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A Speculative Synthesis of Ubuntu Pedagogy and Constructivism for Inclusive South African Higher Education

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Abstract

South Africa seeks to address transformation in education by wrestling with systemic issues such as unequal resource distribution, accessibility, and issues of social justice resulting from the country's colonial and apartheid histories. These legacies, in increasingly globalised contexts, have and continue to marginalise African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) and subjugate African academic perspectives. As such, South African higher education arguably remains rooted in overtly Eurocentric pedagogical practices and is predominantly underscored by constructivism in the 21st century. This article interrogates the responsiveness and relevance of these hegemonic approaches in the way they address the diverse needs of South African students and describes the potential of an AIKS framework as an approach to indigenous preservation. Ubuntu pedagogy, grounded in the indigenous African philosophy of Ubuntu, is not positioned in dialectical opposition to constructivism, nor as a sole alternative to existing Western approaches. Instead, the article critically compares and juxtaposes Ubuntu pedagogy with the constructivist teaching approach as it is currently operationalised in South African higher education. Outlining the synergies and divergences between these two perspectives allows for new lines of inquiry to be drawn, while also highlighting and contributing to the existing but limited body of knowledge that classifies Ubuntu as a possible contextually responsive approach to teaching and learning in the South African higher education landscape.

Keywords: Decolonisation, glocalisation, African Indigenous Knowledge systems, Ubuntu pedagogy, constructivism

Introduction

South Africa has a long and complex history that has undeniably shaped its current higher education landscape. This legacy is marked by inequality and a disregard for pre-colonial practices and African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS). After the establishment of democracy, there have been several significant attempts to democratise education and to challenge the dominant epistemological and pedagogical assumptions grounded in Western and Eurocentric thought. These challenges have been further compounded by the 21st century's international and transnational imperatives to standardise and homogenise education. In the face of educating an increasingly diverse nation of African students from multi-contextual backgrounds, timely and responsive reconsideration of curricula, teaching practices, and knowledge systems in ways that honour and affirm local identities and histories has never been more necessary. This article traces the historical conditions that have resulted in current educational challenges, as well as highlights and unpacks new challenges faced in an increasingly globalised knowledge economy. A conceptual argument is put forward that advocates for meaningful transformation and redress through hybridised approaches that integrate established Western pedagogies and indigenous, locally responsive and resonant approaches. The aims of this article are twofold. The first aim is to trace the historical conditions and their far-reaching effects in the formation of 21st-century education and its intention to cater to diverse student needs and backgrounds. The second aim is to compare and contrast Western and indigenous learning theories by way of a qualitative comparison between the

principles of Ubuntu pedagogy and constructivism, to understand how these teaching and learning theories may work together and augment one another in terms of the crafting of inclusive learning experiences for students from diverse backgrounds.

Methods

This article is a descriptive theoretical exploration of literature and is speculative in nature. It is situated within an interpretivist paradigm and employs strategies of hermeneutic inquiry to interpret existing literature in whole and in part to derive a deeper understanding of the phenomenon within its social, historical, and literary contexts. Hermeneutic inquiry itself is distinct from many other Western approaches to research insofar as it challenges the positivist notion of singular universal truth, arrived at through sterile and replicable scientific methods. Hermeneutic inquiry also prioritises subjective knowledge and situated understanding (Muganga, 2015). The authors propose that this can lend itself to deeply appreciating indigenous ways of knowing, being, and becoming when hermeneutic inquiry is undertaken through a non-Western lens. This forms the "local horizon" of meaning (Chughtai, 2023) from which the hermeneutic circle is entered within the context of this article.

Pre-1994: Disparate Histories in South African Education

The history of South African education before 1994 can be categorised into three distinct epochs: pre-colonial[1], colonial, and apartheid education (Beckmann, 2022). What follows is a brief overview of the character of each period, and its influence on the development of the South African educational landscape.

Indigenous education prevailed before the onset of formal and institutionalised education introduced by colonisation (Seroto, 2011). This pre-colonial education is predominantly characterised by the non-textual transfer of knowledge from older to younger generations within indigenous groups such as the Khoi, San, and Bantu-speaking communities. The vernacular character of pre-colonial education on the continent reflects the non-hegemonic ideas, beliefs and practices of different local groups through their uniquely lived and learning experiences, conveyed through oral traditions, rituals, apprenticeships, and social conventions (Onwuatuegwu & Paul-Mgbeafulike, 2023). It is exactly these attributes that are often collectively described as AIKS (Kaya & Seleti, 2013). These rich non-textual recollections and transfer of knowledge challenge traditional Western (scientific) notions and understanding of how knowledge is transferred. While not 'formalised' in the Western sense, it was collectively understood and upheld that care, custodianship and learning were the shared responsibilities of the entire community, and as such was deeply integrated into all aspects of social, cultural, artistic, spiritual, and recreational life (Seroto, 2011). Pre-colonial education was therefore, in purpose and delivery, holistic in nature and contextually responsive to ensure the development of social norms and moral values, laying the groundwork for character development, experiential learning, and participation within the community. These key competencies developed during this period hold relevance within contemporary education when combined with formalised education (Seroto, 2011).

