Articles

The case for the relevant university

H. R. Botman
Rector and Vice-Chancellor
Stellenbosch University
Stellenbosch, South Africa
e-mail: russelbotman@sun.ac.za

Abstract
Stellenbosch University has gone through a serious engagement with the topic of a pedagogy of hope. The engagement included the initial proposal of Paulo Friere, the South American educationist, bearing the imprints of the twentieth century and the new ways in which intellectuals are revisiting the critical pedagogy of hope for the twenty-first century. There are serious differences between the two efforts. However, a relevant pedagogy must be contextually designed in a clear acknowledgement of the needs and fears of all people in such a context. South Africa has a long way to go and this article is a contribution to the search of a conceptual framework to reconsider the renewal of the educational system.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1921–1997) is regarded as one of the most influential thinkers in his field. His Pedagogy of the oppressed (2006a [1970]) and his latter Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed (2006b [1992]) made a lasting impression on the theory and practice of education the world over. It is these and other works that led to the important place of a ‘critical pedagogy’ within education, conveying the idea that education should play a role in changing the world for the better. In particular, he argued that the role of education is to stimulate critical thinking and a critical consciousness in people. The goal is to empower them so that they may free themselves from oppression, poverty, injustice and the difficult task of living peacefully with former oppressors in a new situation.

Interestingly, Freire said that he had input from black and white South Africans on ‘the tragic, absurd, unthinkable experience of racism’ and that many of them were interested in learning how to overcome ‘the sense of being crushed’. This Freire connects to the idea that ‘on the basis of a new apprehension of the world, it would be possible to acquire the disposition to change it’ (2006b).

Freire worked mainly with illiterate adult peasants living on farms in South America, but his ideas have since been applied to primary and secondary schooling as well – also in a democratic context, post repression. Freire also wrote about
higher education, and I contend that his ideas are relevant to Africa and elsewhere in the developing world where there is an acute need to overcome significant underdevelopment, inequity and injustice, and to achieve sustainable progress on various levels.

At Stellenbosch University (SU) the concept of a pedagogy of hope was formally introduced relatively recently – in 2007 – as a possible leitmotif to guide our core activities, i.e. learning and teaching, research and community interaction. Serious engagement with this notion has since unfolded on an institutional level and is still underway. In the meantime, SU publically launched an ambitious and comprehensive advancement campaign in July 2010 under the banner of the HOPE Project (www.thehopeproject.co.za). This initiative is aimed at positioning the University to be of service to society by using its strengths and expertise to address seemingly intractable problems experienced by people in South Africa, the rest of the continent and the world over. Freire’s critical pedagogy has been a significant point of reference in both these processes.

I will therefore briefly unpack what I consider to be pertinent aspects of Freire’s critical pedagogy, and also outline how a pedagogy of hope has shaped SU’s current positioning as an engaged institution of higher learning committed to science for society.

**HOPE, HUMAN EXISTENCE AND THE NEED FOR A DEMOCRATIC RELATIONSHIP**

Paulo Freire (2006a) states that his argument for a pedagogy of hope is not a matter of mere stubbornness, but rather the conceptual result of ‘an existential, concrete imperative’. In clarifying this further he says, ‘I do not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope and dream’.

He argues that a pedagogy of hope flows from the democratic relationship facilitated by education: ‘As a democratic relationship, dialogue is the opportunity available to me to open up to the thinking of others, and thereby not wither away in isolation’.

**ACTION REQUIRED**

Having made his case for hope as an ‘existential, concrete imperative’, Freire points out that hope itself is a necessity for the improvement of human existence, but it is not enough. Without struggle it cannot ‘recreate the world’ (ibid.). Freire wants us to ‘act in and on the world so as to lessen oppression’ (Crittenden 2008).

**CRITICAL PEDAGOGY**

At this juncture Freire adds the notion ‘critical’ to his fundamental concept of hope. ‘We need critical hope the way a fish needs unpolluted water’ (2006a). Struggle and hope combine to form the sufficient ‘critical’ pedagogy of ‘hope’ (ibid.).
To attempt the transformation of the world without hope leads to cynicism and fatalism. That is why many social economic and historical transformations worldwide ended in despair and false hope.

