

# Chapter 6

## On Learning and Cosmopolitanism in Education

Yusef Waghid

### In Defence of Learning

To begin with, learning has always to do with the myriad ways in which people engage with thoughts, questions of meaning, arguments, propositions and criticisms. Therefore, learning has some inter-connection with the individual and social self. For instance, arguments are always proffered by one and in turn another one makes meaning of these arguments or takes arguments into systematic controversy. What follows from this is that learning happens when one connects with the thoughts of others and in turn offers some of one's own thoughts on an issue to the other. It is such an idea of learning which has been, and continues to be, prevalent in most modern educational institutions. Yet, what seems to be happening on the societal and political fronts in most African communities suggests that something must be wrong about the way people understand learning and with the way that they learn and enact learning. In quite a generalised fashion, one can look at several un-virtuous moments of the kind which seem to be prevalent in some African societies: Congolese women being raped by Hutu militia as well as troops in Guinea; clashes between religious bigots in Nigeria; the Sudanese government's alienation of people in the Darfur region resulting in mass starvation and hunger; political dictatorship which continuously mars Zimbabwean politics; and recent xenophobic attacks against immigrant communities in South Africa – these are just a few examples in such cases. What is at stake here is people's reluctance to engage the other with respect and dignity, a stance which is to my mind fuelled by an erroneous understanding of learning – that is, the notion of learning seems to be distant from what it means for the self to engage respectfully with other selves. And, for the reason

---

Y. Waghid (✉)

Faculty of Education, Stellenbosch University, Private Bag X1, Matieland 7602, South Africa  
e-mail: yw@sun.ac.za

that practising cosmopolitan virtue depends on the interconnection of other selves, it seems as if such a practice is distinctly cosmopolitan.

I wish to argue that learning devoid of connecting with others in dignified and respectful ways cannot be justifiable, ethical learning, because such learning has, and should constantly have, some morally worthwhile end in mind – an idea made famous in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and which has been extended in the modern era by Seyla Benhabib (particularly her views on democratic iterations and cultivating cosmopolitan hospitality) and Jacques Derrida (particularly his view on connecting with the other in responsible ways). Also, the question can rightfully be asked: How does cosmopolitan hospitality differ from other forms of hospitality? In the main, one can be hospitable towards members of one’s own cultural group, yet inhospitable towards people from other cultural groups. However, cosmopolitan hospitality does not restrict hospitality towards any favoured group. Instead, hospitality is specifically extended to others who might not belong to one’s cultural group. My contention is that the notions of democratic iterations, cosmopolitan hospitality and responsibility can offer some ways as to how learning ought to be constituted and which in turn offer rich ways as to how un-virtue can be minimised or even eradicated. Learning in African societies, if practised along the lines of democratic iterations, hospitality and responsibility, has the possibility of combating societal and political ills which are becoming more and more prevalent by the day. For example, in South Africa, authoritarian learning (in many instances) has been replaced by democratic learning, and the benefits for society have been fairly visible – ‘free and fair’ elections, respect for the rule of law and a demand for justice in various forms of life.

## **Democratic Iterations as Learning to Talk Back**

According to the seminal thoughts of Seyla Benhabib (2006), democratic iterations involve something like this: one offers an account of one’s reasons, which someone else considers and in turn someone else questions one’s reasons to which one can respond. Attending to reasons and critically engaging with reasons often results in the adjustment, modification or even rejection of one’s reasons. Others would then be encouraged to agree, disagree or even repudiate one’s reasons. This deliberative engagement with reasons is done repetitively; hence, democratic iteration is connected with talking back. Benhabib (2006: 48) refers to democratic iterations as ‘those linguistic, legal, cultural, repetitions-in-transformation, invocations that are revocations’. What follows from this is that learning does not simply mean that one listens passively to what has been taught. Rather, one actively and reflexively engages with meanings to the extent that one’s own understandings are subjected to critical questioning by others. This dialogical exchange of meaning making, questioning and alteration of thoughts is proposed as learning. Yet, in some communities, learning in this fashion is not encouraged. For instance, in some African communities, talking back is not looked upon very favourably and is often considered