Colonial education began in South Africa in the mid-17th century with the first formal school established by Jan van Riebeek in the Cape (Christie, 2006). The curriculum promoted Dutch language lessons and the cultivation of a 'Protestant work ethic'. The tenets of this first formalised curriculum became the hallmarks of education for Africans between 1658 and the early 1800's in the form of a concerted attempt to erase and subjugate indigenous knowledge, language and practices (Onwuatuegwu & Paul-Mgbeafulike, 2023). This devaluation was so extensive that the pre-colonial education landscape could be erroneously framed as a *tabula*

[1] The authors acknowledge that this phrasing may inadvertently centre colonial perspectives, particularly when discussing Africa prior to its colonial encounter. However, the phrasing has been retained to align with the established discourse consulted in the formulation of this article (see Christie, 2006; Seroto, 2011; Seroto & Higgs, 2024).

rasa before colonial intervention – a belief that is still widely perpetuated in Eurocentric accounts of educational history in Africa (Kaya & Seleti, 2013; Beckman, 2022). At the turn of the 19th century, British colonial rule extended formalised education to include free primary education to poorer white communities and missionary schools for black, coloured and Khoi individuals (Christie, 2006; Jansen, 1990). This would lay the groundwork for apartheid's formal systems of educational governance, which perpetuated racial and economic segregation.

In 1948, with the election of the National Party, a formal policy of apartheid was introduced to the Union of South Africa, which was at the time a self-governing dominion within the British Empire. While segregation had been rife during the colonial era, apartheid laws made these conditions even more stringent. The Bantu Education Act 47 of 1953 was enacted by the 'Queen of South Africa' (Queen Elizabeth of Great Britain) and the Union's Senate and House of Assembly (Beckmann, 2022). The act brought all education under the purview of the nationalist government, ending the relative autonomy of missionary schools serving black communities. Under the act, schools adopted racially discriminatory curricula intended to limit black South Africans' educational and economic prospects (Asmal & James, 2001). Additionally, funding and resources were disproportionately allocated to white schools, further entrenching separateness, systemic inequalities and perpetuating racial hierarchies (Kumar, 2018). These historic disparities have had long-reaching effects on the majority of South African students and remain palpable in the current education landscape.

1994-Now: A New Vision for Education in a New South Africa

The educational inheritance of the first democratically elected government in 1994 was one marked by a close to 400-year-old legacy of institutionalised and systemic inequality at every level of schooling. The South African education landscape was in dire need of redress, which became the cornerstone of educational policy across primary, secondary and tertiary education levels. For the purposes of this research, only the tertiary level will be addressed.

As early as 1995, just one year into the country's transition to democracy, the newly elected South African government established the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE). The NCHE was tasked with the challenge of creating frameworks and policies aimed at fundamentally restructuring the domain of higher education to a system that was more consistent with the democratic value of inclusivity, and the foundational ideals of the Constitution. To begin addressing this formidable task, the NCHE (Department of Education, 1996) identified several significant deficiencies in the higher education model inherited from the apartheid regime which included, among others: inequitable access and opportunities for staff and students, a misalignment between higher education outputs and the demands of a developing modern economy, a lack of responsiveness to the complex and contextual needs of diverse student bodies, and a tendency of formal education to compound and exacerbate social division along the lines of race, gender, class, and geography.

The Department of Education's (1996) *Green Paper on Higher Education Transformation* posed an open invitation to stakeholders, the general public, and interested parties to contribute to the formulation of a new, inclusive and democratic framework for higher education. After extensive consultation and investigation, the NCHE's efforts to address the above-mentioned deficiencies culminated in the release of the *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (Council on Higher Education, 1997), which outlined a comprehensive set of initiatives for the democratic and sustainable transformation of higher education within South Africa. Other policy and framework documents of this era with similar aims include the *Higher Education Act 101 of 1997* (Republic of South Africa, 1997), which intended to regulate and govern both public and private higher education in alignment with constitutional law, and the adoption of the *Indigenous Knowledge System Policy* (Department of Science and Technology, 2004) which sought to develop a progressive vision of higher education that:

affirms the value of African cultural values amidst rapid globalisation, promotes a positive African identity and unique knowledge perspectives, and supports the development of indigenous knowledge holders and practitioners. It is evident, both in content and in approach to their formulation, that these frameworks stand as the antithesis of the exclusive and discriminatory apartheid model of higher education. It is also evident that the legacy of apartheid and the current government's seeking to correct the deficiencies and imbalances left within the domain of higher education has, and continues to be, a core feature of the manner in which post-apartheid education is shaped, regulated, and promoted.

More recently, the notion of educational transformation and redress has extended beyond South Africa's apartheid history and into its colonial history as well. Discourse over the last decade increasingly centres on the notion of decolonisation in higher education, which has gained global attention as a result of the 2015-2016 student protests (Le Grange, 2018; Ajani & Simmonds, 2022). #RhodesMustFall started as a student-led movement at the University of Cape Town that demanded the removal of the statue of British colonist Cecil John Rhodes. While the statue was symbolic of discursive conversations around the country's colonial past, the movement quickly advanced to include protests which challenged broader issues of colonial legacies, Eurocentrism in education, and its impact on South African curriculum (le Grange, 2020; Hlatshwayo, 2023). Disparities in institutional structures, staffing and curriculum sparked a national conversation that inspired related movements like #FeesMustFall, which called for equitable access and decolonised education for all. These movements were strongly underpinned by a shift towards democratic ideals, including the progression of diversity and inclusivity in higher education (Hlatshwayo, 2023). The traction gained by these movements also marked a significant shift from a purely governmental drive (in the form of policymaking to serve as an antithesis to the country's contemporary education from the colonial and apartheid systems which preceded it), to a participatory civic drive pushed by ordinary students. What began as a protest intended to draw attention to inaccessible tertiary costs for marginalised youth, consequent movements provoked a paradigm shift, highlighting inequalities in higher education that transcend socio-economic barriers to include racial, linguistic, and cultural factors. These student-led efforts brought forward the need for the country and academy to consider higher education transformation strategies beyond measures taken as evidenced in policies, frameworks and governance. While attempts through policymaking have been made on these fronts, a notable lack of meaningful transformation is seemingly apparent in epistemological, theoretical, and pedagogical approaches around institutional culture and curriculum (Hlatshwayo, 2023).

