

## Articles

# Distance education as a 'we-ness': A case for *uBuntu* as a theoretical framework

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### **Abstract**

'Education-for-me' could, epistemologically considered, probably be classified as a typically Western concept where the individual within distance education focuses on individualised 'education-for-me', thus making the individual the most important ordering principle. African – specifically Batswana – ACE (Advanced Certificate in Education) students do not regard distance education as a solitary activity or individualised 'education-for-me'. It appears from the qualitative data reported in this article that, for the African and more specifically the Batswana ACE student, distance education is rather a 'we-ness' in which they experience the existential yearning to live and observe the anthropological epistemological principle of communality and collectivity, in matters also related to their academic lives. In the ideologically based anthropological epistemological view of 'communality' of the Batswana ACE student, man is regarded primarily as a social being, focused socially essentially on the reality surrounding him/her, and growing into a belongingness towards a communal unity within a particular distance education community as aim.

## THE SPIRIT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

According to the Draft Policy Framework for the Provision of Distance Education in South African universities (2012) distance education is a set of teaching and learning strategies that can be used to conquer spatial separation between educators and students. However, it is not a single mode of delivery it is a collection of methods for the provision of structured learning. It eliminates the need for students to discover the curriculum by attending classes frequently and for long periods. Rather, it aims to create a quality learning environment using an appropriate combination of different media, tutorial support and peer group discussion (Moore 2002; Schmidt-Jones 2012; Madyarov and Taef 2012; Capdeferro and Romero 2012; Wright and Reju 2012). For the purpose of this article, we are focusing only on the peer group aspect (any collectivity in which the members contribute to some general characteristics, such as age or ethnicity) in terms of the specific Batswana students.

The use of the concept *distance education* can best be theoretically and conceptually substantiated from the fact that it stands for a didactical form of delivery in distance teaching. Distance education can thus assist to provide in the requests and needs of indigent, underprivileged, geographically remote communities in areas excluded from admission. It can also contribute to the acquisition of novel skills and awareness regarding the assimilation of up to date technological improvements (Moore and Tait 2002; Bolliger and Wasilik 2009).

## THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTION FRAMEWORKS

Our approach in this article can be regarded as fundamentally interpretative. Our investigation as such was designed from the hermeneutic phenomenology. It is a traditional African philosophy that offers us an understanding of ourselves in relation with the world. According to *uBuntu*, a common bond exists between us all. Through our interaction with our fellow human beings, we discover our own human qualities. But because of the epistemological crisis of our time in South African education we decided to couch the whole investigation under the African social philosophy of *uBuntu* as our theoretical framework. This article, being an interpretative investigation into a lived, day by day experience among individual students with their own intentions, principles and philosophy, *uBuntu* offers itself as a critical and relevant lens through which all issues perused herein are looked into (Valle, King and Halling 1989).

## ***uBuntu* as a theoretical framework?**

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, *uBuntu* is a traditional African ethic or humanist and social philosophy that offers an understanding of ourselves in relation with the world, focusing on people's allegiances and relations with one another. It is inherent from the philosophy that community strength comes of community support, interconnectedness and community commitment. Some believe that *uBuntu* is a classical African social philosophy or whereas others point out that as far as written sources are concerned, the idea that *uBuntu* is a philosophy or worldview has only been developed in recent years (Swanson 2009). *uBuntu* speaks about the fact that one cannot exist as a human being in isolation. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality – *uBuntu* – you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole community (Forster 2007; Swanson 2010). Through the spirit of *uBuntu*, community relations are improved and social cohesion is promoted. In this context the role of *uBuntu* in community development is about the 'we' and our ability to accomplish things that we can only do together with others. It is about building a network of delicate relationships of interdependence and kinship. According to *uBuntu*, a common bond exists between us all and it is through this bond, through our interaction with our fellow human beings, that we discover our own human qualities. We affirm our humanity when we acknowledge that of others.

The idea of *uBuntu* is also regarded as essential to the African socio-ethical reflection and it elucidates the communal and collective rootedness and interdependence of individuals and the extent of social interaction. For that reason *uBuntu* promotes the good of society and includes humanness as a crucial component in the African society where the community always comes first. The human being is born out of and into the community, and for that reason will always be part of the community. The community and belonging to a community is part of the essence of traditional African life. Thus, Philosophy of life and Philosophy of Education are regarded as one, because a philosophy of life helps to discover the goals and purposes valued by a particular society. Humanness is imperative and nobody is born with *botho* or *uBuntu* – these are communally accepted and desirable ethical standards that a person acquires throughout his/her life and therefore education, and thus also distance education, plays a very important role in transferring the African philosophy of life (Murithi 2006; Eze 2008). The phrase of 'a human being depends on others just as much as others depend on him/her' (*motho ke motho ka batho* (SeSotho); *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (IsiZulu), *motho ke motho ka batho babang* (Sotho)) implies that a

