver on one of the central pillars of its founding principles: an understanding of the world as a complex, interdependent, and multi-layered system. Anderson and Becker (1968), alongside other early global education pioneers, wrote about the systemic quality of the world in terms of relationships between nations in the light of increasing globalization. This concept was explored further by curriculum developers in numerous programs and classroom activities that focused on “the world in ...”, encouraging students to see how their community was connected to the global system through trade, migration, and the adoption of cultural practices from other countries. These are worthy attempts to convey the ways in which our lives are influenced by ideas, goods, and people that emanate from elsewhere and which, by virtue of their influence, become part of our “lived experience.” However, such activities tend to illuminate a one-way path of influence, the impact of globalization on our everyday lives. What is missing is an understanding that our personal lived experience—through our actions and the choices we make—has a countervailing impact on global systems. Nearly 70 years after the development of systems theory, derived from the findings of quantum mechanics, our understanding of the global system often fails to acknowledge the infinitely complex and multilateral connections in interdependent relationships. Such failures, I would suggest, lie at the heart of many contemporary global challenges: Climate change, predicted at least 50 years ago, has evolved to crisis point due to humans’ willful inability to appreciate the cumulative impact of countless individual actions; the widening gap between the ultra-rich and the poor, which belies the “trickle-down theory” of neoliberal economics, reveals a stubborn refusal to acknowledge the complex and self-perpetuating environment of systemic poverty; discussion of the “refugee crisis” rarely acknowledges the decisions taken over many decades in the Global North that have created conditions of insufferable hardship for many in the Global South; and the myriad catastrophic impacts of COVID-19 have exposed starkly our collective insecurity in the face of a truly system-wide threat.

The logic of systems theory, when applied to the interdependence of humans in global systems, suggests that national boundaries are far too restrictive frameworks within which to fully understand the development of nations in the contemporary world. Increasingly, nations are shaped by myriad forces emanating from beyond their shores, despite recent attempts to close

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borders. The concept of global citizenship has emerged as an acknowledgment of the fact that our lived experience, even if we are not widely traveled, has roots in other regions of the world from which part of our identity is formed. Integral to this notion, in line with systems theory, is the idea that individuals are not only shaped by but also shape the global system through our collective thoughts and actions. The next logical step in this argument concerns responsibility. Just as we accept, to varying degrees, our responsibilities toward the nation with which we identify, should we not, as global citizens, accept some degree of responsibility toward others in the global system? Such thinking is central to the philosophy of *ubuntu*: Not only does our identity as humans depend on our relationships with other humans, but also our humanity is enhanced by the degree to which we accept responsibility for the welfare of others.

In his concept of cosmopolitanism, Appiah (2006) presents the idea that all people have responsibilities and obligations to others beyond “the local tribe or clan.” Furthermore, he argues that “the cosmopolitan impulse that draws on our common humanity is no longer a luxury; it has become a necessity” (2018, p. 219). Similarly, Nussbaum (1996, p. 9) contends that humans should widen their “circles of compassion” to include not only those in the closer circles of family, neighborhood, and nation but also to embrace all those who share our common humanity. The challenge, for humanity and for global educators attempting to convey these altruistic ideals, is the enormity of the vision proposed and the lack of sufficient grasp of it in our current lived experience. We may talk often about a “global village,” with its inference of an intimate community in which neighbors look out for each other; in reality, few of us actually “live” in that global village in terms of the thinking processes that inform our decisions and actions. Rarely, I would suggest, do we consider the interests of all in the global village when deciding what goods to purchase, how and where to travel, or for whom to vote. To do so, as a matter of course, would require extensive amounts of information, and time to access and assimilate it, that few of us have. Furthermore, the recent explosion of information accessibility on the internet suggests that, while the availability of information may be necessary for globally informed decision-making, it is in itself an insufficient motivator of human behavior. Indeed, the rise in popularity of information media, including social media, driven by personal beliefs and perceptions rather than a pursuit of objective fact indicates that humanity is far from wanting to accept the responsibilities of the global village. As the poet Piet Hein put it, we are “global citizens with tribal souls” (cited in Dower, 2003, p. 145).

Our collective lived experience in the 21st century so far suggests that humans are not yet sufficiently evolved to act upon the “cosmopolitan impulse.” Yet, as Appiah (2006) indicates, the

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global problems we face today demand such action; it is no longer a luxury. The multi-dimensional challenges of climate change, if we are to mitigate its most damaging impacts, require global collaborative actions on an unprecedented scale and at multiple levels by governments, corporations, neighborhood groups, and individuals. The inspiration for such actions cannot be simply “how does it affect me or my group?”; it has to be “how does it affect humanity and the environments on planet Earth that sustain us?” The philosophy of *ubuntu*, which, according to Nussbaum (2003, p. 9), incorporates “the spontaneous desire to act in a caring and compassionate way in which our selfhood is inspired by a sense of collective belonging,” is critical to this way of thinking. A deeper understanding of systems, and the ways in which humanity is profoundly connected through and continues to shape global systems, would go some way toward recognizing not only our responsibilities as global citizens but also how perceptions of self can be enriched through our interactions with others with whom we share the planet.