Education at a Crossroads: A Tension Between Postcolonial and Neocolonial Futures

More than 30 years into democracy, the contemporary South African higher education landscape finds itself still grappling with issues of transformation and decolonisation. It is at this crucial inflection point that higher education finds itself attempting to reconcile two seemingly incompatible agendas. On one hand is the three-decade effort to mitigate colonial and Eurocentric legacies and philosophies (Ngubane & Makua, 2021) evident in contemporary curriculum design, academic policies, literature, and teaching – as well as learning practices that still ultimately marginalise a large portion of South African students and educators (Hlatshwayo, 2023). On the other hand, is the 21st century imperative to equip students to become "global citizens" as per the United Nations (2024) *Sustainable Development Goals.* Education aimed towards global citizenship focuses on developing transnational approaches to social, political, environmental, and economic action. Furthermore, it encourages individuals to view themselves and behave as though they "are members of multiple, diverse, local and non-local networks rather than single actors affecting isolated societies" (United Nations, 2024). This sentiment is compounded by economic and political concerns in the long, uncontested desire to enhance global competitiveness toward the advancement of national interests.

Intergovernmental organisations such as the United Nations, and specifically their

specialised agency, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), purport to advocate for cultural diversity, the protection and preservation of heritage, and decolonialisation efforts. Heritage in this context is often centred on tangible heritage, such as buildings and artefacts. Intangible heritage, such as cultural practices and indigenous knowledge, is acknowledged in UNESCO's *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* (2009), but the overarching primacy of the *Sustainable Development Goals* (UNESCO, 2015) make local practices of storytelling, performance, craft, and social learning subordinate to "global citizenship" principles – which includes Western notions of what constitutes a "quality education". In this way indigenous knowledge and philosophies from the Global South, such as Ubuntu, are pushed aside to further transnational goals. It can be argued that these actions are indicative of cultural imperialism enacted through the soft power of intergovernmental organisations, international law, and foreign policy. For example, South Africa – as a member state of the United Nations – has committed its efforts towards the achievement of the *Education 2030* (UNESCO, 2015) agenda and corresponding sustainable development goals and indicators. This commitment highlights not only an inherited reliance on Western pedagogies as well as teaching and learning approaches (Kumar, 2018), but a continued subjugation of uniquely African perspectives for the sake of international standardisation (Chabaya & Chabaya, 2023). While one could argue that universally standardised pedagogical approaches, such as those expressed in the *Sustainable Development Goals* (UNESCO, 2015) for education, prepare students for an increasingly internationalised lifeworld, a paradox arises between the Western modernity of education propelled by globalisation, and tangible action towards integrating diversity and the values of indigenous knowledge in academic thought (Nyoni, 2020).

The tension becomes evident: There exists a postcolonial mandate to become less reliant on Western pedagogies and educational tradition in favour of indigenous and contextually resonant approaches to knowledge creation and acquisition (Kaya & Seleti, 2013; Chabaya & Chabaya, 2023; Seroto & Higgs, 2024). Yet, there exists an arguably neocolonial drive towards globalization and universalising approaches to education that diminish the significance of contextuality and indigeneity (Pophiwa & Saidi, 2022). This leaves government policies, institutional debates and academic discourse with the task of attempting to make sense of, and enact meaningful change within South African higher education, which is itself at the intersection of these postcolonial and neocolonial contexts.

The Potential of Glocalisation

Glocalisation in education, the process through which students engage with global challenges through localised examples (Khondker, 2005; Niemczyk, 2019; Abrom, 2020), has been put forward as a potential strategy to integrate these seemingly incompatible agendas (Ajani & Gamede, 2021). Khondker (2005) posits that the following principles inform glocalisation: firstly, that diversity is essential and secondly, that globalisation does not necessarily require an erasure of difference and diversity. Glocalisation makes some attempt to acknowledge the unique experiences, history and culture of different groups, however, there exists a risk of these initiatives addressing and adding local content in a fairly superficial way. As such, superficial approaches to glocalisation that are based on standardisation, and only acknowledge local culture to remain profitable and efficient are not the glocalisation advocated for in this article. Instead, glocalisation should be viewed through a lens of social justice similar to the proposition put forward by Tagüeña (2008), in that the practice should ultimately achieve two primary ends. First, glocalisation should be an approach that equally addresses and blends global knowledge and local knowledge, while also respecting human rights. Second is the notion of a "glocal science advocacy strategy" (Niemczyk, 2019) whereby both global and local issues are addressed in learning through both global and local frameworks, forming a sense of connection and embedding the local within the global. While there currently exists no universal standard of glocal education practice, Niemczyk (2019, p. 13) advocates for an approach that seeks to achieve:

...local and global connections to maximize glocal consciousness. The concept can be understood in terms of a form of dual citizenship that comes with privileges and responsibilities. We are all citizens of a specific nation, as well as citizens of the world, sharing the same goal to understand and sustain the world in which we live. Glocal education is meant to provide the capacity to recognize oneself in the narrative of the interconnected world as well as local realities.