person is a person through his/her relationship with others and it focuses on the 'communal and collective interdependence' of an individual to other individuals. '*Tsie e ja ka bontsi, Kgetsi ya tsie e kgonwa ke go tshwaraganelwa*' focuses on the 'we-ness' to support the communal spirit of *uBuntu* in Batswana community life and also refers to the interconnectedness of people in Tswana traditional communities. The focus is thus on the kinship system of the Batswana (Praeg 2008). When we investigate the meaning of 'we-ness', the Batswana student's life anthropological epistemological view of communality, grounded in a life view, man is regarded primarily as social being, as someone who is essentially socially directed towards his/her surrounding reality and aims to establish the growth of an appendage in communal unity. The *uBuntu* theme which is currently still receiving much attention in some academic circles is in essence nothing but this African communality, positive and worthy of emulation. The Batswana ACE student subsequently strives for an experience of communal identity within an distance education society, characterised by communal sincerity, connectedness and closeness.

Therefore, *uBuntu* inspires us to render ourselves to others and to move towards the communal spirit of *uBuntu*, like for example the communal spirit in the Batswana community life. The African philosophy is profoundly concerned with communality and *uBuntu*. It provides a theoretical elucidation and scrutiny of the two as defining aspects of conventional African existence. In our opinion, distance education can therefore endorse *uBuntu* and we are also of opinion that teacher training and development of teachers through distance education can be more successful when the principle of *botho* or *uBuntu* forms part of or becomes the basis and guiding principle of the same programme. 'Education-for-me' is, anthropologically regarded, a classically Western epistemological notion where the individual within distance education focuses on individualised teaching being the most significant source for substantial planning. The purpose of education should not so much be the search for truth, but to heal, and above all to heal the alienation, the split that characterizes western experience. According to Reason (1994) to heal means to make whole and we can only understand our world as a whole if we are part of it. Making whole implies participation. Reason (1994, 326) elucidates this point by indicating that 'one characteristic of a participative world-view is that the individual person is restored to the circle of community and the human community to the context of the wider natural world'.

In the Western way of knowing (just-for-me education) objectivity is highly prized. This, according to Reason (1994), means standing outside the phenomena being studied; separating the knower from what is known, refusing to 'contaminate' the data, resisting 'going native'. A rational inference is that the

African student, and then specifically the Batswana student, experiences distance education as social and a collective interaction with relations with the distance education lecturer as well as with fellow-students. Social orientation as a point of reference, as well as collective relations with peers, is decisively imperative to the African; thus the focus is mainly on the spoken tradition. An intrinsic need exists for discourse, communal interaction and relations, and coherence in a conventional African communal, and thus a shared distance education environment and setting. The focal point should also be on the *just-for-me* education for the communally inclined distance education student; changing this to *just-for-us* education, comprising communality and collectivity. This means that communication, kindness, coherence, devotion and communal cohesion are in fact indispensable within the social environment, within a precise distance education milieu.

'Education-for-me' is where the individual, inside *distance education*, focuses on individualised 'education-for-me'. Contrary to this practice, we want to confirm that African students, and then specifically the Batswana students, prefer to adhere to the anthropological epistemological principle of communality and thus not individualised education. We constitute that the Western epistemological idea 'education-for-me' is in divergence with the philosophically grounded, anthropological epistemological perspective of 'communality' of the ACE Batswana students (Van Niekerk 1996, 2004). The danger of looking at such problems like the provision of education especially to African people is expressed well by Yosso (2005, 71) he states that 'When we look to other times and other cultures we see them through the distorting lens of our own epistemology, or project onto them our own violent shadow'.

The African social philosophy of *uBuntu* is therefore appropriate to be utilized as a lens through which the yearning for a 'perfect-fit-education community for us' for the communally disposed distance education students is proposed. This education community includes communality and sociability. Here the student has a need for dialogue where ideas can be shared, social interaction, social dedication and the time spatial presence of a lecturer and fellow students in scheduled contact opportunities. The above-mentioned matters lead to communal cohesion and common coalition in a community. An organization of higher education, which has a general rationale and a general set of standards, is a good example of a community. A sense of community can also be formed by a collection of individuals living in an informal settlement, sharing the same suffering and hardship.