In Africa and elsewhere, despair has its roots in colonialism, slavery, wars, corruption and human trafficking, to name but a few. Despairing communities can be found in every corner of the world.

A critical pedagogy is a progressive pedagogy of transformation. It seeks to transform broken realities, and its subject is no less ambitious than the world as we know it. Or, the world as we learn to know it based on the evidence provided by knowledge workers.

One should actually speak of many worlds. No single change agent or process is sufficient for the full transformation of the various aspects of the lives of all people everywhere in the world. That is why scientists globally are seeking partners for collaboration all over the world. That is the driving force behind interdisciplinary cooperation and research across faculty, departmental and traditional academic boundaries.

Not every educator is a progressive educator. Progressive educators can be described in terms of methodology, epistemology, educational tasks and the profile of the educational contributions to society.

Paulo Freire argues that ‘[o]ne of the tasks of the progressive educator, through a serious, correct political analysis, is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be’ (ibid.).

A ‘political analysis’ to him is one that leads to an understanding of the historical, economic and social processes producing conditions that lead to despair and thus require the unveiling of opportunities for hope. For the progressive educator, every educational moment – whether in the search for knowledge, the sharing of knowledge or the application of knowledge – is an opportunity to unveil hope: Hope that seeks action, hope that leads to the transformation of the various worlds that we inhabit.

Jeffrey M. R. Duncan-Andrade (2009) identifies three forms of false hope pervasive in schools in the United States. He warns that educators should guard against creating any of these forms, a message that I would argue is also applicable to tertiary institutions here in South Africa.

‘Hockey hope’ creates the false expectation that ‘things are going to get better’ if students simply ‘work hard, pay attention, and play by the rules’. It ignores the
underlying causes of the difficulties experienced by members of disadvantaged communities, i.e. a ‘laundry list of inequities’.

‘Mythical hope’ relies on a ‘false narrative of equal opportunity’ to announce the ‘end of racism’ by ‘celebrating individual exceptions’, based on analyses that are ‘ahistorical and depoliticized’.

‘Hope deferred’ comes about when educators feel overwhelmed by the challenges their disadvantaged students face, but because they are ‘liberal-minded enough to avoid blaming the victim’ they end up vaguely blaming ‘the system’ instead of embarking on a ‘transformative pedagogical project’. The message of hope they convey is either for a future Utopia or for ‘the individual student’s future ascent to the middle class’, instead of empowering students to take control of their destiny.

In opposition to these forms of false hope, Duncan-Andrade poses ‘critical hope’, which he connects to Freire’s thinking on the role of education in society. He again identifies three elements.

‘Material hope’ comes about as a result of high-quality teaching, which provides students with the resources they need to transform their reality.

‘Socratic hope’ takes its name from Socrates’ statement that ‘the unexamined life is not worth living’. It asks of both educators and students to scrutinise their ‘lives and actions within an unjust society’, however painful such a process may be.

‘Audacious hope’ demands of educators to show solidarity with the pain of their students, many of whom are suffering the effects of ‘social toxins’, such as poverty, discrimination and violence.

Duncan-Andrade argues that Barrack Obama’s ascent to the presidency of the US ‘has given us license to reinsert hope into the mainstream educational discourse’. In the case of South Africa, I would argue that it is our transition from apartheid to democracy since 1994 that has given us a mandate for fundamental change in education, and that our higher education sector has a moral duty to help create a progressively better society within our national borders and beyond.

**DIFFERENTIATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

The higher education landscape in South Africa is changing. What had in the past simply been ‘the tertiary sector’ is now a much broader concept of activities and initiatives. So, what is it that differentiates a university from other post-school centres of training? How is the university pedagogically different?

To my mind, what universities do is to bring together their three core activities – teaching and learning, research and community interaction – in a comprehensive way. Not only do we work for knowledge, not only do we work for the sharing of knowledge, but we go further and apply it.