This article echoes these sentiments and proposes that carefully considered and sensitively implemented glocalisation strategies in education may go some way to address the tension between postcolonial and neocolonial agendas in South African higher education. This is, however, proposed with the caveat that a blended epistemological hybrid between Western approaches and AIKS must regard local knowledge and ways of knowing as an equal complement, rather than a nested or subordinate consideration.

Dominant Pedagogy in South African Higher Education: Constructivism

It is significant to note that constructivist pedagogy is not a monolith, but provides different perspectives (Schunk, 2020). For example, Piaget's constructivism prioritises cognitive processes, mental schema and language, whereas Vygotsky's constructivism grants primacy to social interaction. Exogenous constructivism asserts that knowledge is a mental reconstruction of the external world resulting from engagement and direct experience. In contrast, endogenous constructivism positions knowledge as a series of abstractions that emerge from, or are scaffolded upon, prior understanding. Dialectical constructivism draws on both exogenous and endogenous approaches by suggesting that knowledge is born out of the dynamic interplay between both the external environment and pre-existing inner mental architectures (Schunk, 2020).

For the sake of brevity, this article posits constructivism as a predominantly Western pedagogical cluster of theories and approaches that are underlyingly unified by the following characteristics and epistemological assumptions: First, learning occurs in relation to differing degrees of both external and internal factors such as social relationships, the environment, and internal cognitive processes. Second, the notion of situated cognition frames learning as inseparable from the social, cultural, and physical context in which learning occurs. The unique context coupled with the lived experiences of different students is significant in terms of prior knowledge and frames of reference towards meaning and sense making that is subjective in nature. Third, knowledge construction is an active and participatory process of continuous inquiry, exploration and discovery. As such, learning should be student-centred, providing opportunity for direct experience, collaboration and self-regulation. Finally, self-reflection is designated as absolutely essential to both teaching and learning processes within constructivist learning theory.

As of 2025, one of the most widely adopted learning theories in South African higher education is constructivism. This is evident in both explicit and implicit statements made by several public and private higher education institutions. Table 1 (see Appendix A) is a representative sample of five top ranked South African public universities based on Webometrics' (BusinessTech, 2025) global rankings, as well as two of the largest private higher education institutions in South Africa. All statements on each institution's guiding, teaching, and learning principles are extracted from publicly available information on each institution's website. The authors of this article acknowledge that the application of learning theories in specific courses may not align to the purported approaches by universities.

Based on these sentiments expressed by different and highly ranked higher education institutions in South Africa, it becomes apparent that constructivist principles are rife in descriptions of contemporary teaching and learning practices, as well as the manner in which these various educational institutions situate their values and mission. There is also a noteworthy similarity between the local higher education institutions' aims and the global aims described in the United Nations' *Sustainable Development*

Goal Four and the *Education 2030* (UNESCO, 2015) framework. Every single higher education institution included in Table 1 expresses educational values and ambitions beyond the simple transfer of knowledge and skill mastery. Instead, educational approaches that demonstrate awareness and responsiveness to diverse and interconnected contextual factors are emphasised. Education is largely posited as a means to address complex societal issues, which places education and society in a functional relationship to one another. This is particularly well aligned with the social, political, environmental, and economic ideals that global citizenship education strives towards. Additionally, most institutions also recognise student autonomy as a necessary condition for meaningful and authentic learning to occur. Empowerment and active engagement with direct experiences are therefore highlighted.

This article puts forward the suggestion that the prevalence of constructivist teaching and learning principles in South African higher education provides a fertile ground upon which to advocate for a holistically integrated and glocalised approach to the AIKS of Ubuntu pedagogy.

Ubuntu Pedagogy

Throughout this article it has been illustrated that AIKS have been and continue to be subordinated to Western pedagogies (Chabaya & Chabaya, 2023), often in service of non-local social, political and economic agendas. The notion of glocalisation has been presented as an opportunity to combine established Western teaching and learning strategies with the often-overlooked potential of more contextual and localised ways of knowing, affording equitable consideration and gravitas to both. As such, the African philosophy of Ubuntu, and its pedagogical implications, are put forward as a powerful counterpart to constructivism.

Ubuntu, described as an African way of knowing, encapsulates an understanding of what it means to be human – emphasising compassion, interconnectedness, love and respect (Ngubane & Makua, 2021; Mathebula & Martinez-Vergas, 2023; Mkosi, Mavuso & Olawumi, 2023; Mangwegape, 2024). Rooted in African traditional society, Ubuntu represents a set of values and principles that affirms human-centredness, where the sense of self and individual identity is shaped through social connections within the community and relationships with others. At the heart of Ubuntu lies the expression, "I am because we are" (Letseka, 2000, as cited in Mangwegape, 2024). The essence of this well-known saying is the intrinsic link between individual well-being and the collective physical, mental and spiritual prosperity of the community. In this way, Ubuntu is built on an ontological assumption that personhood is relational in nature. Within this paradigm, the realities of individuals are not seen in isolation, but as part of a broader, interwoven, and interconnected social fabric.