Therefore, under the theory of *uBuntu* in this perspective we attempt to establish the extent to which African students prefer to adhere to the

anthropological epistemological theory of communality and congeniality and not individualised teaching or ‘just-for-me’ education. We also intend to understand and elucidate why the ACE distance education programme of the SCTE is not experienced as an isolated and a once-off event by students, but relatively as a case of individual human behaviours which should be positioned inside the *lived* cultural framework (Ajjawi and Higgs 2007). Additional personal information, deduced from that obtained in the *qualitative* data (Huberman and Miles 1994), was used to establish descriptive grounds in which African students have a preference to adhere to the anthropological epistemological theory of communality, collectivity and congeniality. The study population includes all available Batswana ACE students who attended contact opportunities offered by the SCTE throughout 2010. These are students who willingly enrolled in the distance education programme of the North West University and attended classes at the Pretoria, Taung, Vryburg and Potchefstroom tuition centres. We ultimately conducted twelve individual interviews (N = 12) and also four focus group interviews (N = 4) with participants from the number of students available. In order to offer explicit explanations, we scrupulously encoded and programmed the data obtained during the interviews. We interpreted these with the support of the computer software programme Atlas.ti™ (Nisbet 2007). This enabled us to structure a sound understanding of the possible reasons why this specific group of distance education students is adamant to have face-to-face education in a distance education programme. Open, selective and axial encoding (Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1998) was used in every instance to identify and label themes from the available data/information. Through this open, selective and axial encoding, we attempted to expose similarities and differences between the various identified data categories. We also considered the causes and consequences of, conditions for and interaction among the different data categories. Data investigation and elucidation of the empirical investigation were consequently incorporated and linked with the results of our narrative.

## **FINDINGS OF THE INVESTIGATION**

The meaning of the subsequent presentation of the four recognized themes is to attempt, understand and clarify the lived and knowledgeable opinions of the Batswana distance education students in the ACE programme, especially concerning why students willingly undertaking the ACE at the NWU still prefer contact (face to face communication) education. Consequently we confer the four themes as elucidating grounds and justification for the above:

## **The nature of Belonghesion in distance education as imperative for *uBuntu***

Both focus group and individual responses verify that the cohesion of belonging (consistency) plays an indispensable part in the establishment commune among participants in this investigation. It is clear that in this case, scheduled contact opportunities mean a great deal more to the participants than merely the communal need and call for belonging and unity. It means even more to the distance education students than simply experiencing, through their distance education studies, ordinary reciprocal belonging with their distance education lecturers from the North-West University. It is obvious from analysing the information that these ACE students relatively favour a sort of communal and collective education-for-us, and experience the necessity to belong and to fit into a particular scholarship community or society. In this article a communal and shared distance education scholarship community underpins the philosophy of *uBuntu*. For these participants it is a cohesively indispensable belonging. To belong and to be part of a particular distance education community and society in a constantly deepening, heartfelt, communally commonly cohesive and equally trusting foundation of magnetism (therefore the utilization of the deverbative *cohesion* and not the linguistically unipolar and psychologically rather essentialistic deverbative *combination*), evidently is of decisive significance to the participants. This almost transcendental semantic depth compelled Du Toit (2011) to construct the novel Afrikaans term *toebehorendheidsverhegting*, (translated into *belonging cohesion*) which in English is called *belonghesion* – a neologism as well.

The distance education student should experience an extraordinarily profound and interhuman niveau that he/she *belongs* to a particular distance education community which must be seen as a communal society. Within this communal society (particular distance education community) the distance education students must experience that they belong to that particular community and scholar society where there is the prospect of intercommitment, mutual development and social integrity. Then only will they feel exempted from all pressure, ethical burdening and social guilt and then they will be free to be themselves. In view of the fact that in such a distance education community an intimate, interactive space will be provided to distance education students within and throughout which they can exist and experience their ontical communal longing for the cohesion of belonging, *uBuntu* can contribute to their eventual learning accomplishment. Subsequently the second theme, for the essentiality of existence (survival), here called *existence essentiality*.

### **The nature of the essentiality of existence 'I exist, because we exist ...' in distance education as imperative for uBuntu**

Both focus groups as well as individual participants, verify that, since the needs of students should be catered for during planned distance education contact sessions opportunities, it is vital that each student should be *accepted*. By accommodating him/her completely, the desires of the individual and his/her contextualised desires as distance education student are catered for. African communalism and collectivism provides an encouraging and commendable emulation of outcomes such as genuineness, togetherness, communal relations and brotherhood -- to mention only a few. All the above outcomes should be striven for throughout contact session opportunities for this distance education community and thus distance education society. The student will then be able to follow and experience his/her 'right to existence' inside such a distance education community/society of students: '*I exist because we exist*'.

