

A Blended Approach to Community Involved Education for the Wellbeing of Society

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Abstract

This paper aims to look at the different layers of meanings of the concept of community, the role communities play in enhancing education and how this serves the overall wellbeing of societies. Given the complex challenges that are endemic to our globalized society such as climate change, intercontinental mass migration, and the consequences of technological progress, scholars such as Torres (2017) acknowledge that the modern structured education alone cannot solve these problems. Furthermore Hordern (2018) argues that specialized forms of knowledge need to be considered alongside non-specialized local knowledge. This paper argues that there are lessons to learn from small-scale, kinship and neighborhood-based community education. If, as Dewey (1916) argued, students who are able to learn within their communities make noticeable contributions to the wellbeing of their societies and improve themselves, then it does make sense that this approach is brought into on-going conversation with modern classroom based competitive education. The result would be a blended approach which has the benefit of holding the modern structured education through the classroom together with the traditional small-scale unstructured community-based education in a hybrid blended approach. The authors of this paper will use lived experiences of African traditional societies and European modern structured classroom education together with a substantial review of the literature available in this field. Instead of holding the modern classroom structured education as an enemy of the traditional community-based education (Freire, 1970) this paper will suggest a new framework which reconciles the two.

Keywords: Community-Based Education, Community Involved Education, Blended Learning, Structured Education, Hybrid Education Approach

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Introduction

The power of community is being eroded as people become more and more individualistic. As noted by Block (2018), ‘the need to create a structure of belonging grows out of the isolated nature of our lives, our institutions, and our communities. The absence of belonging is so widespread that we might say we are living in an age of isolation, imitating the lament from early in the last century, when life was referred to as the age of anxiety.’ With this in mind there is a need to clarify what we mean by community.

A community can be described in a number of ways and we will unpack these in section 2 of the paper. It has also been evidenced that people can belong to multiple communities. Furthermore, given the complex challenges that are endemic to our globalized society such as climate change, intercontinental mass migration, and the consequences of technological progress (e.g. Delanty, 2003) calls on those delivering public services such as education to make sure that those who are being educated gain a fully rounded educational experience integrating community.

There is a plethora of methods and techniques for educating societies and most of these depend on context, time, money, age, and resources. In traditional non-advanced societies such as some parts of Africa education is locally administered and responds to local needs. In globalized and developed societies education tends to respond to the needs and competition of a globalized society.

There is a need to look again at the kind of education that is given to today’s generations and reassess imbalances between the structured classroom-based education and traditional more informal education. These two are sometimes presented as enemies when they can complement each other for the benefit of educators, learners and the whole community. This paper will review the concept of community and the role communities play in enhancing education of their people. It will also discuss different experiences of community involved education in both the African indigenous context and the British educational setting, and it will put forward a framework for a blended approach to community involved education for the wellbeing of society.

Definitions of Community

Community is a complex concept. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2023), community is defined as ‘the people living in one particular area or people who are considered as a unit because of their common interests, social group, or nationality’. Merriam Webster Dictionary (2023) defines community simply (and broadly) as a unified body of individuals. For Chavis and Lee (2015) a community is not a place, not a building nor an organization, but the people. They argue that people live in multiple communities which have formal and informal ways of organizing themselves. These communities have the capacity to educate their members, to learn from each other and contribute to the wellbeing of the wider society. On the other hand, as Anthony Achi (2021) contends, it is true that people are born ‘into a community whose survival and purpose are linked with that of every single member of that community’. As such, every human being is first and foremost a member of a community.

For many centuries, classroom education has been promoted as the primary method of education. There has been a lack of recognition of the value of what happens outside of the

classroom. This lack of recognition has motivated some scholars into advocating community-based learning, which has also been referred to as community-based education in which 'each shares their experience, - listens to, and learns from, the others' (Hope and Timmel, 1984, book 1, p.10). They argue that 'students will be more interested in the subjects and concepts being taught, and they will be more inspired to learn, if academic study is connected to concepts, issues, and contexts that are more familiar, understandable, accessible, or personally relevant to them' (Hope and Timmel, 1984).