It is exactly Ubuntu's emphasis on connectedness and reciprocity that makes it an ideal complement to constructivism's centring of student autonomy and subjectivity. Ubuntu, within an education context, resonates with, and amplifies the potential of South Africa's diverse and pluralistic society. Ubuntu offers a framework that recognises and values social, racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity as common aspects to learning (Mangwegape, 2024). Rather than framing diversity as a challenge or barrier to be overcome in the pursuit of learning, Ubuntu posits these differences as essential contributors towards more enriched and holistic learning experiences. Mangwegape (2024) extends this argument by articulating the core principles of Ubuntu which embrace African values of solidarity, cohesion, respect, and collaboration. When applied pedagogically, these principles foster a learning environment where knowledge construction and the development of values and attitudes are deeply relational. Learning is driven by interactive and social engagement between students and educators, where both parties assume responsibility for each other's enrichment and development (Ngubane & Makua, 2021).

At this point, it is significant to make a distinction between the philosophical foundations of Ubuntu and its pedagogical applications and implications, in order to avoid using these terms interchangeably, which may lead to conceptual ambiguity. Ubuntu pedagogy, which stems from the Ubuntu philosophy, can be understood as an

approach to teaching and learning that embodies the philosophy's core values. Applied, Ubuntu pedagogy promotes an inclusive, community-orientated learning environment grounded in an axiology of compassion, empathy, mutual respect and humanity. As a humanising approach, Ubuntu pedagogy encourages democratic engagement in the class, where hierarchical structures are softened (but not foregone), by the recognition of co-learning through social engagement (Mangwegape, 2024).

While there is no single, universally accepted definition for Ubuntu pedagogy, several scholars have conceptualised it in ways that reflect its adaptable and context-dependent nature. Bangura (2005), considered one of the pioneers of 'Ubuntugogy', repositions Ubuntu pedagogy as an epistemological framework that integrates AIKS and values through the humanisation of education. Another notable example is that of Le Grange (2014), who through the study of postcolonial curriculum and institutional transformation efforts, conceptualised the notion of *Ubuntu Currere*. In his conceptualisation, *currere*, which is the Latin etymological root for the word curriculum, is integrated with Ubuntu values, placing emphasis on students' collective and cooperative learning experience. *Ubuntu Currere* reimagines curriculum as a human-centred journey – where student identities, lived realities, and socio-cultural backgrounds are deeply embedded within pedagogical decisions (Hlatshwayo, Shawa & Nxumalo, 2020). In essence, Ubuntu pedagogy reflects a proposal to educational practices that humanises learning, fosters collaboration, and recognises diversity not as a challenge, but as a valuable dimension of knowledge construction.

Rooting pedagogical strategies in Ubuntu principles holds the potential for South African higher education institutions to better and more meaningfully respond to the complexities of student diversity, pluralistic student contexts and the advancement of social transformation. Ubuntu pedagogy is constituted of six foundational principles (Mangwegape, 2024; Ngubane & Makua, 2021) which could offer actionable guidelines towards a transformative and authentically African approach to education. These six principles are: Understanding of self and others; Building positive relationships; Collaborative and cooperative working and learning; Nurturing student minds; Acknowledgement of student diverse languages; and Teaching from a place of compassion, love and empathy.

A Synthesis of Ubuntu and Constructivism

In the discussion that follows, the six foundational principles of Ubuntu pedagogy are presented, as well as compared and contrasted with principles of constructivist pedagogy. Instances of overlap and similarity provide a convenient entry point to integrating more African perspectives into well-established teaching and learning practices. In instances of difference or deficiency, these two approaches are not framed in opposition to one another but rather unpacked to establish how they may augment and strengthen each other to form a robust and dynamic synthesis of teaching and learning strategies.

***Understanding of self and others*:** Ubuntu pedagogy values social interaction among students as a central component of the teaching and learning process. From an African epistemological perspective, the formation of identity and a sense of belonging is embedded in the individual's relationship with the broader community (Mathebula & Martinez-Vergas, 2023). This approach suggests that through collaborative learning and shared engagement, students not only construct knowledge collectively, but also gain deeper insight into their own understanding and areas of uncertainty when interacting with others. Within constructivist learning, self-reflective practice is paramount to the learning process. Educators and/or facilitators, as well as students are required to reflect on past experiences, their motivations, as well as their self-evaluation of current learning to allow for the internalisation and formation of new connections, which is then scaffolded on prior knowledge (Ertmer & Newby, 2013). Because self-reflection is inherently an introspective activity, it encourages deeper understanding of oneself and heightened self-awareness. In contrast, a deepened understanding of others is not as strongly emphasised in constructivist teaching and learning approaches. The 'Other' is framed more in relation to the

possibility of learning through social interaction, rather than in the notion of empathy. This is a deficiency to which Ubuntu pedagogical perspectives offer remediation.