as showing disrespect for the other. In such communities, listening is encouraged without the possibility that one could repetitively disagree and rebut the views of others, especially heads of tribes or sages who are considered as unquestionable authorities. Instead, it seems as if uncritical listening is considered as the norm. In such instances, the dominant figures ought to be encouraged to have the confidence in themselves to persuade others through argumentation and to suppress their concerns that talking back would cause them to surrender some of their authority. In fact, talking back presupposes that one recognises the presence of the other, who at least should be considered as a person worthy of being deliberately engaged with. If not, learning in such a case would either not be possible or at the very least be unjustifiable. This is so because without talking back the possibility of being indoctrinated is highly likely, which in turn would curb mutual engagement and the development of trust to enable one to take risks. Risk taking has some connection with moving towards the improbable, the unimaginable or the lucky find – those outcomes of learning which stand opposed to the mechanical achievement of ready-made answers. I do not imagine pre-prepared answers would necessarily eradicate the violent encounters among some people in African communities, because often the response to violence demands the articulation of a language which is yet to be found, and which can potentially reduce and combat violence. Moreover, risk taking also counteracts the possibility that one can reach a final, completed and blueprint decision. Finality in itself curbs the possibility that there is always something to be learned, discovered or in the making. By implication, finality would mark the end of learning.

What follows from the above discussion is that learning is about connecting with the other, recognising his or her presence and creating opportunities for oneself and others to talk back. If this process of talking back happens routinely, the possibility that learning would be engaging and risky might create opportunities for people to accept one another as friends who are mutually attuned to one another. Only then could disrespect and hostility possibly be thwarted. Specifically, I think here about how people in some African communities are inculcated with a mentality of not questioning the ancestors; yet, the ancestors themselves did not expect later generations to regard their mode of thought and action as immutable and beyond reproach (Gyekye 1997: 247). Unless people are taught to have some public say or debate about the reasons for their actions, to reflect upon and defend their views about, say, the wisdom of the sages – that is, to engage, contest, recursively question and offer possibilities about the wisdom of the ancestry – they would not even begin to learn or to talk back.

## **Cultivating Cosmopolitan Hospitality Through Learning**

In some African communities, there is a very strong tendency among people to settle disputes by recourse to violence and aggression. The most horrifying moment I have experienced recently was when I witnessed hundreds of people in

South Africa running amuck with traditional weapons (knives and sjamboks) intent on harming immigrant communities from neighbouring African countries whom they regard as having invaded their country. Thousands of ‘foreign nationals’ were killed, injured and displaced from their areas of residence: at least 62 people were killed, 670 injured, about 47,000 displaced (28,682 displaced persons in 99 sites across Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape) and many returned to their native countries. Areas most affected by the xenophobic attacks were townships of Cape Town (Du Noon, Masiphumelele, Khayelitsa, Lwandle, Macassar, Mitchells Plain, Nyanga, Ocean View and Soetwater) and Johannesburg (Alexandra – where the violence started, Diepsloot, Zandspruit, Primrose, Tembisa, Reiger Park, Tokoza, Hillbrow, Jeppestown, Thokoza, Themisa and Cleveland). An estimated 1,900 people from Malawi have already returned to their home country, and they are being accommodated at an interim shelter, the Kwacha Conference Centre, in Blantyre. Mozambique has received a total of 36,000 returnees, who are currently sheltered at a temporary transit camp at Beluluane centre. Some immigrants are not going back to their home countries; for example, a number of Zimbabweans are going to Zambia. Although the government claims that attempts to curb xenophobia have been successful, there is still a growing concern that immigrants might not be reintegrated into the local communities. Recently, Somalis have been accused of initiating terrorism, which again could possibly spark serious xenophobic encounters. To my mind, people showed profound disrespect towards other persons. If the African term *ubuntu* (literally humanness and solidarity) had any significance, it was definitely not demonstrated through the violent actions of some people towards others. Once again, as alluded to earlier, xenophobia could only arise because people’s learning about the other has not been taken up seriously. For me, the fact that some people have acted so inhumanely towards others is a vindication that their learning seems to be disconnected from notions of respect for the other and the need to treat them hospitably. It is this issue I wish to pursue in relation to Seyla Benhabib’s (2006) idea of cultivating cosmopolitan hospitality.

