

POSITIONING UBUNTU AS A STRATEGY TO TRANSFORM CLASSISM IN UNIVERSITY CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

Social parity, in the form of classism creates an environment where students from less privileged backgrounds feel subjugated and disadvantaged by social intimidation. In order to eliminate classism in university classrooms, the study proposes the potential of Ubuntu as a transformative strategy to promote a university system that is free of intimidation and discriminatory social classes that aid social inequalities. Hence, the study answers the following questions: What are the assumptions of Ubuntu? And how can the assumptions be used to unpack classism within university classrooms? The transformative paradigm was used to lens the study because it resonates with researchers' intention to create and suggest plausible ways of building a just and equitable university community. The analysis of Ubuntu as a transformative strategy was presented using thematic analysis to conceptualise and interpret Ubuntu and its underlying assumptions towards transforming classism. The study concludes that mirroring oneself in others, communality and togetherness, humanity and unity, and egalitarian practices is a dimension of a classless university classroom toward an equitable society. Therefore, university classrooms should be tailored toward love, communality and togetherness, humanity and unity of purpose, and egalitarian practices.

Keywords: Classism, Ubuntu, transformation, university classrooms, transformative strategy.

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1. Introduction

University classrooms can be incredibly intimidating for students from lower or previously disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Not only that, the lecturers and or the instructors may have assumed advantaged/powerful positions and may not be aware of the struggles that their students face on a daily basis. The issues of social intimidation are also rampant among students themselves. Such social parity in universities can create an environment, in which students from less privileged backgrounds feel like they do not belong or are in a disadvantageous situation with intimidating tendencies that are regarded, according to this study, as classism. Classism is conceptualised as a form of discrimination based on socioeconomic status [1, 2]. It manifests in both personal attitudes and institutional policies and practices that limit people's access to opportunities and resources [3, 4]. Though there have been numerous studies on the effects of classism in university classrooms, the findings are pretty clear by recognising classism as a major problem that needs to be addressed by creating a classroom where students feel inclusive in practice, in kind, and in spirit. This is because students who feel like they do not fit in are more likely to drop out, and those who do stay are less likely to do well academically.

In university classrooms, classism creates social inequalities and downward social efficacy among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds [5]. For example, students from wealthy families may have an easier time paying for expensive textbooks or accessing other necessary resources for success in college. Not from the student side alone, classism can also impact the way lecturers interact with students. This is supported by the argument that teachers often have lower expectations for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which can lead to poorer performance in school [6]. However, many suggestions have been made by researchers to

eliminate classism in classrooms, among which is to create a more inclusive environment where all students feel welcome and supported [7–9] by increasing social awareness and understanding among students and faculty members through education and training on issues of social inequality [10, 11]. Government and various educational agencies have also ventured into this by providing resources like scholarships or financial aid and university offering support services like tutoring or mentorship programmes to support students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Despite this, it seems the issues persist among and within university classrooms. This is evidenced in the way student socialises with one another. That is, many students are not comfortable socialising with their counterparts who are perceived to be economically unequal to them. Even on the part of the lecturers or the instructors, students who have little or no access to educational materials, such as books, computers and other needed resources to work may not receive adequate attention from their lecturers.

Furthermore, if not addressed, the dreaded classism can lead to lower academic performance and a sense of unity of purpose among students in the university, which may attract diverse consequences, not only for the students and the classrooms but could also affect university productivity. This agrees with [12]’s argument that a lack of unity of purpose in the university system leads to conflicts that hinder productivity. In order to eliminate the potential of classism in classrooms, the use of Ubuntu as a transformative lens is imperative. This is essential to creating a more equitable society where everyone is responsible for their own well-being and the well-being of others [13]. Hence, transforming classism and building a better university classroom requires understanding the origins and assumptions of Ubuntu, how Ubuntu and classism reciprocate in individual lives and institutions towards dismantling classism and building a more just and compassionate world. Ubuntu, an African philosophy that emphasises the interconnectedness of all humanity, communality and oneness, will be unpacked as a transformative lens to dismantle classism in university classrooms. Hence, the questions as to what are the assumptions of Ubuntu and how the assumptions can be used to unpack classism within university classrooms were answered.

Research Objectives

In order to answer the above questions, the following research objectives are raised to pilot the study. That is, the study:

- explores the assumptions of Ubuntu as a transformative philosophy;
- presents how those assumptions could be used to ameliorate classism toward a transformative and just university system.

