

CHALLENGES FACED BY THE UNIVERSITY TO PROVIDE INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT FOR 'EXPOSED' KENYAN STUDENTS

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Abstract

Universities originally came into being from the love of knowledge and from the curiosity of knowing. However, of late, with increased access and advanced technological facilities and an influx of both necessary and unnecessary information, universities are facing cultural challenges which have gone so far as to challenge an integral human development. This challenge is especially true for our Kenyan universities, which for the first time are able to expose their students to the whole world as has never before been possible. Care needs to be taken because, man can and has been sacrificed to the success and influence of science and technology. The time has come to ask ourselves whether these facilities are being used to contribute to an authentic human development of students.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge was sought after by ancient philosophers well before the existence of universities. Students at that time followed their identified teachers learning all they said and committing it to memory since books were an expensive luxury. Issues were dealt with in the context of a liberal arts curriculum, protecting the then realm of human knowledge, while fostering an unlimited respect for classical knowledge. Philosophical issues dealt with, answered students' questions about the reason for their existence and fostered an all inclusive curriculum ranging from rhetoric to logic, music and arithmetics. This was intellectually satisfying due to the engagement of the mind by use of reason to identify underlying principles.¹

Over the years and since then, universities have broadened their scope and they now engage humanities, sciences and technical subjects. Universities have become the heart of research,

¹ Ancient Greek Philosophy [Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy]

knowledge generation, community service and channels through which a range of societal problems have been solved.

With such growth in knowledge, advanced research, improved technology and information as data has also multiplied and is more readily available. Universities are able to expose their students to information like never before. The originally described well guarded knowledge sector that only constituted the *septem artes liberales*, now reaches beyond the imaginary boundaries of human imagination. Universities in their quest to form cultivated and knowledgeable professionals have provided unlimited internet access. The internet gives access to vast stores of information, including databases on every imaginable subject, libraries throughout the world and other specialised information. When information is thus readily and easily available, no room is left to challenge and intellectually engage the mind in metacognitive activities through reflection or other mental or mind engaging exercises. It is this aspect that is of primary interest to me in this paper.

MAIN EXPOSURE THROUGH MODERN TECHNOLOGY

Readily available information and knowledge on the internet has resulted in a ‘fundamental reshaping of elements by which people comprehend the world about them, and verify and express what they comprehend’.² Peoples’ comprehension of the world is more often than not influenced by what is presented to them. These presentations are varied and not all of them are true. One of the main reasons for the variety is the fact that ‘most of this information is egalitarian in the sense that anyone with the necessary equipment and modest technical skill, can be an active presence in the cyberspace, declare his or her message to the world, and demand a hearing’³. Everyone and anyone may have their say thanks to freedom of expression which indeed is a fundamental human right⁴ and this, I would like to comment, is a good thing provided

² Ethics in Internet by Pontifical Council for Social Communications (2002) pg. 25

³ Ibid. pg. 30

⁴ “Man, provided he respects the moral order and the common interest, is entitled to seek after truth, express and make known his opinions...”
quoted from *Gaudium et spes*, n.59.

when it comes to matters of public interest, people are truthfully informed. Still, accessing the information may be one thing, its interpretation is quite another since some basic nontechnological competencies such as deep thinking, creative thinking and the ability to solve problems still need to be relied on.⁵ This will subsequently be explained in this paper.

THE PROBLEM

Since all one needs are retrieval and internet search skills (apart from the necessary equipment) to retrieve information, active engagement of metacognitive processes is no longer essential. One hardly needs to engage their mind. What's more is that the more one searches and gets answers, acquiring the necessary habit, the less one needs to engage one's mind.

