

The Humanities Scholar, the Social Environment, and the Ivory Tower: Making the Rational Real

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Abstract

Before the renaissance, the humanities were practiced rather than studied. As a matter of fact, in ancient Greece, the study of humanities was introduced as a basis of a broad education for citizens as it was the source of morals for the ordinary citizen. But in the modern era, students are given the impression that these subjects matter less. How invaluable is the study of the humanities? What connection does the study of the humanities have with the social environment? This paper aims to explore how the study of the humanities can impact or influence the dynamics of the social environment. The paper argues that the relationship between the scholar and the social environment can be antagonistic or transformative. The two influence each other in a dialectical tension.

Introduction

Several centuries ago, Plato the Greek philosopher, adumbrated in his *Republic*, a tripartite educational curriculum consisting of reading and writing, physical education and literary or secondary education. The literary or secondary education is in tune with what is called “Humanities” today as it covered the works of poets and were learnt to be recited and where necessary, sung to the lyre. This implies that such included the knowledge of music. Alluding to the importance of this aspect of education for Plato, Desmond Lee, the translator of Plato’s *Republic*, makes the point that the Greeks had no bible and what the bible has been to us as a source of theology and morals, the poets were to the Greeks. This explains Plato’s preoccupation with the moral and theological aspect of the poets as it was from them that the ordinary Greek was expected to acquire his moral or theological notion. (129)

Following this, Plato insisted that whatever must be fed the young by way of the pedagogical content must aim at encouraging the highest excellence of character. The purpose of that education was to produce a class of competent rulers (guardians) who were to pilot the affairs of the state. In this way, Plato underscores the value of the humanities study and impresses upon one that there is an interaction between the products of the humanistic education and the social environment where such is expected to function. The educated is expected to bring the skills acquired to bear on the concerns of the social environment for good. Thus the posture of many a critic that has queried the relevance of the humanities in the contemporary scheme of things dominated by the achievements of science and technology, accusing the Humanities of

lack of cultural or economic relevance, and having no purpose and consequently relegating it, will instead of making the society richer, poorer.

Reflecting on the Humanities in Nigeria, Akachi Ezeigbo has said that humanities are called upon to re-strategize and be pivotal in promoting knowledge and learning in Nigeria in order to destroy bigotry and fanaticism of all sorts, religious and ethnic (Ezeigbo, p. 140) He maintains that “Our curriculum in each discipline ought to be challenged by new ideas, new subjects; for instance, entrepreneurship, publishing, gender studies etc.” What Ezeigbo is saying in other words, is that one should through one’s work, address the prevailing issues in our social environment.

For O. Oladipo, knowledge and truth are not to be pursued for their own sake alone. Rather they should be a means to an end. As he has put it, “knowledge and truth, therefore, are not important intellectual qualities in for themselves. They are important in human intellectual endeavours simply because a commitment to their realization provides a surer way of overcoming some of the obstacles-natural and social- to human development and social progress. Thus, there is a close link, indeed a bond, between scholarship and the pursuit of good life.” (76).

What Oladipo is saying clearly is that the luxury of pursuing truth and knowledge for its own sake in the time of crisis can be likened to Nero fiddling while Rome burns. Any meaningful intellectual activity of the scholar in the humanities must aim at addressing the crisis. Here the scholar is expected to bring his or her critical thinking skill to bear on the crisis. The raw materials for scholarly activity are provided by the social environment and should be subjected to critical thinking requirements. Gender issues, child slavery, domestic violence, women trafficking, discrimination, injustice and domination are issues confronting the modern person. One should aim to influence and change one’s world through one’s ideas.

It was in the above connection that Karl Marx’s view that “hitherto philosophers have interpreted the world, in various ways, the point, however, is to change it” makes sense. Marx’s view is a clarion call for the person of ideas, the scholar to make his or her discipline instruments of social change, to make it relevant to the needs of the human person on the street, politics and agents of the state, their spiritual and intellectual needs not just an activity restricted to the classroom and ideas published in journals that are tucked away in local or foreign libraries that very few people have access to.