2. Materials and Methods

This study is a theoretical paper, embedded in inductive and deductive argumentation of issues within the purpose of a transformative paradigm. The transformative paradigm is a research lens that focuses on how power and inequality are shaped and reshaped [14, 15]. It challenges dominant narratives and assumptions and encourages the researcher and the researched to question or challenge the status quo [16]. This approach is often used in social science research to examine social justice issues by examining the systems and power structures that uphold inequalities [17, 18] for transformative change. This lens is vital to this study because it allows the researchers to create and suggest plausible ways to build a just and equitable university community. Therefore, this paradigm is appropriate for this argument since it is rooted in a commitment to social justice and empowerment of marginalised and or unequal groups.

In other to present a coherent argument, we adopted thematic analysis. The thematic analysis method is one of the most frequent forms of research analysis, especially in studies where the data comes from written text and spoken words [19]. It emphasises the identification, analysis, and interpretation of meaning [20]. In social research, thematic analysis can be used to analyse interviews, focus groups, open-ended surveys, and other types of data [21, 22]. In this study, our data is based on the epistemology of ubuntu philosophy, which informed our argument. This argument is arranged in themes, following [23]’s three steps of doing thematic analysis, such as familiarisation with the data, which involves reading many materials on Ubuntu. The second stage is to identify the main themes, which is to deduce the assumptions of Ubuntu, and the last step is to make sense

of the themes by analysing and discussing the assumptions of Ubuntu with how it could be used to dismantle classism in university classrooms. These were presented by conceptualising Ubuntu, identifying its assumptions, and analysing them as a strategy to eliminate classism.

3. Results

3.1. Concept of Ubuntu as a Framework

Ubuntu's basic principles, in all of their various applications, are at the foundation of African life and belief systems, in which people's daily lived experiences are mirrored. Since the Homo sapiens first established a home on this continent, Africans have had the longest experience with survival and preservation as a human society [24]. The philosophy is utilised daily to settle arguments and disputes at all levels across Africa; therefore, it is an important part of the concept of people and their ways of life [25, 26]. The term "ubuntu" originated from the Bantu languages of Zulu, Xhosa, Swati, and Ndebele and can be described as a social philosophy of love, oneness, unity and communalism [27–29]. From Xhosa words, "ubu" means "being" and "ntu" means "human" [30], which still bothers humanity and is humane. Ubuntu has been investigated by several academics throughout the past three decades as a viable philosophical perspective, particularly with regard to postcolonialism and transformation in Southern Africa [28, 30–33]. Several writers have explored Ubuntu as an African philosophy that proclaims unity, love, oneness, communality and as a way of life that encourages the idea of "ourselves in others and others in ourselves." That is, it is a way of living, not for oneself alone, but for one another, to support and care for each other.

[32] views a person with Ubuntu as one who is welcoming, hospitable, warm, and sharing with others. Such individuals are open, affirming, and accessible to others who are willing to be dependable and do not feel threatened by others' abilities or goodness since they have a secure sense of belonging and togetherness. Therefore, the concept of community and communality is one of the fundamental principles of Ubuntu, which is a nebulous notion of commonness in humanity and is regarded by [34] as "I am, because we are." Based on this, one can argue that Ubuntu is a person's deepest essence; it is the divine spark of goodness within everyone. Based on this, we argue that while Ubuntu philosophy can be used as a framework for thinking about various aspects of life, it can also guide how to live life according to human values. Human values, such as love, truth, peace and happiness, are central tenets of the Ubuntu philosophy, and adhering to these principles can create a more just, classless and harmonious world.

This philosophy is a relevant theoretical framework that can be used to transform teaching and learning toward humanism [35, 36]. When Ubuntu practices is injected to classrooms activities, as educators, it opens up a new possibility for connection, understanding, oneness, collaboration, classlessness and growth among the students and their lecturers. The philosophy is capable of creating classrooms where all students feel seen, heard, and valued and building student-lecturer relationships is based on respect, empathy, and care. Applying this philosophy will benefit the students and their lecturers and stand the space to inspire a curriculum and instructional materials that reflect the diversity of students' cultures, backgrounds, and experiences. So far, Ubuntu has successfully made a positive impact in classrooms, most especially in creating a just society and equitable academic community [37–39]. Moreover, as it grows, it is only likely to have an even greater impact in the fight against classism. Therefore, to combat classism in university classrooms, Ubuntu's ways of life cannot be underestimated, including working together to ensure that students have the same access to academic resources, opportunities, and recognition. By doing so, Ubuntu hopes to create a more just and equitable world for all.