***Building positive relationships*:** The notion of peaceful and harmonious coexistence is integral to the Ubuntu philosophy. This principle is closely intertwined with the development of individual identity which emerges through social interaction within the community and fosters a sense of belonging. Groenewald (2023) posits this development as the dialectic tension between the inner and outer identities. Teaching and learning, anchored by this principle, fosters a collaborative and respectful learning environment, promoting a shared sense of purpose and mutual regard (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Effective learning is unlikely to occur in educational settings marked by relational conflict or disruption. Ubuntu pedagogy advocates for improved interpersonal relationships that build on developing tolerances for diverse contextual backgrounds, learning needs, and knowledge. While the concept of positive relationships between individuals in learning contexts is not explicitly addressed in traditional constructivist learning theories, it is to some extent alluded to. Vygotsky's (1978) *Zone of Proximal Development* suggests that individuals are able to internalise knowledge and achieve more, more rapidly, with the guidance of another individual or group with more knowledge or experience (Huang, 2021). This concept asserts that individual knowledge is ultimately scaffolded upon social dimensions of learning through social interaction. As the learning environment is a socially mediated one, it is imperative that it is viewed as a space that can only exist through conditions of respect and sensitivity. Ubuntu, in this case, provides an affective and relational lens through which to ensure social and environmental conditions as well as to support the transfer and construction of knowledge. Additionally, there is a link between this principle of Ubuntu and one of the United Nations (2025) global citizenship educational targets, which is described as "education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence", demonstrating the potential for Ubuntu pedagogy to serve as a meaningful complement to constructivism, as well as to integrate and glocalise transnational aspirations.

***Collaborative and cooperative learning and working*:** Collaborative learning is a key construct in engaged learning and promotes unity and the pursuit of common goals. As such, within a truly democratic class, the creation of equal opportunities for all is prioritised to ensure that all individual voices and contributions are heard and valued. Similar to communal life, collaborative work positions each individual's contribution as vital to solving educational problems and challenges. The collective is emphasised, reflecting the foundational value of respect, where knowledge sharing is positioned as a mutually enriching process. Once again, from an African perspective, this ethos is conveyed through the expression described by Ngubane and Makua (2021): "I know because you know, and I give you what I know so that you can give me what you know in return." Reflecting the reciprocal, mutually beneficial nature of learning, understanding is co-created through interdependence and shared responsibility. This principle finds a near perfect mirror in constructivism's emphasis on cooperative and collaborative learning, in which facilitated opportunities allow for students to become actively involved in learning through engagement with content, the environment, and social interaction with peers and mentors. Collaborative learning efforts should be augmented and consolidated with Ubuntu practices of introspection, self-regulation and self-reflection, ideally allowing each student to arrive at a deepened understanding of themselves, others, and the environments they share.

***Nurturing of student minds*:** The Ubuntu pedagogy encourages participatory and interactive learning. In 21st century contexts this may look like interaction through quizzes, collaborative discussion forums or even blog posts, all aimed at promoting active student engagement. In a learning environment that promotes an Ubuntu pedagogy, students are encouraged to inquire, debate, discuss and share their understanding with one another and their lecturers. The learning environment should promote psychological safety, ensuring students feel comfortable with making

mistakes, expressing gaps in their knowledge, and engaging openly with their peers and lecturer. Similarly, the concept of nurture in constructivist pedagogy is approached pragmatically. Ideally, educators should nurture students' inherent curiosity by facilitating learning through exploratory and inquiry-based learning.

***Acknowledgment of diverse student languages*:** With eleven official languages, the South African educational landscape accounts for a diverse student body (Groenewald, 2023). Yet despite the country's multilingual reality, educational institutions remain monolingual in their language of instruction (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). In mainstream South African higher education, the language used is English. As such, a barrier to teaching and learning arises where students are expected to engage, interact, and perform in a language that is a second (or even third) language. This reality highlights the need to recognise multilingual teaching and learning. Embracing the diversity in students' linguistic resources affirms their identity and dignity, and enhances learning (Mangwegape, 2024). Furthermore, Mangwegape (2024) calls for the adoption of translanguaging as an application of this Ubuntu principle to embrace students of all backgrounds, resulting in the implementation of a transformative pedagogy. Constructivism, particularly Vygotsky's social constructivism, demonstrates an awareness of the significance of language in the learning process. Language is typically framed as a constituent element of the environment alongside cultural objects, symbols, and social practices (Schunk, 2020). It is arguable that within constructivist pedagogy, the term language is thought of as a shared system of meaning, rather than a reference to a specific dialect or set of vocabulary. However, in a pragmatic sense it is fundamental to consider language diversity of students within a particular context and the teaching and learning implications. For example, different languages may have different words or lack certain words to express a given concept. This has significant implications as to whether students are able to access, contextualise, and scaffold new or unfamiliar concepts. Under the principle of language, Ubuntu points to the practical concerns of language that must be considered for fair and equitable learning. On the other hand, constructivism offers an alternative possibility for how information can be shared and processed, an example being multimodal approaches, demonstrating a potentially symbiotic relationship between Ubuntu and constructivism within this particular domain.