THE EFFECTS

A mind that is not engaged, becomes lazy. Sonja Corbit (2010) reported that new research shows that increased use of technology alters the way the brain processes information. She claims that browsing and skimming of information has become 'the dominant mode of thought and preferred method of learning and analysis, rather than simply a way to identify information for further study'⁶. Patricia Greenfield, a developmental psychologist, reviewed more than 40 studies of the effects of various types of media on intelligence and learning ability, and concluded that, although there are benefits to our use of the Internet and other screen-based technologies such as new strengths in visual-spatial intelligence, they have also diminished our capacity for higher higher-order cognitive processes: mindfulness, reflection, inductive problem solving, critical thinking, and imagination. True, one may become a search expert thus increasing the brain's ability to hunt and gather information, however, in order to think deeply, one must first be capable of focused rigor and sufficient ability to concentrate on a given task. In my opinion, this requires reflection, silence and inner quiet.

⁵ J Santrock, (2007), Educational Psychology (3rd Edition), Mc Graw Hill.

⁶ Wired for Silence: Disconnecting from Technology to Reconnect with God, By Sonja Corbitt, 6/30/2010
<http://www.catholic.org/technology/story.php?id=37170&page=2>

I am also of the opinion that our students, are far from close to this kind of reflective attitude. Instead, the typical 'exposed' Kenyan student today - exposed in the sense that they have access to the internet, a system of computer networks that operates worldwide, something that not all Kenyans have access to - is usually seen bouncing along with a head set or a pair of ear phones inserted in their ears and music set loud enough for a neighbour in a *matutu* to hear and partake willingly or unwillingly. Many are seen with a laptop (be they owned, borrowed or hired) that, as a mere standard measure, must have a downloaded VLC player and additional programmes for music and games. Memory space on the hard disk is usually reduced to a bare minimum as it has been occupied by a wide range of usually illegally downloaded and/or copied videos. In other words, exposure to what I would prefer to call a double portion of noise and images is practically continuous.

This in no way fosters use of metacognitive processes. True, information, is readily available, some of it being more current and up-to-date than textbooks and answers to very basic and fundamental questions can easily be accessed. Further, as may be evidenced from a Google search, the Kenyan student has a range of 82,500,000⁷ results from which to get his 'answers' on the internet web⁸ under the search topic 'Who am I and why do I exist'. Still, much of this information is unevaluated in terms of accuracy and relevance⁹, not to mention the growing concern about the readily available pornographic material that is also a growing concern.

When the student is thus subjected to noise, silence becomes something terrifying, something to shy away from and definitely something to be avoided at all costs. Silence is where one has to face oneself and this can be quite hard depending on what one finds there on the inside. Many times, this is unfortunately: Nothing! When one is empty there is a lack of ideals, depth and meaning in the person. In my experience of dealing with university students who are mainly

⁷ As on 4th October 2010. An identical Google search gave about 52,300,000 in mid September of 2010 thus showing an increase of information posted.

⁸ The Web is a system for browsing Internet sites. It is named the Web because it is made of many sites linked together.

⁹ J Santrock, (2007), Educational Psychology (3rd Edition), Mc Graw Hill, p. 434

noise and image filled, I have found that even plain conversation can be a challenge for them. They can tell you what they have heard and seen but usually, not what they think. Those that are a bit more creative may narrate another's experience portraying it as their own.

Such emptiness many times leads to low self esteem and even depression, a phenomena sadly becoming more and more common to 'well exposed' students. When something happens to offend our sense of worth, indignation arises¹⁰. The word 'in-dignation' comes from dignity. As dignified humans, we search for answers to questions that give meaning to life and therefore help to make us who and what we are and understand and identify what our ultimate purpose in life is.¹¹ It is therefore only human that when such fundamental questions are not answered, one's dignity and self worth are questioned.

The experienced educator Ryan Ruggiero says 'Self-esteem is of two kinds: earned and unearned. Only earned self-esteem is healthy and satisfying and it doesn't precede achievement but follows it. This goes to show that to curb the aforementioned emptiness, answers to fundamental questions such as those regarding the meaning of life must be satisfactorily answered.

In recent years, many people with a teaching role, have seen the potential of metacognitive learning in helping learners to see themselves as others see them and in the process to contemplate (reflect) on what they see.

THE DANGER

I would like to list two main dangers of the aforementioned effects.

First is the fact that continuous exposure to the internet many times results in educationally unintentional learning experiences since learning also takes place whether we mean it to or not¹².