This kind of differentiation goes further. All universities share a commitment to research, learning and teaching and community interaction, but there will be institutions that choose to focus on a specific area. For instance, SU is research-driven, though we also focus on the other two areas.
And at SU we also say that the research that we do is not just filed away somewhere, but is used to produce graduates of a particular kind – professionals that are interested in and engaged with the problems and challenges of the real world.

WHAT IS THE UNIVERSITY?

Hennie Rossouw (2003), former professor in Philosophy at SU and a former Vice-Rector (Academic), identifies three conceptions of the university, namely the pedagogic, cognitivistic and pragmatistic paradigms. These are ‘different sets of presuppositions and convictions about the character and function of the university’, but ‘they do not wholly exclude one another’.

In the pedagogic paradigm the university is viewed as a ‘centre of education or general shaping by higher education... in the tradition of scientific thought’. In the cognitivistic view the university concerns itself specifically with the ‘extension of knowledge’, particularly ‘new knowledge’ that is acquired through ‘research according to the strict requirements of the scientific method’. And according to the pragmatistic conception, the place and role of the university are to be ‘practically useful’ and to produce ‘utilisable products’. It is an ‘instrument’ with which to promote ‘external objectives’, e.g. social justice or economic progress. This view is a reaction to the ivory tower image of the university as an ‘institution that is busy with all sorts of esoteric activities in total isolation from its environment’. In contrast, it poses the ‘demand of relevance’ – viz. ‘purposeful involvement in the actual needs of the surrounding society’.

THE CASE OF STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

The pedagogy of hope at SU relates not only to the pedagogic function of the university, but also to both the unlocking and application of knowledge. It is meant to be an inclusive and integrated approach. SU is a place where knowledge is pursued and communicated and applied with a view to making the world a better place; thus an institution that creates hope amidst despairing conditions in the surrounding society full of problem related to human health and dignity, peace and security, democracy and human rights, as well as the environment and economic development.

This view of the place, role and function of the university is in line with SU’s mission statement (SU 2000), which is ‘to create and sustain ... an environment in which knowledge can be discovered, ... shared and ... applied to the benefit of the community’. It is also in line with our vision statement (ibid.), which sets the University the aim of ‘being relevant to the needs of the community, taking into consideration the needs of South Africa in particular and of Africa and the world in general’.

One could argue that most, if not all universities are characterised by these three activities – the discovery, sharing and application of knowledge. But not all universities commit themselves to be of service to ‘the community’. For Stellenbosch,
The case for the relevant university

this is the essential implication of Freire’s pedagogy of hope: to be a university ‘of meaning and significance for South Africa and Africa’ (Botman 2007). We want to use our academic and research excellence to the benefit of society, to change policies in the country, to help create possibilities for people who otherwise would not have had them, and to think of a better kind of world than the one we currently have. That is different from mere applied science. It goes much further – it says this is applied within society, where it will make a difference and where our country will get a better chance.

STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY’S HOPE PROJECT

In 2000, SU adopted a new Strategic Framework for the Turn of the Century and Beyond (SU 2000a) with the aim of re-evaluating its priorities in light of both the birth of a democratic order in South Africa, and the dawning of the 21st century and its knowledge-based economy. On the one hand, this called for SU to build on the high standards it had achieved as a world-class research university. But it also required of the institution to change, to fundamentally transform itself.

So, the University acknowledged that it had been a role player in the injustices of the past. And it expressed a commitment to redress, which would be pursued through ‘equity’ and ‘service’ – building a staff and student corps demographically more representative of society, and promoting development in the context of pressing needs in society, particularly in disadvantaged communities.

When I was appointed rector and vice-chancellor in 2007, I dedicated my time in office to the realisation of this commitment, and the vehicle I proposed for this was Freire’s pedagogy of hope (Botman 2007). The opportunity arose because the 2000 Strategic Framework represented a radical shift in the pedagogy that SU was known for before the year 2000. It was my view that the Strategic Framework and Freire’s pedagogy of hope belonged together.