***Teaching from a place of compassion, love and empathy*:** Teaching has the potential to more deeply connect with and inspire students, if delivered from a place of love, empathy and kindness, and solidarity (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). The love described within this framework, is the love for oneself, for others, and for one's profession. The development of this holistic value can have a positive impact on the student experience, and when coupled with strategies to increase engagement and student confidence, teaching from a place of love and kindness fosters a psychologically safe environment in which students can thrive. In addition, the demonstration of empathy by what is perceived as an authoritative figure, further encourages students to be kind and compassionate – developing their global competency skills. While constructivism holds some relational values, these qualities are rarely articulated or encouraged within contemporary constructivist teaching and learning discourse. Capacities such as compassion, love, and empathy are not explicitly advocated for by constructivism. This is perhaps the most divergent characteristic between constructivist and Ubuntu pedagogy, and this article argues, potentially the realm in which a blended approach to integrating Ubuntu principles can make the most significant difference. Honouring and actioning a pedagogical practice of compassion, love and empathy is a profoundly human way to reframe the purpose and delivery of education. Ngubane and Gumede (2018) extend the conceptualisation of Ubuntu from pedagogy to moral theory, suggesting that Ubuntu implores humans to consider how their humanity is shaped by their interactions with others. Within this framing, divisions – whether they be hierarchical, contextual or cultural – are dissolved into a single recognition of the notion of humanity and solidarity between educator, students and peers (Mthimkhulu, 2024). By leveraging this indigenous inheritance, Ubuntu pedagogy has the potential to assist educators in designing teaching that fosters an inclusive,

supportive and conducive environment that promotes learning among students that extends beyond curriculum objectives and national or transnational targets. Humanness becomes paramount and the continual process of becoming a more well-integrated and holistically developed human, in relation to others and the environment. Through this frame, Ubuntu pedagogy extends the opportunity for South African higher education to move from being student-centred and performance-driven in order to compete globally, to becoming truly human-centred and empathy-driven to thrive and prosper glocally.

Limitations and Recommendations

As this article is a descriptive theoretical exploration of literature and is speculative in nature, a lack of empirical research on how these combined approaches may function practically in diverse classroom contexts is acknowledged as a limitation. A potential avenue for future research is to conduct case studies or precedent studies on how a blending of these pedagogical approaches are integrated in higher education contexts to better understand their practical implications and efficacy. This article is also limited insofar as it has only drawn a comparison between Ubuntu pedagogy and constructivism. While this revealed significant areas of overlap and similarity it is not evident that this compatibility would be the case with all comparisons to Western pedagogical frameworks such as Behaviourism or Information Processing Theory. Similarly, Ubuntu is only one AIKS. A recommendation for further research locally is to attempt similar comparisons with other, similar systems such as Botho or Ukama philosophies. Internationally, this could be extended to relevant indigenous knowledge stemming from other national contexts and in relation to the unique and diverse needs of those nations' students.

Additionally, due to scope limitations, this article has not considered the role and implications of digital technology in the privileging of Western knowledge, nor the potential of digital technologies to serve as a conduit for making indigenous knowledge more accessible within educational contexts. As almost all the higher education institutions reviewed in this article made some allusion to the significance of technology in formulating their vision, purpose, teaching, and learning guidelines, this appears to be a promising and necessary path for further scholarly exploration.

Conclusion

This article details how the history of colonisation and apartheid has significantly shaped the current educational landscape of South Africa. Despite national efforts to distance education from these colonial and apartheid histories, as well as efforts to preserve cultural heritage in a world now oriented towards transnational, dominant pedagogical approaches that remain rooted in Western teaching and learning theories such as constructivism continue to persist. This is evident through analysis of public and private higher education institution statements in South Africa, and it is highlighted that these approaches may not be entirely suitable for the complex needs and environmental circumstances of students from diverse racial, cultural, linguistic, religious, socio-economic, and ethnic groups pursuing higher education in South Africa. However, despite the potential limitations of these approaches to resonate with all students, they are proliferated in pursuit of efficiency, standardisation and cooperation with international and transnational agendas which have the potential to be framed as neocolonial insofar as they are hegemonic in nature. This is not to say that Western pedagogic frameworks hold no value, nor is it to say they should be disregarded entirely. Instead, the article turns its attention to neglected pre-colonial and AIKS to consider their relevance to both contemporary South African education in combination with Western frameworks such as constructivist teaching and learning theories and practices. The argument put forward is informed by six core principles of Ubuntu pedagogy and these principles are compared and contrasted with principles of constructivism to reveal intersections, overlaps and divergences.

The most noteworthy point of divergence is in the humanising, relational and emotional dimensions of learning that are fully embraced by Ubuntu philosophy and its pedagogic expression and often neglected or suppressed within

constructivism. It is hoped that this insight may serve as a starting point towards a truly inclusive and contextually responsive education system that demonstrates parity in combining of Western and African pedagogical approaches, instead of privileging one over the other to the detriment of holistic and integrated student development. A meaningful and integrated vision of glocalised education for South African students would hold space for students to learn and grow in ways that affirm and honour their diverse cultures, heritages, and gifts while also preparing them to navigate an increasingly globalised and interconnected world as thoughtful, empathic and responsible global citizens.

Disclosures

AI use

We hereby declare that no Generative AI was used in the formulation of the article. All authors have approved the final article.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests

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Appendix A: Table 1 - Constructivist Principles in Higher Education Institution's Statements on Teaching and Learning.