Cosmopolitanism recognises the rights of others to ‘universal hospitality’. Simply put, others have the right to be treated hospitably. For Benhabib (2006: 22), *hospitality*, in a neo-Kantian sense, ‘is not to be understood as a virtue of sociability, as the kindness and generosity one may show to strangers who come to one’s land or who become dependent on one’s act of kindness through circumstances of nature or history; hospitality is a right that belongs to all human beings as far as we view them as potential participants in a world republic’. Such a right to hospitality imposes an obligation on democratic states and their citizens not to deny refuge and asylum to those whose intentions are peaceful, particularly if refusing them would result in harm coming to them (Benhabib 2006: 25). So, if the intentions of Somali entrepreneurs are peaceful (and there are many of them in South Africa), it would be considered their right to be treated hospitably and all democratic citizens’ obligation to ensure that these immigrants enjoy such a right.

Cultivating cosmopolitan hospitality involves learning to recognise the right of others to be treated hospitably. First, considering that cosmopolitanism involves the right to temporary residence on the part of the ‘stranger who comes to our land’

(Benhabib 2006: 22), it follows that public schools in South Africa cannot deny access to children from immigrant communities. In most cases, they are not refused. However, some children are excluded in subtle ways, considering that the language of instruction, for instance, is not the mother tongue of these immigrant children. In fact, in the black township of Kayamandi (in Stellenbosch, South Africa), African children find it difficult to cope with non-mother tongue instruction in public schools. Three Belgian teachers once requested a mediator to assist them in teaching children in Kayamandi to participate in art and cultural activities. And, taking into account that local school children find it difficult to cope with a different language, it would be extremely challenging for immigrant (say Somali) children to adapt to the public school life in their country of temporary sojourn. What cosmopolitanism thus demands is that immigrant children should be taught initially in their mother tongue before they are assimilated into the broader public school life. Or, alternatively, they should simultaneously learn the language of instruction and be supported in doing so. The point I am making is that one should not take for granted that people with immigrant status would fit naturally into the public structures of their adopted countries or countries of temporary residence. They have to be initiated gradually into social and public life on the basis of a sense of obligation on the part of democratic states. Failing to do so – for example, denying immigrant children gradual access into public schools and thus depriving them of developing and exercising their capacities – would amount to treating others unjustly. The upshot of this view is that if my Malawian student's children, who are attending the local Kayamandi school, are not treated hospitably by, for example, being initiated gradually into public school life by South African teachers and other learners, then the teachers and learners are not abiding by their obligation to treat others humanely – that is to say, justly. This unfavourable attitude towards immigrant others would not only retard interaction and cooperation among different people, but also impede the education for social justice project that the Department of Education in South Africa so dearly wants to implement in public schools. This is because the consequence would be that these immigrant children and their parents will invariably develop a mistrust (as is seemingly the case with my Malawian student and his children) of the public school sector – a situation which in turn increases their suffering (discomfort) and perpetuates what Iris Marion Young (2006: 159) refers to as 'structural social injustice'. With reference to the social justice project of the Department of Education in South Africa, one can have little doubt that cultivating in students the 'values' of democracy, social justice and equity, equality, non-racism and non-sexism, *ubuntu*, openness, accountability, respect and the need for reconciliation and recognition of the rule of law can produce a heightened awareness of what it means to be a responsible citizen. It is difficult to imagine that a learner who has internalised the 'values' of social justice, equality and *ubuntu* could in any way not be considered as having achieved a worthwhile moral outcome, which would invariably position her favourably to deal with issues of democracy, accountability and reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa. And, bearing in mind that educational transformation aims to engender in learners a deepened awareness of and appreciation for mutual respect, disagreement, justifiable criticism, critical judgement,

rational deliberation and nation building, it follows from this that democratic ‘goods’ as announced in the Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy can in fact bring about transformation in education. In quite a different way, and of relevance to this essay, failing to inculcate in people an aptitude of hospitality or not treating people hospitably at all would be tantamount to creating conditions where people do not learn. This is so because learning in the first place requires one to recognise that others should be considered as legitimate partners who are capable of contributing to what can be learnt. And a precondition for genuine learning is that the learners experience a sense of belonging – hospitality – that would make them feel comfortable and ready to learn. I cannot imagine Rwandese learners actually learning about reconciliation if the perpetrators of violence against them coerce them into learning.