One of the key features of this approach is that the community is used as the classroom; and is rooted in the belief that all communities have intrinsic educational assets and resources that educators can use to enhance learning experiences for students. In such settings educators can improve knowledge retention, skill acquisition, and preparation for students by giving them opportunities to apply learning in practical, real-life experiences and issues.

Comparisons Between Community Involved Education and Classroom Structured Education

Most of the time when one speaks about education, we mean a period of formal classroom structured education; mostly classroom based (whether face-to-face or online) with an educator/s who knows the subject and the students who are there to be taught. In this mode of teaching, Paulo Freire (1985, p.54-55) noted that 'the educator's maximally systematized knowing and the learner's minimally systematized knowing'. He suggests that in this 'banking education', teachers talk and pass on information and pupils 'sit and listen quietly and passively' (Hope and Timmel, 1984, book 2, p.49). However, in latter years problem-based learning has come more to the forefront of advanced educational methodologies and the benefits of such are well known (e.g. Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2004).

However African indigenous communities had and still have their own way of educating their people (e.g. Achi, 2021). For instance, every aspect of life from ploughing the fields, building living accommodation, making clothes and indeed the very essence of morality is bound up in community education. Meaning that the skills and knowledge are passed on from generation to generation mostly informally. This education prepared young minds for their responsibilities once adults in their communities. As Cameron and Dodd (1970) argue, the strength of this method lies in the fact that it 'was a native, locally developed lifelong process of learning, with well-defined goals, structures, content, and methods, through which cultural values, skills, norms, and heritage were transmitted by the older and more experienced members of society from one generation to another to help individuals be integrated into the society.' They further assert that although at the end of such an education, graduands didn't sit final exams, nor were awarded certificates or diplomas, they graduated ceremoniously and were considered graduates by the society; not because they had papers to show, but because they were able to do what they had graduated in.' In this way communities made sure once adults these people did what the community expected of them.

Unlike in traditional communities where learning is happening in communities and in informal settings, the structured education has the classroom as its base with a clear demarcation between educators and students and with a beginning and an end point with conferring awards depending on the educational stage. As evidence has shown, classroom structured education has enabled communities to pull themselves out of illiteracy and equip their people with skills needed in today's global connected communities. The argument in this paper is that classroom structured education needs to be valued and recognised; it is

irreplaceable and is here to stay. But one needs also to acknowledge that when it is blended with the traditional community-based education, results are overwhelmingly better. If for example as Dewey (1916) argued, students who can learn within their communities make noticeable contributions to the wellbeing of their societies and improve themselves, then it does make sense that this approach is brought into on-going conversation with modern classroom based competitive education. Moreover Torres (2017) argues that modern structured education alone cannot solve the complex problems which we find within 21st century societies.

For some time, educationalists have argued for a more interactive model of learning which recognizes not only that knowledge is not only limited to the classroom, but also flows both ways between the educator and the students. For Paulo Freire (1985, p.177) ‘the very practice of teaching involves learning on the part of those who are teaching, as well as learning, or relearning, on the part of those who teach.’ The implication of this is that the gap between the educator and the student diminishes.

A Case Study of a Fully Integrated Community Involved Education

The Queens Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education (Birmingham UK), a training institution for Anglican, Methodist and Pentecostal clergy has been using a form of community involved blended learning for a number of years.

The education is delivered in six blended formats:

- The daily sharing of food and conversations between all year groups and members of staff, together with daily worship help to foster a learning community.
- Classroom structured delivery through assessed modules where tutors are responsible for designing and delivering the material and facilitating classroom discussions.
- From the outset each student is given a Link church where they are paired with another experienced clergy for the whole period of their training. The student practically and closely observes what is going on in the church, has opportunities to ask questions and reflect on what they see. They meet regularly with the clergy they are paired with. In this way the congregation and the parish become another classroom. Link church clergy meet with members of staff at the Queens Foundation once a year to discuss and feedback into the experience of training.
- Each student is given a six-week placement period working in a context similar to the one they will face when they finish their education. Again, they are working alongside and sharing some responsibilities with an experienced practitioner. At the end of this period the students produce a portfolio in which they describe the context they have been working with, they carefully choose the themes emerging from that description and then intellectually reflect on them.
- Students’ partners are involved in the life of the community either through worship and food as well as through meetings with tutors to discuss their experience of accompanying their partners on the education and vocational journey.
- Cultural education exchanges take place where students travel to other educational institutions overseas and live there for a number of weeks with a reciprocal arrangement to follow.