To accomplish its major objective, this paper is divided into three sections. Section one gives us an insight into what the humanities are and stand for. The skill of critical thinking, which is derived there from is also explored. Section two examines the dynamics of the social environment and its different aspects. The interplay between the scholar and the social environment over time is also highlighted. In section three, the ivory tower is brought under

the search light with a view to showing its role in preparing its products for relevance in the wider society. The skill of critical thinking is highlighted as what the humanities bring to the table in order to make the social environment better. This section further embodies the conclusion.

What are the Humanities?

Generally, the term, ‘Humanities’ refers to all the academic disciplines that study human beings as individuals and in society. In this sense the term covers some disciplines in the social sciences also, such as political science, sociology, anthropology and psychology, as well as Law. Specifically, in the context of this discourse, the Arts and Humanities are fields most often housed within “Liberal Arts” schools. The term is a composite of disciplines such as literature, classics, ancient and modern languages, history, philosophy, media studies, music, religious studies, the fine and performing arts, and other related subjects.

The Humanities pedagogy is part of the process of education which deals with the human person in its multidimensional modes such as language, art forms, Histories, culture, as well as other forms of human engagements. It inquires and interrogates in its assorted forms what being human means and probes the interaction between the human person and the society in which such lives.

The training in the humanities exposes one to critical thinking skills that move the person from the level of ordinary thinking, which is natural to everyone to a level where such analyzes, assesses and evaluates one’s thinking. This skill enables a person to ask vital questions, gather relevant information, reason logically from the information, and come to reliable, trustworthy conclusions about the world that enable such a person to live and act successfully in it.

This results in questioning ideas and assumptions rather than accepting them at face value with a view to determining whether such ideas, arguments and findings represent the entire picture and are open to finding that they are not. With critical thinking skill, an individual develops and exhibits personal traits, such as open mindedness, fair-mindedness and empathy. These enable persons to remain open to the possibility of changing their views on an issue when logic and evidence support doing so, fair-mindedness enables such to treat all viewpoints alike without reference to one’s feelings or selfish interest of one’s friends, or group, as well as adheres to intellectual standards (such as accuracy and sound logic) uninfluenced by one’s own advantage or the advantage of one’s group and to strive to treat every viewpoint relevant to a situation in an unbiased, unprejudiced way.

Empathy is the ability to imagine what someone else is feeling or experiencing. This is a crucial skill for critical thinking as it allows one to broaden one’s perspective and reflect on one’s actions and beliefs. Ultimately, a critical thinker does not drift through life blown by every

wind of belief. Such a person carefully considers reasons on all sides of an issue when he makes important decisions. Its problem-solving potentials, that is the ability to use, knowledge, facts and data to effectively solve problems are what society needs for growth, progress and development.

Looking at its uses, Critical thinking seeks ways of understanding the mind and then training the intellect so that common errors as prejudice, overgeneralization, common fallacies, self-deception, rigidity and narrow mindedness are minimized. It enables an individual to be a responsible citizen who contributes to society.

According to Paul and Elder, “human beings are what they think. Whatever one is doing, whatever one feels, whatever one wants- all are determined by the quality of one’s thinking”O (xix) Experience has shown that some people’s quality of thinking is not even affected by their level of education or the number of degrees they have acquired. That is why one hears of leaders who studied in Harvard, Princeton or Oxford and are yet ruled by their primordial sentiments in public policy making. There are in existence, lawyers, indeed, senior advocates who have no respect for the rule of law and aid and abet impunity and lawlessness in their clime. With this scenario, and given that one is shaped by the beliefs and convictions of the family, social group and customs in which one is born, there is a need to take charge of one’s thinking by subjecting such to rational scrutiny. There is a need to consciously make the critical mode of thinking a lifestyle, more so in taking decisions that affect the lives of others, weighing the pros and the cons of one’s courses of action and inaction. In this way, it adds value to us as individuals, enables us to make decisions that have substance and ultimately promotes our good and the good of the society. There is no greater value that the study of the humanities offers than this skill of critical thinking. This is why the humanities matter.