Of course there might be some plausible arguments against the view that people under coercion cannot actually learn. I agree. In South Africa, during the apartheid days, learning was not denied students who did not attend classes because of police victimisation or political exile; they learned to resist. What I am talking about here is a form of learning free of coercion. Students under apartheid might have learned to resist oppression, but they did not learn freely together with others or their learning did not take place under conditions of hospitality and trust, which would have resulted in engendering an atmosphere of mutual co-existence and deliberation so desperately needed today in Africa. The point I am making is that having learned under protest and conditions of resistance contributed towards their mistrust and hostility, which in any case would take longer to combat if these virtues were to have been acquired under conditions of cosmopolitan hospitality. In fact, cultivating respect for persons as a corollary of learning would stand a better chance of being realised if it were to be achieved under conditions of hospitality rather than hostile aggression.

Second, ‘the right to have rights’ prohibits states from denying individuals citizenship rights and state protection against murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation and other inhumane acts such as persecution (whether political, cultural or religious) (Benhabib 2006: 25). So, if Somali immigrant children wish to wear their head scarves in South African public schools, following ‘the right to have rights’ notion, these children cannot be discriminated against. Asking these children to remove their scarves, which they might consider as important to their religious and cultural identity, would be a matter of treating them unjustly on the grounds that their right to be different would be undermined. Similarly, for the South African government to have deported a Pakistani national on the grounds of unreasonable suspicion that he might have been a terror suspect caused much humiliation and insult to his family (including his children at school), especially considering that the Department of Foreign Affairs has after more than 6 months not yet produced any evidence on this person’s alleged Al-Qaeda connections. In this case, the political – more specifically, cosmopolitan – rights of a human being have been seriously compromised. To the contrary, this is precisely my concern with practices in some French schools, that is, denying Muslim girls their right to wear scarves. Briefly, the ‘scarf affair’ in France in 1989 originated with the expulsion from their school of

three scarf-wearing Muslim girls. Seven years later, there was a mass exclusion of 23 Muslim girls from their school. Throughout the 1990s and well into the twenty-first century, confrontations between school authorities and young Muslim girls and women continued. Although the intervention of the French authorities to ban the wearing of the veil in the schools at first seemed like an attempt of a progressive state bureaucracy to modernise the backward-looking customs of a group, this intervention cascaded into a series of democratic iterations: the intense debate among the French public about the meaning of wearing the scarf, to the self-defence of the girls involved and the re-articulation of the meaning of their actions, to the encouragement of other immigrant women to wear their headscarves to the workplace. Basically, women have learned to ‘talk back [to the state]’ – a matter of engaging and contesting the meanings of the Islamic practices they want to uphold. To my mind, democratic iteration emerged as a consequence of having denied people their right to exercise their right of wearing scarves.

When one relates ‘the right to have rights’ to learning, one implies that people in the first place cannot be denied learning. People ought to be respected as having the right to learn and, if not, learning can no longer be learning. The right to learn (in this instance, how to engage with one another) is a right which people ought to enjoy. To talk about compulsory learning is in fact an anomaly, because learning in itself is a responsibility. So, cultivating cosmopolitan hospitality is in fact advocating for learning which cannot be denied any individual. This makes sense on the grounds that through learning people get to experience one another, which could potentially root out the possibility of disrespect towards one another, hostility and violence. Experiencing one another creates possibilities of relating to one another in terms of commonalities and differences. Experiencing one another’s differences through a legitimate, rightful learning activity would potentially rule out the possibility that hatred, victimisation and resentment could ensue. Through such a form of learning, the possibility exists that it becomes very unlikely that envy, hatred of the other and other forms of antagonism could become the order of the day. Certainly in South Africa, there are instances of rich and poor, privileged and underprivileged beginning to occupy the same educational spaces. Yet, the levels of intolerance and envy towards the other are subsiding because people are learning to live with one another’s differences and perhaps learning to accept that some are more privileged than others. Learning to live together with others is in fact real learning, because recognising and respecting the differences of others would undermine the possibility that violence can arise. In fact, learning to engender cosmopolitan hospitality would potentially ‘open up’ people to one another and to engage deliberately and iteratively, which Zygmunt Baumann (2001: 142) argues could ‘enhance the humanity of their togetherness’. Opening up to one another would invariably break down the walls and fences which often separate and isolate different people; it means that people would come to recognise others and respect and tolerate diverse peoples. It is this recognition of the other, respect for and tolerance of diversity that can go some way in building mutual trust and deliberative engagement – those qualities necessary to restore security in our ‘polycultural’ (Baumann 2001) environment, particularly on the African continent.