Although many other higher education institutions integrate a number of these elements into their educational programs, such as work placements, Queens has a fully integrated and lived experience of integrating community into the heart of its learning and teaching.

The blending of these modes of education aims at bringing together the theoretical knowledge in the classroom structured education and integrate it into the real issues/concerns of the contexts in which their institutions are set and grapple with on a daily basis. The result is an education that is relevant and responds to the community's problems and concerns. The other key advantage of this blended approach is that students are formed and trained by the whole community – the training institution, the local and regional church and indeed the national and international church which does input in what is happening in all those areas.

Other benefits of the blended community involved approach include the fact that all stakeholders take ownership and feedback into its evaluation and improvement. Communities are encouraged to own the kind of education that is taking place; and if there are areas which need to improve or change, they have opportunities to influence what happens next. This requires those who design curriculum to be willing and open to other people contributing to the thinking, design, and implementation of what is to be taught. However, if there is already a problem of an 'elitism' gap between educators and students, (Freire, 1985, p.177) then it would be important that this new approach will need humility from the 'experts' and academics.

Furthermore, since all those involved will not be paid in monetary terms, this blended approach will result in less monetarization of education. This can be a positive thing as well as a challenge as traditional universities will want to achieve maximization of profits as one of their aims. On the other hand, this may lead to universities taking more revenues but being able to value more those other stakeholders who deliver education alongside them.

A Framework for a Blended Approach to Community Involved Education

Figure 1 shows the framework put forward for a blended approach to community involved education for the well-being of society. Blended in this context is different to blended learning that is used to mean online and physical teaching.

The ingredients of the fabric of the community join hands with what happens in the classroom and in a blended integrated way they make the cog that is educational learning turn. The use of cogs by the authors of this paper is intentional. It aims to illustrate the fact that the learning that is provided in and by the community is as important as that offered in the classroom. The blending is done by several things, each providing a learning relationship in which educators and students learn together. As said earlier in this paper, the gap between the educator who knows, and the student who does not know or knows little disappears. In mentoring for instance, although an experienced person takes somebody less experienced under their wing, providing advice and guidance does not mean an equal relationship. In this model the mentor will be prepared to learn from the one being mentored.

The pairing involves students being sent into the community with pre-defined and well-established processes to jointly capture and summarize key ideas from the context and then discuss their observations and learning. This approach can even be broadened to include a mentor or supervisor as another voice in the learning. As said earlier those involved would need to be open to deepen their learning and prepare their minds for new insights to emerge.

For placements, a period of specified time is set aside where the student would be allowed to have work experience which is an integrated and assessed part of a student's degree. The student is encouraged to apply their learning from the course in the workplace and apply

learning from the workplace in the course. Such experiences are well established within courses at a number of universities, such as Aston University, Birmingham.

Attachments would involve undertaking unpaid work experience with an organization, to gain insight into a particular job role or industry. This kind of ‘on-the-job learning’ can be mutually beneficial to both employers and students. Other forms of threads linking the classroom and the community include vocational and visits. Where adequate planning and preparations are done well, everybody involved benefits from such a blended approach to education. In other words, the more blended and integrated education is, the wider the benefits are spread.

One of the uniqueness’s of this model is that not only students have their presence in the classroom as well as in the community but so do their educators. The blended and integrated approach changes the dynamic of the relationship between the classroom and the community, between the educators and students, and between employers and their future employees. In the process of such a blended community involved education, the ties that hold the communities together are strengthened and the community in the broader sense benefits from such a community. The world of business, religious bodies, charities, social interest groups, sporting groups and neighborhoods know and are connected to what is going on in the classroom, and in return the classroom knows and is connected to its community. Block (2018) acknowledges that the key to creating or transforming community is the power of being with others embodied in each relationship we encounter and each meeting we attend.

