REFLECTIONS ON PROMOTING OPEN DISCUSSION FORUMS AT UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The Department of Philosophy at the University of the Free State recently presented an open discussion forum on the following topic: Imagine a truly South African university. Many people reacted with scepticism towards this initiative, suspecting that there had to be some party-political agenda behind it. The idea that one may, and even should, address political issues relating to the nature and functioning of the university in an intellectual and academic fashion seemed somehow inconceivable to many. At first it seemed as if these reactions were merely the result of a weak political culture on campus, but it became evident that it was in fact the lack of a culture of dialogue that constituted the major obstacle in the way of genuine interactive communication. This article will explore some of the possible reasons for this state of affairs. The first part of the article focuses on the possible detrimental effect that certain paradigms of higher education - with their one-sided focus on vocationalism - have on critical thinking. In the second part, the communicative dynamics of the forum will be analysed as a theme of interest in itself. In conclusion, the importance of cultivating an appropriate attitude that meets the ethos of constructive communication for such discussion forums will be emphasised.

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INTRODUCTION

It all started with an idea: Imagine a university that is truly South African. In true Socratic spirit a variety of questions followed: Are South Africans becoming globally connected and locally disconnected?[1] What is meant by responsible citizenship? Is there a one-sided focus on democracy and not enough focus on deconstructing the essentially Eurocentric university in order to grow educational institutions with their roots in African soil?

The intriguing nature of these questions has recently led to the first of a series of open discussion forums, the purpose of which is to stimulate a discourse in which the dream of a truly South African university can be contemplated in a creative manner. After the first forum was held, it became clear that it was going to be quite a challenging task to ensure that this stays an unfettered intellectual, but politically conscious project.[2] Many people reacted with scepticism towards this initiative, suspecting that there had to be some party-political agenda behind it. Some did not participate at all since they did not want to get involved in "anything that has to do with politics", while others limited their contributions to familiar party-political rhetoric. The idea that one may, and even should, address political issues relating to the nature and functioning of the university in an intellectual and academic fashion seemed somehow inconceivable to many. Another idea that was rejected as being too idealistic was the possibility of having a meaningful discussion between people who hold different, even sometimes opposing, views.

At first it seemed as if these reactions were merely the result of a weak political culture on campus. However, feedback pertaining to the first forum pointed to other factors besides the lack of a political culture as being responsible for the sceptical and even negative reaction towards the forum, especially from students.[3] In fact, it was the lack of a culture of dialogue that constituted the major obstacle in the way of genuine interactive communication. So, while the initial focus was on the *content* of the debate, it was actually the *communicative form* of the debate that was problematic in the first place.

The aim of this article is to reflect on certain factors that may have an influence on the success of open discussion forums regarding the nature of a truly South African university. The approach followed may be methodologically contextualised against the background of an assortment of analytical tools that have been developed over the years in the Philosophy Department (e.g. ideology theory, metaphor analysis and worldview-interpretation), in this case specifically a meta-communicative model. The first part of the article focuses on the possible detrimental effect that certain paradigms of higher education — with their one-sided focus on vocationalism — have on critical thinking. In the second part, the communicative dynamics of the forum will be analysed as a theme of interest in itself. In conclusion, the importance of cultivating an appropriate attitude that meets the ethos of constructive communication for such discussion forums will be emphasised.

THE INFLUENCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION ON THE NATURE OF DISCUSSION FORUMS

Given the fact that the university is supposed to be characterised by vigorous intellectual discourse, it is quite ironic that many of the people who constitute the university community, and who are supposed to be experts on the idea of the university, were reluctant and/or unable to engage in an intellectual discussion regarding the nature of the university. Martha Nussbaum wrote in her book *Cultivating Humanity* that

> it would be catastrophic to become a nation of technically competent people who have lost the ability to think critically, to examine themselves, and to respect the humanity and diversity of others (Nussbaum 1998a: 300).

Could it be that, both in a national and international context, this point has already been reached? Listening to some of the comments made prior, during and after the forum, it surely felt like it. Thus, we need to ask ourselves to what extent this state of affairs can be attributed to the direction in which higher education has been moving the last few years. Many students nowadays attend university with the sole purpose of becoming educated and trained for a specific career, so that they can "go out into the world and make money". It is not surprising then that they are not interested in getting involved in talks about the nature of the university, or any socio-political issue for that matter. However, what is surprising is that the partner they found in this quest for the best possible qualification in the shortest possible time and packaged in a curriculum consisting of the bare essentials is none other than the outcome-based higher education system currently being promoted at universities.