The way I see it, we have three responsibilities as a university (Botman 2010). The first is a moral responsibility. Given our history, we have a moral responsibility to the poor, to rural communities and to a diversity of individuals in our country. Our second responsibility is the historical responsibility to face up to the lingering burdens of the 20th century, the fact that in large parts of the world, people are still battling with basic challenges, such as getting enough food to eat and clean water to drink, a roof over their heads, peace and security in their streets, a decent job with a fair salary, and quality education for their children. The third responsibility is the responsibility to embrace the challenges of the 21st century, the world of a new generation of young people, new ways of learning, new opportunities for research and the need for harnessing emerging technologies on an on-going basis.

The HOPE Project is our way of living up to these responsibilities. Following my appointment in 2007, the SU community pulled together and distilled from the international and national development agendas (as captured in, among others, the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations and the South African
government’s Medium-term Strategic Framework) five themes to guide our core activities. These themes are the eradication of poverty and related conditions, and the promotion of human dignity and health, democracy and human rights, peace and security, as well as a sustainable environment and a competitive industry.

Our various faculties came up with a growing list of more than 20 interdisciplinary academic initiatives and enabling programmes that give expression to these themes. These range from an interdisciplinary food security initiative and an innovative programme for combating poverty, homelessness and socio-economic vulnerability through the legal system, to centres for dispute settlement, HIV/AIDS management, invasion biology, agribusiness leadership development and sustainability. It also includes a new rural clinical school, a youth sport initiative, a unit for corporate governance and institutes for governance and water management. And there is the University’s new Graduate School, which incorporates our African Doctoral Academy and is linked to the Partnership for Africa’s Next Generation of Academics, consisting of SU, the University of Botswana, University of Malawi, University of Dar es Salaam, the University of Nairobi, as well as Makerere University.

In addition, the HOPE Project also includes steps taken by the University to maintain its position as a leading 21st Century institution of higher learning. This we are doing by:

• Recruiting top students, researchers, lecturers and support staff, and actively assisting them so that they produce top results;
• Improving our diversity profile;
• Expanding postgraduate study further; and
• Establishing excellent facilities and infrastructure.

Innovative research outputs driven by sceptical minds is a prerequisite for facing the challenges of the future South Africa. Such research is set in motion by reflecting critically on current conditions and is sustained by a commitment towards a better future. This requires a solid grounding in excellent basic science as well as creative imagination. Since success in this complex endeavour is not guaranteed, hope in the research context becomes an agent that provides the impetus for new and relevant actions. Hope imparts an attitude of defiance and creativity by imagining a future free of human indignity and environmental degradation.

The HOPE Project encompasses a huge investment in the sustained academic excellence of Stellenbosch University and will significantly strengthen our commitment to leave a scientific footprint in the community. As builders of hope on and from the African continent we will continue to put our research expertise at the service of human and environmental need. We will also be inspired by witnessing how knowledge shapes and changes our society. Hope in the research context is the driver of a cycle of discovery and action informed by knowledge.

Throughout this process, research at Stellenbosch is guided by the notion of simultaneous excellence and relevance informed by a diversity of people and ideas.
The case for the relevant university

– whether it is putting Africa’s own satellites in space for improving food security and town planning, contributing to the development of fact based policies around TB treatment, ensuring a transformed society based on social and economic rights, or developing appropriate technology for making safe drinking water.

Inspired by the HOPE Project, SU’s core functions – research, teaching and learning as well as community interaction – converge to make the University an effective role-player and participant in South Africa’s strategic priorities to eradicate poverty; improve social services; build sustainable communities; improve the country’s health profile, and grow an increasingly inclusive economy for the benefit of South Africa and Africa’s citizens.

CONCLUSION

A pedagogy of hope requires of universities to be relevant, meaningful, significant. This is an appropriate role for the higher education sector in South Africa, given the state of underdevelopment that large numbers of people – here and elsewhere on the continent – continue to experience. By using science in the service of the society, we can help make the world a better place. Future generations deserve nothing less.

REFERENCES