The humanistic education is heavily laden with communicating and transmitting the moralities and civilities that hold a society together from generation to generation. The education which is the corollary of Humanities scholarship is aimed to instill in individuals certain skills and attitudes that are judged to be useful and desirable in society (D. J. O’connor quoted by Ezewu, 32). Such being the case the educational system is incomplete without a systematic study of the humanities from the primary level. Such are described as disciplines of memory and imagination, telling us where we have been and helping us envision where we are going. (The Heart of the Matter).

The Social Environment: The Dialectics of Ideas versus Reality

People’s social environment encapsulates assorted social relations and all surroundings (physical and otherwise) influencing and being influenced in some way by human beings. Some of the specific elements composing the social environment include all social relationships (including family and friends and colleagues in the work place), infrastructure

(roads, electricity, buildings and other facilities), industrial and occupational structure (factories, offices and relationship between the worker and the employer), labour markets (worker's welfare) power relations (political, social and economic), government (democratic and non-democratic), institutions (health, education, security, and religious), beliefs, cultural and religious practices. Put together, such constitutes one's social environment and the space in which one's entire experience happens. The dynamics of the social environment impact one's lives: it can shape one's behavior in subtle ways just as the individual can influence the social environment. (www.dictionary.com).

In looking at the scholar and social environment dialectic or nexus, it is important to note that the social environment where the scholar lives and operates represents the universe where he performs his or her scholarly functions or activities. Such can be hostile, for instance, bad socio-economic or material conditions are harmful to the psychological state required by the scholar to function effectively. It can also be antagonistic in the sense that opposition to the work of the scholar could come from any segment of the social environment, especially an environment that does not give latitude for intellectual speculation. Sometimes, stringent measures are taken to suppress the ideas, especially when the vendors or workers of such ideas are labeled extremists.

The implication is that the scholar's social environment may be conducive and as such support both personal and career development goals, or potentially mar such goals. In more concrete terms, the culture of military dictatorship with all its dictatorial accoutrements does not augur well for the scholarly enterprise and progress. This means that the political system is a key factor in determining the health of the humanities scholarship. This is the reason why one should not turn one's back to the political happenings in the wider society believing that decisions made out there will not affect one's personal happiness. The dynamics of the social environment directly or indirectly affect the scholar. At the same time, one's ideas or beliefs to a great extent influence one's social environment (Russell, 7)

Historical evidence abounds regarding workers of ideas whose intellectual productions shaped social and political organizations and most of them were in the humanities. For instance, John Locke (1632-1704) changed and influenced the world in many ways. His political ideas like those in the *Two Treatises of Government* (such as civil, natural and property rights and the job of government to protect these rights), were put into the United States Constitution. His *Two Treatises of Government* was instrumental to the revolution that led to the abolition of Divine Rights of Kings and a drastic change in British Monarchy. (sites.google.com).

In his "Reconstruction in Philosophy", John Dewey, the American pragmatist, said that all philosophies arise from people's continual struggle to deal with social and moral problems. Two implications follow from Dewey's statement. First, we can't understand a philosophy

without an awareness of the social forces that have produced it. Second, and more importantly, any philosophy or doctrine has worth only to the degree that it helps people resolve their problems.

Linking the foregoing exposition to the theme, “Humanities” Scholarship and the Social Environment,” it is imperative for the humanistic scholar to be aware that humanistic study is worth pursuing not just for its own sake but for the impact on the products that will in turn influence the social environment, to resolve or solve the social, political or moral problems of the day.