Some academics are becoming more and more skeptical about the status of higher education as an independent academic discipline. Maybe Brandon (1984: 1) was right when he stated — in the 1980s — that this field is "a creature of teacher-training education". Another alarming development is the way in which higher education is becoming an all too powerful role player in organising the academic life and work of faculty members. Aronowitz (in Trifonas & Peters 2005: 116) rightly warns against the dangers of what he calls

> the formation of a distinct administrative class whose economic and ideological interests are tied to the corporate order, and of an increasingly intrusive state in everyday academic affairs, especially abrogating faculty's control over hiring, tenure and promotion, curricular matters, and its own production of knowledge.

The ease with which some educationalists dismiss "the unconstrained acquiring of knowledge as a value in itself" as one of the core functions of the university, is of great concern (Visagie 2005: 225). So too is the suspicion with which they view the relevance of the Humanities for vocational training and their attempt to reduce its role to narrow pre-professional studies. The following remark of Johnson (2006: 394) captures the author's viewpoint regarding current higher education practice at the university:

> Those of us in higher education are struggling to think about what we do in the classroom in a way amenable to the social-scientific methods of "learning

outcomes" and assessment rubrics that are being urged upon us by the ever-more assertive accrediting agencies. But it is hard to describe the marvelous and mysterious growth of a young mind, over the course of a semester no less than over the full four years of college experience, in rigorous and mathematically quantifiable terms; hard to think of students as consumers; to regard liberal education as a product or commodity to be marketed like any other, or to think of Deans in their traditional capacity as faculty advocates as "vice-presidents".

The influence of vocationalism

The creation of a corporate university is a worldwide phenomenon and the Humanities are usually one of the first casualties of an education policy in which vocationalism is the primary focus[4].Thus, when the corporatisation of the university in South Africa is being debated, cognisance should be taken of the changes introduced in the British university system during the administration of Margaret Thatcher when "the Humanities felt under pressure to justify their existence to government bureaucrats by showing that a Classical training (for example) produces useful managers for industry" (Nussbaum 2006: 2). Henry Giroux could just as well been describing the South African context when he states that in the USA

> The university is gradually being transformed into a training ground for the corporate workforce, rendering obsolete any notion of higher education as a crucial public sphere in which critical citizens and democratic agents are formed (Giroux 2005:61).

Today, higher education at university level is characterised by an overemphasis on technical, professional and vocational education which results in careerism and vocationalism being the driving force behind education. Rice (2006: 11) argues that in order to succeed in the era of globalisation, graduates will need to be "intellectually resilient, cross-culturally literate, technologically adept, and fully prepared for a future of continuous and cross-disciplinary learning". One of the dangers of the vocational trend in education that is being propagated is that many students will graduate without most of these abilities. While some educationalists see no need for an education that goes beyond job training, they seemingly fail to realise the value that, for instance, communication skills, critical thinking and sound ethical reasoning will add to the students' professional qualifications. This is quite ironic, as the following example shows:

> If you simply don't know how to distinguish a utilitarian from a Kantian argument, there are issues that you may easily miss – as a doctor, as a juror. You might think for example that respecting a patient's choice and promoting the patient's interest are the same thing and you might just assume that your own judgement about the patient's interests is the only thing that needs considering – as many doctors are all too inclined, paternalistically, to do (Nussbaum 2006: 3).

But, more importantly, critical reasoning and communication skills will also shape the way in which people participate in public life as citizens — not to mention the influence

it may have on their private lives. Having said that, can it be expected of students to imagine a university that is truly South African when their education is limited to technical knowledge and on-the-job-skills? When the famous linguist, activist and philosopher Noam Chomsky was asked what qualities he looks for in a student he replied:

> Independence of mind, enthusiasm, dedication to the field, and willingness to challenge and question and to explore new directions. There are plenty of people like that, but school tends to discourage those characteristics (Chomsky 2005: 175).

How applicable is this remark of Chomsky to higher education in South Africa? To what extent do lecturers encourage creativity and imagination in critical thinking? Surely, the university has a responsibility to cultivate the humanity of its students so that they do not merely excel as professionals in their respective fields, but also practice responsible citizenship.

Three core values of liberal education

Although career preparation and training form an integral part of education and should rightly be viewed as a priority, it should not be promoted at the cost of what is generally regarded as a liberal education.[5] Nussbaum (1998a: 9-11) identifies three core values of liberal education that should accompany scientific understanding. The first value is that of critical self-examination, inspired by Socrates' idea that self knowledge is necessary for "taking care of the self", which is characterised by "the capacity to reason logically, to test what one reads or says for consistency of reasoning, accuracy of fact, and, finally, of judgement". Secondly, she proposes the ideal of world citizenship — to see ourselves "not simply as citizens of some local region or group but also, and above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern". Thirdly, narrative imagination is the ability

> to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have (Nussbaum 1998a: 11).