4. Discussion

From the above exploration of Ubuntu philosophy, one can deduce that Ubuntu shares the following four cardinal assumptions, which are: Mirroring oneself in others, communality and togetherness, humanity and unity, and egalitarian practices. These assumptions were unpacked below in themes based on the principles of thematic analysis.

– **Mirroring oneself in others:** Based on the above Ubuntu presentation, one can see that Ubuntu is a way of life, philosophy, and approach where people see themselves in others. This

aligns with the definition that Ubuntu practice promotes the belief that one exists because of the others and that others are also mandated to take care of their fellow human being humanely and in harmony by taking care of those around us [40, 41]. It is about being respectful, sharing what we have, and working together for the common good. This is practically what it means by “I am because we are” or “humanity towards others.” This reiterated the fact that human beings cannot exist in isolation; everyone is connected to the entire humanity. This is also consonant with the argument that compassion and connection to others make humanity [42]. That is, true humans must relate to other people humanely. This is not also far from the general bible knowledge that says, “love thy neighbour as thyself.”

– **Communality and togetherness:** Based on the above analysis of Ubuntu, one can deduce that the world of Ubuntu is laced with a society that values communal ways of doing things. This could be argued as a way of life that encourages solidarity among the people and makes peace in their unions towards humanity. It speaks about our interconnectedness and unavoidable unity of purpose [43, 44]. This assumption is also in line with Foggin’s (2021) argument that Ubuntu is sometimes used to describe a community-oriented approach to living in harmony with others and working together for a common good and goals. This philosophy can be applied to many different areas of life, including communal relationships with family, friends, and community members (Metz & Gaie, 2010) because it teaches people to value the interconnectedness of all people and their togetherness. This could be regarded as shared humanity to treat others with compassion and respect.

– **Humanity and unity of purpose:** Based on the above conceptualisation of Ubuntu, humanity and unity of purpose is one of the broad assumptions of Ubuntu. We argue that it is a “philosophy of humanity”, with a belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity,” or “the idea that we are all human beings and therefore we are all related,” which fosters unity of purpose to make the world a better place for everyone. The argument here is that if Ubuntu believes that we are all one human family and that humans can achieve anything in oneness, then unity is the oneness, needed to promote humanity regardless of differences. This assumption is also in consonance with [45]’s study that unity enables people to come together and create a just and equitable society as a cornerstone of any successful society. According to [46], unity is easy to stand up against discrimination and fight injustice toward building classless and a better future for all. Therefore, via unity of purpose, Ubuntu gives strength to overcome adversity and create a more just and equitable society. Hence, a just and equitable society on its own is humanity that can be at its best in unity.

– **Egalitarian practices:** Based on the above conceptual presentation of Ubuntu, we deduced that Ubuntu is a philosophy that recognises egalitarian ways of doing things. Ubuntu believes in equality for all people, regardless of social status, race, or gender. This is consistent with [47]’s argument that egalitarian practices seek to promote equality in all areas of social life, which is not far from the importance of community and cooperation as indicated by Ubuntu [48] and promotes altruism and compassion. Through the lens of Ubuntu, we can also argue that these practices share a commitment to promoting equality, the balance of economic power and cooperation among people as a framework for social change that can help address the root causes of inequality and promote values that emphasise humanity and interdependence of people. It also ensures equal access to education, health care, jobs, and other opportunities that may end discrimination based on factors like race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic background.

Analysis of the assumptions as an anti-classism strategy

This section discusses and analyses the nexus between the assumptions of Ubuntu and classism, mostly presented to show how Ubuntu could be used to eliminate and or reduce classism in university classrooms. This was done under the following sub-headings in line with the principles of thematic analysis as indicated above and in response to the above assumptions. The themes are: Mirroring oneself in others and promotion of classless university classrooms, communality and togetherness and promotion of classless university classrooms, humanity and unity of purpose and others and promotion of classless university classrooms, and egalitarian practices and promotion of classless university classrooms.