¹⁰ "Dignity" refers to a person's sense of self-worth; "in-dignation" arises when something happens to offend that sense of worth.

¹¹ The Catholic Church is main body that has always stressed the importance of respecting human dignity and has written and spoken at length about it regarding human dignity and education. Both Pius XI and Pius XII talk about men of every race, condition and age, having an inalienable right to an education that is in keeping with their ultimate goal, since they enjoy the dignity of being human.

¹² Jonassen, DH, LP, Wilson BG (1999) Learning with technology: A constructivist perspective

The danger herein is that students, who have no right criteria of what is wrong and what is right, may learn, unintentionally or otherwise, as truth that which is in fact not true. This further leads to their not having the right criteria regarding fundamental aspects in life and as such, a good, clear and true definition of life's true meaning. All their actions could as a result be based on wrong criteria to the detriment of society and this, according to me, is the real danger. In this regard, I fully agree with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who said, 'There is nothing more dangerous than ignorance in action'.

To help people become more intelligent is to help them to better perceive, learn, remember, represent information, reason, decide and solve problems. i.e. improve cognitive functions. This is the task that we are faced with today.

Second is the danger of suppression or even loss of one's individuality when there is an absence of reflective and critical thought processes in ones' cognitive habits (metacognition) – a lack of turning on the inside. Erat (2004) was of the opinion that:

'This exact same problem [loss of one's individuality] is rampant in our modern day world - men and women become lost in the technological world only to find that they have gained little mentally It is not uncommon to find people unhappy with their jobs, working days and nights just to pay their bills, and not having any time to themselves or with their family. This is a problem that is too serious to ignore and is spawned from the notion that technology is eating away our lives.'¹³

Suppression of one's identity in the form of falsely portraying oneself can be evidenced on the web in chat programs, on FaceBook, Twitter, weblogs, webpage postings and other digital media. In cyber space one can be whoever they wish to be and may create numerous digiSelves depending on who they are communicating with and what image they wish to portray. Such multiple identities usually operate independently from the real world, which in my opinion, ultimately leads to a disconnection from real world experiences. If one really knew who they were and the true meaning of human life, there would be a healthy sense of self dignity.

¹³ Erat C (2004)The Loss of Individuality in a Technologically-Based Society Clarkson Integrator Newspaper Issue date: 1/26/04 Section: Opinion

Everybody needs this. Pope Benedict XVI warns that man can and has been sacrificed to the success and influence of science and technology¹⁴. We cannot let this happen.

RECOMMENDATIONS

What is needed is a more reflective attitude, one that is actively metacognitive. In essence, metacognition is *thinking about thinking*.¹⁵ It involves being aware of what one's own learning and memory capabilities are and of knowing what learning tasks one can realistically accomplish. For that one needs to know which learning strategies are more applicable as per the individual and, more importantly, identify those which are not and then *using* these identified effective learning strategies. It also involves monitoring one's present knowledge state. With metacognitive skills one is able to clarify one's purpose for an action. One is capable of studying information depending on whether one merely wishes to ascertain the gist of the information provided, learn its content thoroughly and in great detail or if it is simply for pleasure. For that one needs the ability to ascertain what is most important to learn and remember and as a result, focus attention and effort on that material. It means an ability to make sense of and elaborate on the provided or given information, use or refer to prior knowledge in understanding and elaborating this information, and apply ideas presented by trying to clarify any seemingly ambiguous points.¹⁶

Use of metacognitive processes therefore implies involving the understanding and the control of cognitive processes.¹⁷ Such skills are not specifically taught in a classroom and are acquired slowly and usually only after having undergone and faced many challenging, mind provoking learning experiences – something that internet searches do not significantly promote.

Sound ethical principles

¹⁴ Address delivered by His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, to the participants of the seminar on "The Cultural Heritage and Academic Values of the European University and the Attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area", held at Vatican City on 1 April 2006.