The Humanities have always been the vehicle for promoting these values. For example: Philosophy can teach general argumentation and ethical reasoning skills, while Communication and Media Studies can teach communication skills. The departments of Literature and the Arts can best cultivate narrative imagination, while History, Sociology and Political Studies can illuminate the different facets of world citizenship. When these values are combined with what Visagie (2005: 235) describes as the inner core of university culture, namely "the value placed on uncompromised knowledge, as well as the academic freedom to participate in this culture", students might leave university not only vocationally well prepared, but also enthusiastic about their responsibilities as citizens of the country.

However, one should resist the temptation to conveniently blame the enforcers of higher education policies for the current state of affairs. Members of faculty should take most of the blame — mainly because of their reluctance to fulfil the very purpose of

being an academic: challenging the one-sided focus on vocationalism and resisting the reduction of the humanities to narrow pre-professional studies.

> While many faculty members talk twaddle about accommodating liberal and vocational education – by which they mean to "accommodate" liberal education all the way outside the city limits where it won't bother anyone – we liberal educators too often make no response or, worse, make small, meek noises that suggest we will be content with any mouldy corner in the university as long as we can, please heaven, just have that corner. I cannot remember the last time I heard any liberal educator bluntly and emphatically challenge the presumptions behind pre-professional rhetoric of narrow utilitarianism, which always paints itself as simply being realistic (a rhetorical strategy that condescendingly marks liberal educators as people with no proper grasp of reality) (Gregory 2003: 2).

If members of faculty refrain from raising their objections regarding certain aspects of higher education policy and refuse to enter into dialogue with the educationalists — then they have failed their students and subsequently, cannot expect from them to imagine a university that is truly South African.

CULTIVATING A COMMUNICATIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS DISCUSSION FORUMS

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of the open discussion forum referred to was to get the university community involved in imagining a truly South African university. As Kessels *et al*. (2004:16) argue: "Reflection on and critical examination of our words and reasoning can best take place in colloquium with others." Therefore, in the above-mentioned case, all students, members of faculty and management as well as other interested parties were invited to participate, in order to ensure that the forum was as open and inclusive as possible. The forum was structured in accordance with the basic rules that Habermas identified for "the ideal speech situation". Rossouw en Van Vuuren (2004:97) explains it as follows:

> In a simplified way it could be portrayed as that situation in where all the participants in the discourse are treated as if they are truly equal and in which all forms of coercion or force have been removed. The only force allowed in this situation is the force of the best rational argument.

The success of the forum depended on a number of factors, for instance, the intellectual quality of the discourse, the quality of the communication and the attitude with which each participant joined the discussion. On reflection, it became clear that the forum achieved the goal of creating a space where people could voice their opinion. However, it was less successful in getting the participants engaged in dialogue in such a way that they could leave the forum with a better understanding of the other's opinion. The main reason for this was not the structure of the dialogue as such, but the lack of good communication skills.

The attitudes with which participants *voice* their opinions as well as the attitude with which participants *listen* to the opinions of others are of critical importance for constructive dialogue. Kessels *et al.* (2004: 16) argue that we need to create a specific atmosphere, "Free Space", in which such dialogue can take place. The attitude needed from participants is described as follows:

> Crucial here is the ability to suspend our own ideas and judgements, to be receptive to the thinking of others, to be open to their frames of references and their understanding of meanings… It does not only mean that you consider your dialogue partners as equals or that you acknowledge the other's otherness. It implies much more: that you empathise with ideas that aren't yours, that you are prepared to consider points of view that prima facie you would be inclined to reject (Kessels *et al.* 2004:16;39).

Unfortunately, these characteristics were not always reflected in the contributions of some of the participants, which consequently led to an atmosphere that was, at times, not conducive to communicative discourse at all.

Different communication games
The different ways in which people voice their opinion say a lot about their attitude. Visagie (1998: 135-138) identifies the following "communication games" in which people can engage, namely contention, consensus, compromise and co-optation. In the contention game, people supporting opposing views will each concentrate on deploying successful arguments in defence of their own approach and attempt to exploit weaknesses in the opponent's viewpoints. When people enter into the consensus game, the focus is not on defending a theory but on getting an agreement — however long it takes — on which is the better argument. The compromise model is the result of a new interpretation that is born out of the communicative interaction between two parties, while co-optation as a form of communication happens when "we let our [favourite] theory partially comply with the critical demands of another theory: we add certain elements, or disregard parts or significantly modify some aspects" (Visagie 1998: 138).