In essence, cosmopolitan hospitality can only manifest itself if African local communities can begin to offer a welcoming hand to the beleaguered immigrants by supporting their integration into our society and by providing them with protection from possible criminal attacks. In many ways, the cosmopolitan hospitality which ought to be afforded other human beings (especially from immigrant communities) complements the duties and responsibilities associated with the activities of democratic citizens. Unless African countries and their peoples recognise the rights of others to be treated with dignity and respect and not suppress their rights, the achievement of justice will remain remote from the minds and hearts of people. People would not have learnt.

## Learning, Responsibility and the Other

Thus far, I have argued that enacting democratic iterations and cultivating cosmopolitan hospitality might offer oneself and others a better opportunity to learn. What democratic iterations and cosmopolitan hospitality have in mind is to create conditions whereby genuine learning can take place – one learns to experience the other and that, in turn, rules out the possibility that violence, aggression and the ridicule of the other can ensue. But then one learns to take responsibility for the other. It is this practice of assuming responsibility for the other through learning which I now wish to pursue in order to find out how one's relationship with the other could potentially be enhanced. For this discussion, I turn to the seminal thoughts of Jacques Derrida.

Derrida (2001) maintains that it is the responsibility of the modern university to be 'unconditional', by which he means that it should have the freedom to assert, question and profess. In other words, for Derrida (2001), the future of the profession of academics is determined by 'the university without conditions'. Put differently, Derrida frames the profession of those academics who work at the university as a responsibility. This responsibility to profess is no longer associated with a profession of faith, a vow or promise, but rather an engagement: 'to profess is to offer a guide in the course of engaging one's responsibility' (Derrida 2001: 35). So, an unconditional university is one that enacts its responsibility of engagement. And if learning is one of the practices associated with that of a university, learning *per se* should also be about enacting a responsibility. Derrida connects the idea of responsibility to the university, but I now specifically want to make an argument for learning along the lines of his conception of responsibility. This is not to say that he does not link responsibility to learning, but rather I want to make the argument for responsibility as a corollary of learning in a more nuanced way than Derrida seemingly does.

From my reading of Derrida's idea of responsibility, I infer three features which are central to what could underscore learning: responsibility means to engage the other freely, openly and critically; to act responsibly is to hold open a space for non-instrumental thinking; and to be responsible is to constantly resist or disrupt practices



which move towards completion (Derrida 2001: 35–36). What are the implications of responsible action for learning (including Africa)? First, a responsible learner (one who has learnt) concerns himself or herself with social problems. Responsible learners endeavour to argue openly, freely and critically with others in an attempt to solve social problems. Such a form of learning provides a sphere in which genuine critical discourse (investigation and debate as against mere text book transmission) takes place, and at the same time is likely to produce activities of ‘value’ in addressing societal problems. In this way, students (as learners) are taught to be critically reflective about society and can simultaneously contribute towards the achievement of, say, improved nutrition and health services, more secure livelihoods and security against crime and physical violence. In a way, responsible learners are responsible citizens who are intellectually, culturally and technologically adept and committed to addressing social problems.

Second, for a responsible learner to attend to non-instrumental thinking means that such a learner does not merely perform his or her responsibility for the sake of something else, for instance, physical needs, reputation and gratitude. Such instrumental actions would render responsibility conditional. The responsible learner is concerned with the intrinsic worth of his or her actions (and not with the convenient applications of his or her research) and is engaged in just, autonomous, non-instrumental activities. Such learners’ actions are not rooted in dubious motives and/or interests. Here I agree with Haverhals (2007: 4250), who claims that such learners would enhance ‘the development of personal autonomy, which also has a public significance’. The public role of such a learner and the educative value of his or her activities are affected by a legitimate concern to act responsibly.