¹⁵ JE Ormrod (2008) Human Learning (5th Edition) pp 352

¹⁶ *Ibid.* pp 352-353

¹⁷ RJ Sternberg, (2003) Cognitive Psychology (3rd Edition) p 463

Further, being computer wise and a content expert is not enough. The internet can only be truly helpful if it is used in light of clear, sound ethical principles¹⁸. The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE, 2000) talks about four functional areas for technology standards for students to include productivity, communications, research and problem solving as well as an understanding of basic concepts and social and ethical issues, relating to technology. Under social, ethical and human issues they state:

- Students (should) understand the ethical, cultural and societal issues related to technology.

All these are relevant and are most probably well-intentioned, however, how to do this is not given.

Sound philosophical and humanistic foundation

For clear ethical principles, a sound and basic philosophical and humanistic base are necessary from which provided knowledge and information is given respective meaning and is put into perspective. I am against neither technological advancement nor unlimited access to information – if anything, they are fantastic¹⁹. The point is that one needs to be able to properly make use of them for the common good²⁰ and not for the detriment of society. Otherwise, information is more often than not presented as absolute, which in turn comes to be seen as the source of values, when in actual fact it is not.

Precise knowledge of clear ethical principles is therefore fundamental. A fair degree of self-mastery in order to choose that which the intellect presents to us as good is also highly essential. Apart from these, the strength and will power to stick to a worthwhile commitment is also

¹⁸ Ethics in Internet by Pontifical Council for Social Communications (2002) pg. 25

¹⁹ When used effectively, the internet expands access to a world of knowledge and people that students cannot experience in any other way (Crux & Durplass, 2007).

²⁰ By common good is to be understood "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily." Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 26. The common good concerns the life of all. It calls for prudence from each, and even more from those who exercise the office of authority. (point 1906 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church)

crucial. All this is particularly important in our society where many currents of thought (...) fail to give life meaning.²¹ Once there is correct perspective and a sound base, choice of information provided that is relevant or of essence becomes an easier task and also allows a better exercise of one's freedom.

Combine different technologies

Greenfield, 2010, recommends a combination of different technologies such as reading, which, along with audio media such as radio, also stimulates imagination. She is of the view that a balanced media diet using different technology's specific strengths in order to develop a complete profile of cognitive skills is necessary.

THE CHALLENGE

The challenge is to educate our 'exposed' Kenyan students to acquire the aforementioned skills of metacognition with clear ethical principles. Education, broadly defined, is all those experiences by which intelligence is developed, knowledge is acquired, and individual personal growth is realised and therefore a profound meaning of life. Such can only be done with an all round formation, maturity and critical thinking skills as has been mentioned earlier. Critical Thinking is taking charge of one's own mind – if we can take charge of our mind, we can take charge of our lives.

John Dewey (1938/1997), one of many educational leaders, recognized that a curriculum aimed at building thinking skills would be of benefit not only to the individual learner, but to the community and to the entire democracy.²² The right education is therefore vital and continues to be a growing concern. At the 11th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops held in 2005, the Synod Fathers voiced this concern thus:

²¹ Oakeshott, M (1968) Learning and Teaching,

²² Dewey J (1938/1997), Experience and Education, Macmillan

“As in other places throughout the world ... (a) complete, integrated programme of education is needed (...), through which [students] are prepared adequately to face all circumstances (...) Education (...) should instil in youth the profound meaning of life.”²³

CONCLUSION

Graham Gibbs (1981) advocates that reflective (metacognitive) techniques allow individual development and individual choice. In addition, there is abundant evidence (e.g. Feurstein, 1980; R.J. Sternberg, 1987c) that people’s training can profoundly affect their intellectual skills. Gibbs says, “It is a matter of educating each student to free him/herself from the conditionings that prevent him/her from fully living as a person, to form him/herself into a strong and responsible personality, capable of making free and consistent choices.”²⁴

If education were an actual acquisition, growth and possession of freedom and thereby freeing oneself from the aforementioned conditionings that prevent one from living as a person, would be neither an issue nor would it result in questions on dignity. This is what we as teachers *must* do and have the grave responsibility *to* do. Let us not shy away from it.

²³ 11th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops held in 2005.

²⁴ As stated in Point 52 on Educating to freedom at the congregation for Catholic Education

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