Mirroring oneself in others and promotion of classless university classrooms: Based on the above analysis of Ubuntu as a theoretical base for this study, we argue that when the assumption of Ubuntu, “mirroring oneself in others” is made to be part of university classroom practices, stand a chance to eliminate classism and make students view themselves as the same and humanly. This argument also shows that self-love among students makes it easy to love and respect one another as fellow human beings. This argument is consistent with [49]’s and [50]’s argument that Ubuntu promotes love, discards hatred, and eliminates discrimination among students in higher education institutions. This confirms the findings of [51] that compassionate disposition in classrooms enhances productivity and student academic performance. Therefore, it is expedient for university classrooms to respond to classism by promoting a situation that will make students see themselves as one devoid of discrimination based on social and personal diversity [52].

Communality/togetherness and promotion of classless university classrooms: Based on the above analysis of Ubuntu as a theoretical base for this study, we argue that when classrooms are built to inculcate communal spirit with the awareness that it is good to work together towards achieving common goal among students will transform their minds towards one another. That is, togetherness and communal spirit will make classroom stakeholders understand that social classes, economic backgrounds and other social inequalities do not matter in university environments, hence should be jettisoned. This is consistent with the finding of Townley (2017) that collaboration and teamwork allow students to overcome diversities. This also aligns with [53]’s and [54]’s argument that togetherness, cooperation, and teamwork enable students to manage their diversity and increase their love for one another irrespective of their colour status and political opinions.

Humanity/unity of purpose and promotion of classless university classrooms: Based on the above analysis of Ubuntu as a theoretical base for this study, we argue that true humanity and humane practices that are laced with unity of purpose are Ubuntu-like and capable of eliminating classism in university classrooms. Classroom stakeholders should endeavour to inculcate humanity and unity into the students because it will enable students to display humane tendencies and desist from all activities that could create unethical social classes and inequalities among them. By doing this, students will learn to be united and work together in harmony to achieve a common goal. This is not far from the idea that unity of purpose is needed to achieve its aims and objectives [55, 56]. This is also consistent with the conclusion of Berghs (2017) that humanity and humane practices (Ubuntu) are a dimension that works against pluralistic classism in organisations. Therefore, teachers and or all stakeholders should ensure that humanity and unity spirit should be promoted in order to eliminate classism in the classrooms.

Egalitarian practices and promotion of classless university classrooms: Based on the above analysis of Ubuntu as a theoretical base for this study, we argue that egalitarianism should be the hallmark practice in the classroom. Such classroom should be indebted to democratic practices, freedom of participation in knowledge construction and openness to correction and to be corrected. That is, teachers and or all the stakeholders, including students, should inculcate the idea that promotes equity and equality and that “all animals are equal” in generating knowledge in the classrooms. This is argued because it eliminates classism by making the higher animals understand that the lower animals are created in the same ways like them. Therefore, it must be treated with humanity. This is further confirming the conclusion that a classless classroom enables classmates that have some bad feelings about a classic or highly advantaged student also to understand that it is the way society is structured and not their fault to be in a high position; therefore, they are not to be rebuked [57].

This study is a theoretical and argumentative in nature and does not take the possibility of environmental and social diferencies of all universities into consideration, which may vary from one university to another. However, the same focus of the study, concentrating on the assumptions and their anti-clasist strategies, may be subjected to hypothesis testing for further validations.

5. Conclusion

The study explores classism and how it could be ameliorated in university classrooms to ensure a classless, equitable and egalitarian university system where unity and oneness become the

order of practice. This was done within the purview of the transformative paradigm and Ubuntu as a philosophical practice, positioned to dismantle classism in classrooms. Based on the above theoretical and deductive analysis, we conclude that mirroring oneself in others, communality and togetherness, humanity and unity, and egalitarian practices is a dimension of a classless university classroom toward an equitable society. Based on this, the study recommends that:

- teaching and learning processes should encourage students to see or mirror themselves in others and vice versa to ensure a classless society;
- university classrooms should be made to promote commonality and togetherness in teaching and learning to enable students to cultivate the spirit of togetherness in their daily practices towards ensuring a classless society;
- classrooms should be tailored to promote oneness, humanity and unity of purpose towards the actualisation of common goals amidst diversity;
- and that classrooms should be made to create a conducive atmosphere for egalitarian practices among students and all classroom stakeholders.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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