Third, a responsible learner constantly disrupts or resists the possibility that knowledge production has moved towards or attained completion. Such irresponsible actions would ignore the contingency and unpredictability of actions themselves. A responsible learner always strives to embark on new narratives in the making, or perhaps moves towards some unimagined possibility. And for this, responsible learners constantly think of themselves as projects in the making – their work cannot attain completion and perfection. There is always something more to learn which, of course, brings me to how one can potentially respond as a responsible learner to the dilemmas which confront African communities. These dilemmas involve the reluctance of many African people to engage one another deliberately and iteratively, the seeming unwillingness to attend to one another in a hospitable way, as is evident from the violent moments which have become endemic to many African communities. Acting as a responsible learner means that one constantly disrupts the practices which one embarks on in pursuit of cultivating non-violence, tolerance and respect for persons.

I shall now illustrate what I mean by constantly disrupting the practices one can embark on in order to combat some of the societal and political ills. For this discussion I have chosen the example of the troops from Guinea who are being accused of raping several thousands of women. The point here is: what can a responsible learner do to challenge such an inhumane atrocity – how can he or she disrupt such

an inhumane practice? In the first place, a responsible learner acts by giving an account of his actions. That is, he or she has to be answerable for his or her actions, in this instance, the act of doing or not doing something about the rape of women in Guinea. (S)he can either vociferously condemn the heinous crimes perpetrated against women or remain silent about the incident. The account of one's silence could be fear of reprisals by some members of the military or ignoring calls by the international community to speak out. Be that as it may, actually doing something such as offering reasons or being silent about the situation involves giving an account of oneself and one's reasons. In my view, a preferred accountable action would be to condemn the crime of rape perpetrated against helpless women. Second, acting as a responsible learner involves amassing the support of others who themselves stand up against crimes which violate human dignity. Third, and most importantly, being a responsible learner actually involves doing something about rectifying the situation – that is, doing something to change the situation – to cause a sudden disruption. This could include a range of actions such as campaigning widely for the war to stop in Guinea or for an international tribunal to put the military junta on trial. Hence, acting as a responsible learner involves identifying a wrong and actually doing something about changing that wrong. The point I am making is that if learning does not lead to actions which can alleviate, quell or even eradicate societal and political injustices, then such learning is not constituted by responsibility. I would like to believe that all forms of learning should be guided by an ethical element – one that involves combating or disrupting various forms of injustice.

Certainly on the African continent, learning has to be connected with the achievement of justice for all. Only then can learning be of value in leading to human flourishing. This makes sense considering that too many injustices are perpetrated by Africans against Africans. And if Africa has any chance of prospering economically, culturally and politically, the emphasis on all educational institutions should be on cultivating a conception of learning that can engender in people a willingness to deliberate in iterative fashion (learning that encourages talking back), an attentiveness to connect hospitably with others and, finally, to act responsibly with the aim to change a bad situation. Connecting learning with such cosmopolitan virtues would go some way towards attending to Africa's moral problems – problems which the world and certainly philosophers of education should not be turning a blind eye to.

Finally, learning through democratic iterations, the exercise of cosmopolitan hospitality and the enactment of one's responsibility towards the other would certainly go some way in the pursuit of lifelong learning. This is so for the reason that 'learning to talk back', performing hospitable actions and enacting one's responsibility towards others are deeply reflexive and inconclusive practices – those qualities reminiscent of lifelong learning through which people are continuously and actively engaged in acts of meaning making.

## References

- Baumann, Z. (2001). *Community: Seeking safety in an insecure world*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Benhabib, S. (2006). The philosophical foundations of cosmopolitan norms. In R. Post (Ed.), *Another cosmopolitanism* (pp. 13–44). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Derrida, J. (2001). The future of the profession or the unconditional university (thanks to the ‘Humanities’, what *could* take place tomorrow). In L. Simmons & H. Worth (Eds.), *Derrida down-under* (pp. 233–247). Palmerston North: Dunmore Press.
- Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the African experience*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Haverhals, B. (2007). The normative foundations of research-based education: Philosophical notes on the transformation of the modern university idea. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 26(5), 419–432.
- Young, I. M. (2006). *Global challenges: War, self-determination and responsibility for justice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.