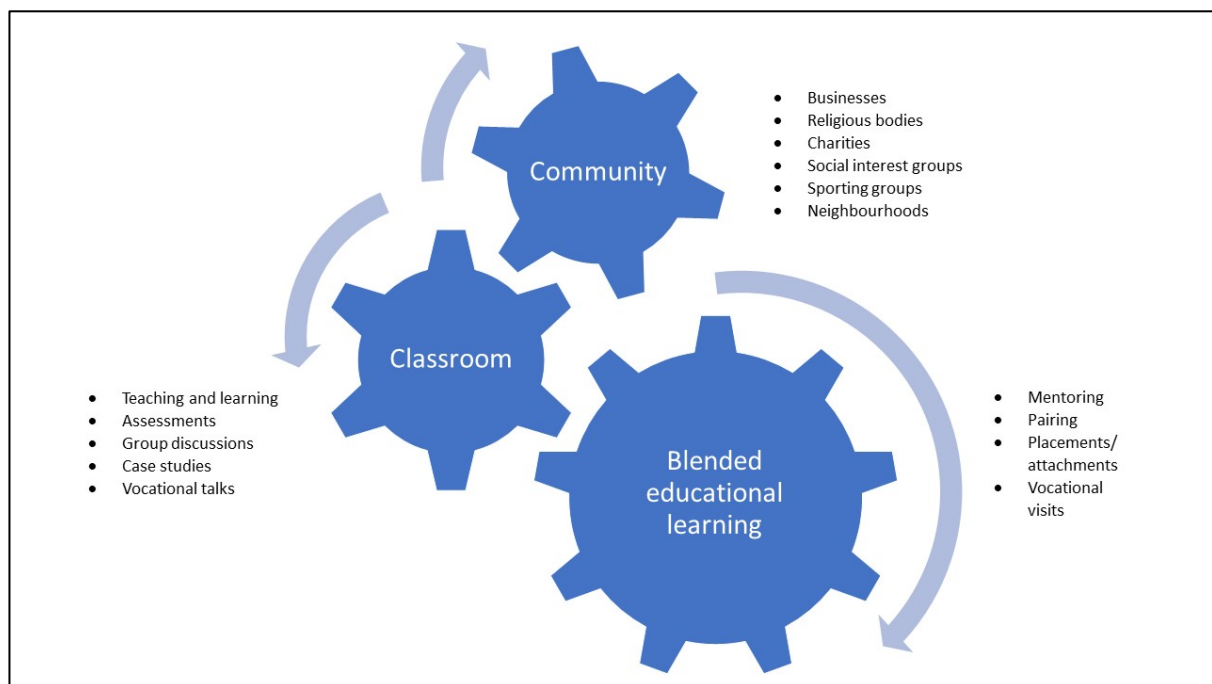


Figure 1: Framework for a hybrid blended approach to community involved education

This approach potentially has a number of challenges. One of which maybe the resistance from academics who may feel that parts of education are being moved from their grip. They would share the platform solely occupied by them with other stakeholders such as professionals already practicing in various fields. Results will also depend on how this is sold to those other professionals who will be involved in the placements, attachments, pairings, mentoring and other methods of blending this kind of education. They also may say that they

wouldn't be able to afford to do this work. However, our argument is that time and space need to be created for this blended approach to succeed. Furthermore, safeguarding is a growing area of work that needs attention. Institutions have invested heavily in this area mainly because of the need to create safe environments for employees, customers, and other stakeholders but this would need to be considered further for the framework we have put forward.

Conclusion

The argument we make in this paper is that a blended community involved approach of delivering education has benefits for the wellbeing of society. We made it clear that classroom structured education, though very important, is not enough on its own to deliver what 21st century contexts need.

Despite the seemingly overlapping of teaching and learning with sometimes blurred boundaries between teachers and learners, it still remains the case that students learn more when theories are constantly tested, debunked and reexamined against the real issues and concerns of the contexts of everyday experiences.

We have also tried to highlight the challenges which may prevent the blended community involved approach to work. These include resistance to it from the classroom structured approach and concerns over safeguarding.

We have tried to bring the undervalued modes of education to the fore: education outside of the classroom and in the community. In doing this, we do not want to give the impression that there is anything wrong with classroom structured education, but rather to affirm it and its place in the wider scheme of education. The key to this paper is those other models of education, sometimes undervalued, that we want to sit at the same table as the modern classroom structured education. We hope we have made this argument clear; and whether classroom structured mode of education wishes to share the platform with these other models in a blended way remains to be seen.

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