A fifth communication game can be added to these four, namely that of *conversation*.[6] Whereas the other four models focus on communication with the purpose of getting some kind of a general agreement amongst participants, *conversation* is about explaining different points of views just for the sake of understanding and clarification. The meaning ascribed to *conversation* in this sense is partially captured by the following quote from Appiah:

> Conversations across boundaries of identity – whether national, religious, or something else – begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from some place other than your own. So I'm using the word "conversation" not only for literal talk but also as a metaphor for engagement with the experience and the ideas of others. And I stress the role of the imagination here because the encounters, properly conducted, are valuable in themselves. Conversation doesn't have to lead to

consensus about anything, especially not values; it's enough that it helps people get used to one another (Appiah 2006: 85).

From the outset it was clearly stated that the goal of the first few forums is not to reach some kind of formal agreement on the nature of a truly South African university. The challenge is to formulate and then critically analyse one's own opinion regarding the nature of the university and try to make sense of the other differing opinions. Interesting enough, all of these argumentation games (contention, compromise, consensus, co-optation and *conversation*) were represented in some or other form at the first open discussion forum.[7] Given the fact that the nature of the forum was that of imaginative contemplation, one would therefore presume that *conversation* would have been the obvious choice of communication mode. However, this was not the case and the communication games that proved to be most popular were that of contention and compromise.

The contention game was preferred by especially the student participants and this combative style of argumentation dominated their attitude towards the forum. Unfortunately, given the nature of the contention game, it proved to be the least conducive for the kind of imaginative contemplation the organisers had in mind with the forum. Although the compromise model allows for a more open discussion than the contention approach, it still detracts from the intended communicative spirit of the forum to some extent. In general, people tend to play the compromise game as an exercise where you decide beforehand which principles are non-negotiable for you — no matter what. Such an attitude brings some negativity to the table that might hinder the participants' ability to be prepared to listen to opposing views, genuinely try to understand them, and freely imagine a truly South African university.

The consensus model is probably the most idealised form of communication, but at times there is some confusion regarding its rules and usually one needs to qualify what specific meaning is being attached to the concept of consensus.[8] Again it should be mentioned that the purpose of the mentioned forums, especially the first few, is not necessary to reach consensus and it was quite a challenging task to convince our audience of this. Some participants just could not understand our real intention and perhaps this was why the co-optation game was not really considered as an option. Playing the co-optation game successfully depends on a good understanding of all the opinions presented around the table. This requires a lot of discursive creativity and would probably be more useful at a later stage in the series of forums. As one could have predicted, the *conversation* game must have seemed like a waste of time for many and was therefore just as unpopular.

Hypothetically one can imagine the series of forums develop for instance as follows: The first round would ideally be characterised by the *conversation* game, since the participants just want to get clarification on all the opinions represented. In the second round contention, consensus and compromise will take centre stage: respectively to analyse, criticise, and evaluate opinions in order to eliminate the unconvincing ones and

identify the strongest arguments. In the last phase, the co-optation game can be employed to play around with the arguments identified in the previous round, and maybe come up with some generally agreeable suggestions.

Each of these argumentation games has its strong points as well as weaknesses. The idea is not to rank them in terms of which one is the best, but rather to know which one will be best suited for a specific situation. In a sense the *conversation* game is fundamental to all the other communication games, but can also be played on its own. For instance, in a specific situation where the goal is to reach consensus regarding an issue, different participants might use different communication games to get the debate going. What is important is that people should be honest and open about the specific games that they play and be willing to adopt different games for different circumstances. It is of crucial importance that the participants buy into this ethos, because the success of the forums depends on the communicative attitude of each participant.

CONCLUSION

At the forum, André Zaaiman emphasised the fact that the peaceful manner in which South Africa's formal transition to democracy has occurred was not a miracle, but a deliberate effort instigated by people committed to the cause. This freedom pleads for an ethical attitude that embodies the acknowledgement of the high price at which this freedom came, recognises that this freedom is fragile and accepts the responsibility to nurture it. The university as an institution of higher education has a crucial role to play in nurturing and promulgating such an attitude. This was the point of departure from which the open discussion forum was launched, and although many sceptics view it as a too idealistic an idea, one may take comfort in and be encouraged by the following remark from Martha Nussbaum (1998b: 45):

> We need citizens who have this education, reamed when they're still quite young, before their imagination is shackled by the weight of daily duties and self-interested money-making schemes. We produce all too many citizens whose imaginations never step out of the counting house. But we have the opportunity to do better, producing Socratic citizens, capable of thinking for themselves, arguing with their traditions, and understanding with sympathy the conditions of lives different from their own. That, I think, is not political correctness. That is the cultivation of humanity.

