Enhancing the Learning Experience: Ubuntu, Nakara, and the Classroom

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As a student in North American classrooms I learned about punctuality, sometimes the hard way. It became so ingrained in me that I am now always early for everything; I am present fifteen minutes ahead of time before the start of church, class, or any mundane event. I reflect on this and find that I am a Latinx individual who has become acclimated to life in the US. However, I now find myself teaching in classrooms that are increasingly diverse. As I interact with these diverse students, I find myself reconnecting with my roots and learning that my heritage as a Latinx person allows me to make connections to the culture of many of my students.

Punctuality is a strong Western value. Time is money. One of the greatest resources people have in their possession is time. Yet this is one of the things that sets Western thought apart from other cultures around the world. An example of an attitude that contrasts sharply with this idea is the Latin American saying: "*hay más tiempo que vida*" (there is more time than life). This saying can be interpreted in two ways. First, one can say *carpe diem*, seize the day. Life is short, therefore one must make the most of his or her time on earth. The second way this can be taken is that there is plenty of time. Time will go on, and one must therefore invest in relationships rather than fret over punctuality and time. This second interpretation is the way many Latin Americans behave and think consciously and subconsciously. It obviously conflicts with the expectations of Eurocentric culture.[1]

I spent three weeks teaching two courses in Zambia last year. One area that I was able to build bridges from my Latin American background with my students from Zambia was through the principle of Ubuntu and its implications for time. *Ubuntu* is a term that cannot be translated because of the density and depth of its meaning.[2] It is a term that may be described as meaning "humanity for others," "I am because you are," "I can only become a person through other persons," and "to become a person."[3] A term from Latin America that is similar is the Oaxacan concept of *nakara*. It is translated as "a willingness to take responsibility for another by providing what is needed for a healthy life."[4] It indicates a strong collective bond. Rather than being disjointed individuals pulling away from each other, this invites us to see our connectedness and relatedness to one another. My actions affect another person and their actions also affect me. We do not live in a vacuum. Even in our most individualized Western mindset our actions have consequences, whether to an organization, our society, to the environment, to those of a different nationality or race, etc.

As I reconnect with my own Latin American roots and simultaneously interact with my Zambia students, I realize that we may be so concerned over the things we must get done and material that needs to be covered that we forget that as teachers we must model an empathic humanity to others. I knew I had a lot of things to get done for my intensive courses in Zambia. However, the first day there, I realized that the students had only participated in asynchronous class sessions and that their only connection to me was a computer screen. The students vocalized the difficult time they were having with this type of education, learning our LMS, and the culture of online courses. These were very foreign. They were in a state of learning shock, longing to establish a close connection with their professors and the seminary. This was the reason that I decided to improvise and to be flexible with my goals. The first day of class, instead of beginning to lecture, I asked them about themselves and the deepest held innermost values related to their own culture and way of being in the world.

The students timidly warmed up and began to share from their own point of view. During my personal time at the hotel, I designed some activities that involved teamwork and group discussion. I have often seen my students in the North American context groan and complain about these types of activities. They seem to be very practical and just want the instructor to disseminate information. They also dislike working in groups because they are oriented to doing well for themselves first. Group work may reduce the importance of their individual work and consequently impair them from getting a good grade. But my students from Zambia thrived in this type of environment. They laughed, shared, and opened up to one another.

The second thing that I had to adjust was to slow down and spend time on those concepts that I thought could make a positive influence on the students. I learned that I do not have to cover everything. My students are intelligent and responsible for their readings. It was as if my students had to come to a sense of corporate satisfaction with the material covered. I was surprised that when something deeply impacted them that they demonstrated their concern and appreciation for the course content by keeping silent. It is as if they had to digest the material and take their time doing so. Their silence was a mark of comprehension, a sign that they were processing their thoughts and were satisfied with what they were learning. If I can

describe it, it was a silence that in Western contexts might be perceived as uncomfortable, but for them it was meaningful. It was the silence of awe and wonder.

As I strive for cultural competence and modeling the right relationship with others, Ubuntu has become an important relational term that helps me build a rapport with my students from Zambia. While I may not be the best model of it, for me it means that the classroom must have a strong relational component. My students not only want to receive the right information, but they also want to exist in the right relationship with the instructor and their classmates and course content. I found myself learning from them. Ubuntu has the potential to cross socioeconomic and cultural borders. I find myself thinking differently of my role as a teacher, the class dynamic, and my relationship with my students.

[1] Disclaimer: this does not mean that the class is unstructured or that there is no time limit for student assignments.

[2] John D. Volmink, "Ubuntu: Filosofía de vida y ética social," in *Construir puentes Ubuntu para el liderazgo de servicio*, edited by the Consortium of Building Bridges for Peace (Canterbury: ImPress, 2019): 45-66.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Paula E. Morton, *Tortillas: A Cultural History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014), 34-36, 138.

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