The Batswana ACE distance education student as analysed from both individual and focus group interviews, does not just experience educational protection, but in fact *existence* safety and protection in the distance education community with contact sessions with the social presence of the fellow students and a distance education lecturer who guides him or her in the journey. As it emerged from interviews, the reality is that at present a model of disparity *in being* exists in distance education, where the distance education lecturer leads and the distance education student follows, specifically *You lead, I follow*. We were capable to deduce from all interviews that these ACE students experiences an intensely rooted need and longing for a lecturer as *fellow (member) human being* to guide him/her during their distance education journey. The profoundly rooted necessity is for having a sense of community throughout scheduled facilitation opportunities. In this distance education commune, the distance education lecturers must be time spatially present as fellow human beings – neighbours in this distance education community – where academic and scientific guidance and leadership for the student is provided, with in no way proceeding along a model of inequality and unfairness of individuals. The ACE distance education student, bearing in mind his/her humanity, yearns for a communal learning community and society in distance education. The prominence is equally on the need of both the support of fellow-students and the time spatial 'real-time' presence of a distance education lecturer during planned face-to-face contact facilitation opportunities.

From the viewpoint of the Batswana ACE distance education student at the NWU, and based on the anthropological epistemological concept of 'communality' where the human, the person, is first and foremost seen as communal human

being, and where the scholar (student) is fundamentally communally engaged to his/her instantaneous reality. Because of the above, he/she is primarily dependent on and designated to the distance education lecturer as fellow-human-being (thus also a member of a group). These ACE students therefore regard distance education as a communal learning community and society which also assumes a communal union in which African communalism and its constructive principles and standards are represented. All these constituents are a vital to the cosmology of distance education as didactical delivery mode. Subsequently the third theme, viz. *collectivity*.

### **The nature of Collectivity as communal unit in distance education as imperative for *uBuntu***

The Batswana ACE student in distance education seeks to experience *security* and refuge as supplementary components of collectivity in scheduled contact opportunities in distance education. Moreover, it explains why distance education students have a need for togetherness, an ever deepened level of cohesion of *belonghession* within this particular distance education society and community. The sheltered *person-in-community* in this circumstance proves to be one of the essences of collectivity as communal unity and harmony. It is fundamental that collectivity as communal unity and harmony be effectively measured within distance education and distance education has to continually attempt to construct a communal and joint unity for the distance education students. Through belonging to a group within a communal education community and society, students in distance education obtain an unambiguous identity and distinctiveness inside the distance education community and society. The student in distance education regards the group as imperative because (Van Der Walt 1999; Van der Westhuizen and Oosthuizen 2003):

- the group is eminent above the individual – which appears to be in direct disparity to the individualised ‘education-for-me’;
- she/he follows and lives an existence philosophy of communality;
- inside the group, a sensitivity for safety of an individual exists which is complicated to comprehend as an individual;
- Africans regularly exist and experience the ontical interdependence of others entirely;
- communal collaboration is considered as tremendously significant, and
- the African society is a first and foremost person-centred culture, believing in, being available for others’.

In summary: in this distance education community and society, communality thus refers to a situation of constant belonging, a 'we-ness' – an initiative of *uBuntu*, where fellow group members are embedded and connected to one another. Like previously mentioned, the principle of *uBuntu* can only succeed when teacher training forms part of a constituent of any community and society, thus also in the education of students during distance education. Therefore, within this distance education community and society that represents a particular learning community, an experience of survival sanctuary triumphs which will lead to distance education teacher students not only considering themselves to be protected, but also cared for in this particular distance education learning community. We purposely refer to 'existence care' as such here, since existence refuge, existence security and existence care should, as we have attempted to argue, be regarded officially as didactical and psycho-pedagogical beacons in distance education communities and dealt with as such. Should the student in distance education be accepted unreservedly in a distance education learning community and society, she/he will experience a much more reflective refuge, which will also lead to communal approval which includes existence refuge, existence security and existence care. We are of the opinion that collectivity is of existential significance to the Batswana ACE student in the distance education programme of the NWU. Communal orientation as well as collective relationships with other distance education community members is determinedly vital to the African. Fundamentals such as social relations, the social presence of a lecturer and students, belonging, communal ownership, etc. create a sense of communal cohesion and reciprocal dedication, which leads to a sense of collectivity within a particular distance education community. The fourth theme, viz. *Communal acceptance*.