The Role of the Social Studies

The task I am outlining is no small one. What is required is an evolutionary leap, a paradigm shift as profound as that which heralded the Renaissance or the Scientific Revolution. The latter movement gradually shifted our consciousness out of a dependence on personal beliefs and mythologies toward a thirst for knowledge based on scientific evidence and technological innovation; it generated unprecedented advances in meeting basic human needs, at least in wealthier countries, and in creating social systems that are more grounded in equity, inclusion, and respect for the rule of law. Though slower to make its impact in the Global South, the model of “development” thus generated has been adopted across the planet. Recent global crises, however, have begun to expose the limitations of this model, with its primary focus on unregulated technological innovation principally designed to serve populations within the artificial boundaries of the nation state. Lacking in this vision is sufficient attention to the social innovation required on a global scale to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding, increasingly mobile population in an already compromised natural environment. Rather than the reverse, social innovation needs to drive technological innovation.

The critical role for social studies educators is to lay the groundwork for social innovation. This includes nurturing “soft skills” such as critical and creative thinking, conflict resolution, negotiation, and participatory decision-making, which are now recognized as important in the workplace as well as in our everyday lives. It encompasses the requirements for active citizenship at local, national, and global levels, such as the ability to access and analyze information and to

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make informed choices that protect the well-being of all inhabitants of the planet. Certainly, it includes recognizing and challenging inequities and injustices wherever they are found. More than this, however, is required for the paradigm shift to occur. Prevailing models of development are still predicated on 19th century formulas of unbridled economic growth, the exploitation of natural resources, and competition between nations. Such formulas are so deeply embedded within our consciousness that it is easy to overlook the powerful hold they maintain; none of them, however, fits well with the urgent need for a sustainable future that requires concerted international cooperation to reduce the harmful impacts of human activity and restore planetary health for the good of all citizens. The new paradigm requires systems-level thinking and decision-making.

An unintended impact of recent advances in information technology has been, paradoxically, to restrict social innovation rather than to broaden our thinking. Through the brilliance of algorithmic intelligence, I can be connected instantly to people around the world who share a similar worldview; I am fed a regular diet of news clips that align with my personal interests and political beliefs; I am bombarded with advertising tailored to nurture my consumer preferences. A consequence of such innovation is the creation of transnational cultures of conformity that have tended to promote “a fragmentation of our shared reality,” suggests Homer-Dixon (2003, p. 15): “Never before have we been so connected together on this planet and never before have we been so far apart in our realities.” The deepening political divisions appearing in many countries, and the seemingly unbridgeable chasms of perception among citizens that they generate, suggest that we are far from establishing a globally inclusive discourse with a focus on the common good.

Thankfully, leadership in social innovation is emerging among today’s youth, in both North and South. The courage and precocious wisdom of Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai have sparked the interest and passion of millions of young people in their determined quests to disrupt established thinking and pursue alternative, more socially conscious paths of development. Gifted and inspirational cheerleaders, however, have come and gone in the past with limited lasting impact. Their efforts need to be supported by myriad ordinary voices of dissent: young people around the world, in diverse socioeconomic situations, who are prepared to stand out from the crowd and demand a new vision for the future of the planet. Such voices will need to break free from the cultures of conformity that tend to regulate the thoughts and behavior of the interest groups with which we all identify. Such voices will need to recognize that their everyday decisions and actions have consequences, for themselves, for those around them, and

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for global systems. Such voices will need to be informed by an understanding of systems, both in terms of the planet-wide consequences of harmful individual actions as well as the potential of everyday decisions to contribute to social change for the common good.

Cultivating ordinary voices of dissent is a key task for the social studies. By “voices of dissent,” I do not mean vocal social activism, although it might include that; rather, I wish to convey the idea that individual decisions, however insignificant they may seem, are made using the common good—that which benefits most members of the global community—as the principal term of reference, rather than just the good of the individual, the social interest group, or the nation. Dissent will be required whenever the demands of the common good are misaligned with the dominant call of other interest groups; it necessitates all of the critical skills that are integral to the learning and teaching of the social studies, as well as a willingness to recognize that systems-level thinking and decision-making are needed to nurture social innovation. To foster voices of dissent, the social studies will need to demonstrate how ordinary actions are inextricably connected through global systems to the well-being of other humans and the environments we share and how an understanding of “everyday transcendences” (Gaudelli, 2016) can illuminate the potential of our daily lives to stimulate innovation at a planetary level.

At the heart of this call for the social studies to lay the foundation for social innovation is the philosophy of *ubuntu*. Through their expressions of dissent, individuals advocate for the common needs of humanity and, in so doing, strengthen our sense of collective belonging. Our lived experience becomes progressively more enlightened, more inclusive, and more rewarding.

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Graham Pike has held teaching and administrative positions at four universities in the UK and Canada, most recently as Dean of International Education at Vancouver Island University. He has spoken widely on global and international education and his publications have been used in schools and teacher education programs around the world. He has led professional development for global educators in more than 20 countries and his work as a consultant has included multiple United Nations contracts for school improvement projects in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

His research and teaching have focused on the development of innovative pedagogies for exploring global issues and developing active global citizens. His work has been recognized by the

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