Higher Education Institution	Statement on Institution's Guiding principles of Teaching and Learning	Discernible Constructivist Principles and/or Characteristics (Schunk, 2020)
University of Cape Town (2025)	*"To unleash students' potential through education to be resilient agents of change for themselves and in society.* *We do this by offering innovative curriculum at the cutting edge of disciplines and professions, facilitating*	Self-Regulation Active Learning Contextualised Learning Inquiry-based Learning

	students' engagement with their own learning, offering socially engaged curriculum and top-end digitally enabled education at undergraduate, postgraduate and continuous education levels. *UCT aims to be distinctive by developing graduate attributes focused on the self, the community, and the world; supporting success and excellence (through student support, academic support, learning analytics, etc.); and providing problem-based education in authentic contexts where appropriate."*	
University of the Witwatersrand (2025)	*"The six 2025-2029 Learning and Teaching focus areas are:* *1. Empowering students as self-directed students* *2. Supporting and recognising university teachers* *3. Enhancing the environment for teaching and student learning* *4. Driving curriculum design for student engagement and lifelong learning* *5. Harnessing technology to promote learning* *6. Strengthening data driven student success."*	Self-Regulation Active Learning Contextualised Learning Situated Cognition Inquiry-based Learning
University of Pretoria (2025)	*"Our teaching and learning approach is based on inquiry-based, hybrid, and community-based learning. This means that students can ask questions and do research in their field to learn and discover answers on their own, be taught in a classroom or other formal contact environment but also find additional activities, notes, resources and videos to supplement their classes online; or apply their knowledge in a practical way to help communities around university campuses.* *The University's approach to learning theory posits that students actively construct their knowledge and understandings, which is best achieved through engagement in class using inquiry-based teaching. A flipped teaching approach, requiring students to prepare before class, allows new teaching to build upon existing knowledge actively. This creates more time in class for inquiry-based activities, such as developing ideas, exploring consequences, justifying solutions, discussions, and problem-solving, while lecturers can focus on complex concepts and problems. The inquiry-based flip approach is applicable across different instructional modalities.* *The University's flipped learning model is divided into three phases of teaching and learning:* *(a) preparation before class,* *(b) engagement in class, and* *(c) consolidation after class."*	Inquiry-based Learning Contextualised Learning Situated Cognition Student-centredness Active Learning Scaffolding Knowledge Reflective Practice
Stellenbosch University (2025)	*"Principles underpinning quality TLA at SU:* *1. Teaching, learning and assessment are seen as distinct but symbiotic aspects of the same pedagogic process that forms part of all SU's credit-bearing academic offerings.* *2. Students' engagement with, and responsibility for, their own learning is a fundamental aspect of the learning-centred approach to TLA.*	Self-Regulation Active Learning Inquiry-based Learning Student-centredness Contextualised Learning

	3. *All SU programmatic offerings contribute to transformative learning experiences aimed at students' holistic growth through the integration of the University's graduate attributes.* 4. *Teaching, learning and assessment are professional activities that require professional learning by academics to be equipped for their TLA role, and are supported by the scholarship of teaching and learning, and of assessment.* 5. *The University has a responsibility to provide equitable opportunities to all students to complete their studies and achieve the required learning outcomes.* 6. *All undergraduate curricula introduce students to relevant research skills and cutting-edge disciplinary knowledge.* 7. *Where feasible, all credit-bearing offerings at SU should be digitally enabled and presented on a continuum from a blended in-person to a hybrid mode of provision for all students."*	
University of Johannesburg (2025)	*"The University of Johannesburg's (UJ) strategic directions are encapsulated in its Strategic Plan 2025, the current version of which covers the years 2014-2025. While its six strategic objectives span a wide range of areas of activity, Strategic Objective Two focuses on achieving excellence in teaching and learning. More specifically, this means contributing to the increasing stature of the University through becoming recognised for offering quality higher education programmes to a large and diverse study body. Attention to curriculum renewal ensures that its programmes are relevant in terms of the socioeconomic context of South Africa, and that they prepare graduates adequately for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR)."*	Contextualised Learning
The Independent Institute of Education	*"We entrust individuals to take responsibility for their learning and development while providing them with appropriate support to enhance their success. We value a transformative mindset characterised by 'change', (an acronym for the below concepts):* *Co-creation: Collaboratively pursuing knowledge that transforms individuals and society.* *Holistic thinking: Approaching challenges from a systemic viewpoint acknowledging the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of all the parts.* *Advocacy: Championing meaningful, positive, and sustainable change ethically and mindfully.* *Nation building: Promoting social cohesion that celebrates and embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion.* *Grit: Navigating challenges that accompany learning and transformative change with passion, perseverance, and resilience.* *Empowerment: Enabling individuals to participate actively in shaping their own lives and the world around them.* *These characteristics collectively form a transformative mindset that embraces change, innovation, and growth, while empowering individuals and communities to create*	Self-Regulation Student-centredness Active and Collaborative Learning Situated Cognition Contextualised Learning Inquiry-based Learning

	positive and lasting change in society."	
STADIO	*"...our mantra, "students at the centre, learning at the core", guides us toward the following primary aims: learning optimisation and the achievement of student success, learning enhancement and student support, and mental health and optimal wellness.* *Goal One, which is to widen access in line with the National Agenda and STADIO's mission aims to make learning more accessible to all students, particularly within the complexities of the South African context ... Goal two, which is to respond to the needs of industry and the 21st century, ensuring graduate relevance and employability for the world-of-work, includes the establishment of a Centre for Student Success (C4SS) on each Contact Learning (CL) campus where Work Readiness and Work integrated Learning will be the focus areas ... Goal three aims to integrate the values of student-centredness, and realising the STADIO commitment to "students at the centre, learning at the core" ... Goal four, which is to harness technology and leading practices to promote a culture of quality teaching focuses on the establishment of a reading lab within the C4SS that will offer individual support for reading and writing skills, as well as remediating strategies for reading and writing skills."*	Self-Regulation Student-centredness Contextualised Learning Situated Cognition Active Learning