### **The nature of Communal acceptance in distance education as imperative for *uBuntu***

Distance education students would like to experience communal (mutual) acceptance and recognition: cohesion of belonging and collectivity as communal unity. Students ought to be without any social guilt or facade so that they can purely be themselves to get together with one another in this approach, where there is no pressure, a sense of interdependence, kindness, brotherhood, belonging and consistency, social cohesion and relationships should triumph throughout all scheduled contact facilitation sessions, as frequently indicated above. Only then will such a contact facilitation session turn into an interactive space intended for the training and development of educators. *Mutual acceptance*, void of any hidden intention, can now manifest without restraint. We have the outlook that *mutual*

*acceptance* not only has to be an invariable aspiration of any distance education community and society, but in reality should be an indispensable characteristic, a fundamental nature of communal distance education for students, and that ought to be acknowledged and managed in view of that.

*As a result*, as evident of the analysed data and information of this investigation, we have concluded that the unremitting implementation of individualised distance education (especially as it has been understood in developed, Western countries) has, in developing countries such as South Africa, in all likelihood reached the closing stages of its shelf existence. This proclamation is substantiated by the realities that distance education, particularly the approach in which the learning content is packaged for curriculum purposes – ought to integrate the communal initiative of social and communal security and interdependence, particularly as it is enclosed in the existing anthropological epistemological teaching of contemplation concerning the meta-theory of collectivism and communalism, ingeniously and creatively.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS: UBUNTU AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK IN SUPPORT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION**

The distance student at the NWU does not regard distance education as a solitary activity or individualised 'education-for-me'. It appears that distance education is rather a 'we-ness' in which they experience the existential yearning to live and observe the anthropological epistemological principle of communality and collectivity, also in matters related to their academic lives. In the ideologically based anthropological epistemological view of 'communality', man is regarded primarily as a social being, focused socially essentially on the reality surrounding him/her, and growing into a *belonghession* (cohesion of belonging) towards a communal unity within a particular distance education community as aim.

Based on the above, it could be logically concluded that the *uBuntu* theme currently being regarded highly and studied seriously in certain South African academic circles is essentially nothing other than this type of African communality and its positive outcomes, worthy to pursue. The distance education student at the NWU strives to experience a communal identity within a distance education community, characterised by transactional sincerity, commitment and closeness. Consequently we regard it as of crucial importance to consider the educational needs of the individual in distance education, and that distance education should focus without hesitation on 'Fit-for-us Education' for the distance education student; in other words on 'education-for-us' in which communality, collectivity and sociability manifest as indispensable key features.

Since we argue that the focus should be on ‘Fit-for-us- education’, we also consider the essential characteristic of *belonging* to a particular distance education community to be of paramount importance. In order to *belong* within social cohesion, the student should be provided with contact opportunities during which he/she can experience transactional closeness, sincerity and commitment. The distance education student should experience that he/she is part of and belongs to a particular distance education community where the student feels relieved from moral burdening and social guilt and is free merely to be him/herself.

Distance education is not a solitary action or a type of individualised ‘education-for-me’, but the Batswana ACE distance education student at the NWU, exhibits an existential yearning and desire for a ‘we-ness’ (‘I’ll be able to progress and develop in my studies for the reason that we, as a collective and communal unity, progress and develop’) in distance education. Within the scrutiny of the Batswana ACE distance education students at the NWU, based on the anthropological epistemological outlook of communality, an individual is first and foremost regarded and accepted as a *social being*; someone who is fundamentally *socially and communally* intended with the surrounding realism, having advanced in the direction of a consistency of belonging inside a particular communal unity within a particular distance education community as a definitive aim. Captivating this, distance education ought to be in future established as a ‘we-ness’ entity by means of an identity and distinctiveness of ‘we-ness’, and thus be managed and dealt with as such. Thus we can make the statement that the distance education student at the NWU within this distance education community should be able to pursue his/her ‘right of existence’ confidently: ‘*I am because we are*’. The distance education student can experience safety of existence in the distance education community where the lecturer guides him/her because of his/her right to exist. In this matter the previously unequal model of the human being, viz. ‘*You lead, I follow*’ is shaped into a mutually acceptable model, viz. ‘*I for your sake and only then you for my sake*’. The first model could then in practice be re-written as ‘*You may lead and I may follow – not because I am forced to do so, but because I want to be, without ulterior motives, both for my sake and for yours*’. Consequently the distance education student at the NWU regards distance education as a ‘we-ness’ and deals with it accordingly. The adoption of *uBuntu* philosophy can thus ascertain the sharing of the skills and resources among distance education communities.

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C. Du Toit-Brits, F. J. Potgieter and V. Hongwane

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