The South African society, as reflected through the media, is characterised by anti-intellectualism and sensationalism, and this lack of sophisticated argumentation in the public sphere was also reflected in the forum. The future of the forum depends largely on the attitude and communication skills of the participants. Having great ideas but not being able to convey them, accompanied by an unwillingness to listen to the ideas of others will signify the premature end of such open discussion forums.

The normative consequences of all this for a "round table" discussion on the nature of a truly South African university is that one needs to leave one's cultural, party-political, and even religious agenda at the door. Of course, all people belong to variously-coloured cultures and institutions simultaneously — all with their own unique calls to truth and integrity. However, around the table, you must learn the ethics of trying to imagine how it is to stand in the shoes of the Other — and the same goes for him/her. This implies that an attitude of tolerance, although virtuous, is not sufficient, since it depicts a minimalistic reading of one's responsibility towards the Other. Instead, the participants' attitude should be one of embracing diversity rather than fearing it. Finally, every interlocutor's first loyalty should be to rationality and sound argumentation — because at a university this is the concrete means of reaching out to the Other as we reach out to ourselves. This love and respect is sought in the name of academic integrity and the pursuit of scientific truth.

The university needs to ensure that the whole institutional community reflects the values and skills necessary for constructive dialogue — not just for the sake of being true to its nature, but for the sake of creating and maintaining critical dialogues in society. Incorporating the values of critical self-examination, world citizenship and narrative imagination in vocational and professional education might be a good place to start.

Endnotes

[1] I want to thank Johann Visagie, Tania van der Merwe and Johann de Wet for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

[2] The open discussion forums are organized by the Philosophy Department of the UFS which sets and manages the agenda. The first forum was held on March 9th 2007 on the Bloemfontein campus of the University of the Free State. Achille Mbembe, a senior researcher at the Wits Institute of Social and Economic Research and André Zaaiman, who has been involved in various democracy initiatives in Africa, were the main speakers at the forum. André Zaaiman is a senior government official but attended the forum in his private capacity.

[3] Overall, the forum was welcomed and positively received by the majority of the people who attended. However, this article focuses primarily on some of the issues that might obstruct the continuation of the series of open discussion forums, and on the views that seem to be held by many of the non-participants.

[4] The debate between Rosseel and Visagie, an educationalist and a philosopher respectively, illustrates the paradigm differences that exist between advocates of this brand of higher education and academics in the Humanities. Rosseel wrote an article on outward-bound entrepreneurship in the human sciences to which Visagie responded with an analysis of the ideological complex that is "steering" higher education. The result of this is what the latter calls "the colonization of the university" (a term coined by Habermas) which is driven by the goals of techno-economic progress, bureaucratic-administrative pressures and the economic market-modeling of university teaching. The reply that Rosseel then wrote, demonstrates in my view the inability and/or unwillingness of some

educationalists to respond to critical remarks voiced against the ideological nature of some aspects of higher education policies. See Rosseel (2004; 2005) and Visagie (2005) in this regard.

[5] Nussbaum explains her understanding of liberal education as follows "We are drawing on Socrates' concept of 'the examined life', on Aristotle's notions of reflective citizenship, and above all on Greek and Roman Stoic notions of an education that is 'liberal' in that it liberates the mind from the bondage of habit and custom, producing people who can function with sensitivity and alertness as citizens of the whole world" (Nussbaum 1998a:8).

[6] *Conversation* is used as a technical term in this context and will be indicated as such by the use of the italics font.

[7] Basic argumentation logic is fundamental to all of these communication models. This includes the ability to distinguish between a good and a bad argument on the following grounds: the structure of the argument (logical consistency), the presence or absence of informal fallacies (misuse of emotional appeal) and the correctness and relevance of facts. On a more sophisticated level, people should also show awareness for ideological pitfalls and demonstrate the virtue of moral sensitivity, that is, be able to resist the temptation of voicing your opinion when you know beforehand that it is not the best possible argument that one can offer in the specific context. Yet again, I want to argue that this should be part of any university education, whether it is a vocational, professional or a general formative qualification.

[8] Habermas gives a good account of the consensus game in the "ideal speech situation" that he proposes. But, as I have argued elsewhere, one needs to be careful not to overemphasize the importance of consensus at all cost. Consensus at the expense of ethical/and moral sensitivity, for instance, is not what communicative action entails. See Van der Merwe (2006).

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