There is something each of the humanities disciplines brings to the table as this pertains to the existential needs of the social environment. For instance, in an atmosphere of social and moral crises, literature can be used to reflect the society, projecting its good values for people to emulate. It has a corrective function also, in its attempt to mirror the ills of the society with a view to making such realize its mistakes and make amends. In literature, one finds stories formulated to depict human life and action through some characters, who by their words, action and reaction, convey certain messages for the purpose of education, information and entertainment.

According to Augustine Boal, the dramatist besides entertainment is “a teacher of morality and a political adviser (p. xii). Grace Ekong has also said in this connection that “Music has always been a viable weapon for communicating life’s experiences. It can be used as an opinionated weapon against political tyrants” and several other vices. (p. 57). Those in Theatre and drama use visuals to portray the pains and costs of injustice and corruption. Oral literature is an instrument of social commentary and instruction and control (Moses Akinola 2). Buchi Emecheta’s writings on gender have greatly influenced the society by giving one insight into the contradictions of gender dichotomy and the plight of the female sex in the society and calling for a change of attitude.

The Ivory Tower: Creating Change

The goal of tertiary education, which includes universities, colleges of education, polytechnics etc in the Nigeria’s Policy on Education is “to contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training, develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society, promote national and international understanding and interaction (Sec 8:28). Clearly, Nigeria’s national policy on Education underscores the value of humanities study. But the reality is that in the implementation of these national educational objectives, the humanities have suffered certain disabilities.

Throwing more light on the critical role of tertiary education or the universities (ivory tower) in particular, *The African Humanities Programme (2014)* notes that the Universities are the

training ground for future citizens and leaders and for transmission of the knowledge necessary for growth, security and development. The programme makes the point that:

A University's core mission is rooted in the humanities- in the study of culture, language, history, literature, anthropology, philosophy, religion and the arts. They have clear practical values: they teach critical and analytical thinking while also stimulating imagination and promoting ethical values. Leaders need these skills to lead, to identify problem and to conceive solutions.

The highlights of the value of the humanities as indicated in the above include teaching critical and analytical thinking, stimulating imagination and promoting ethical values. No rational person can jettison these values in implementing national development objectives. But how come students in this era are given the impression that that these subjects matter less. The society focuses more on science and technology, while the education system has stigmatized as marginal the value of critical thinking for that is what sidelining the humanities amounts to. However, it is in applying critical thinking and adopting it as a lifestyle by the citizens in both private and public spaces that hold the key to solving the prevailing social crises. This is the reason why one must advocate tirelessly for the arts and Humanities.

The university, according to Charles Malik, is one of the most influential institutions in the world today: it determines the course of events and the destiny of man" (25). Specifically, the university shapes the values and beliefs of those who pass through it. Commenting on this vital role of the university, James Davison Hunter, points out that "the work of world-making and world changing are by and large, the work of elites: gatekeepers who provide creative direction and management with spheres of social life" (41). The universities in general and humanistic scholars in particular are gatekeepers of ideas, influencing directly or indirectly all aspects of thought and life in our world. Gramsci underscores the role of the scholar or intellectual in the whole exercise of training in his view that the first general function of an intellectual is to give particular class self-consciousness, a feeling of homogeneity, and an awareness of its own function in the economic, social and political arenas. The particular class in this context is the students that come under one's pedagogic instruction. First and foremost, development of character in accordance with that which is right and good, inculcation of the values of society, as well as instilling the sense of loyalty and duty towards the society should be a priority.

If the observation made by African Humanities Programme regarding the core mission of universities is anything to go by, then the Humanities must contribute to the revolution in attitudinal change especially with respect to social, political, ethnic, racial and moral conflict

in societies (Makinde, 26-27). According to Makinde, the ideas that rule or change the world are incubated, nurtured within the ivory tower and disseminated through influence on the products of such to the social environment.

Flowing from the above, the scholar's social change narration should impress it upon the students that their voices matter and that they can be a force. This means that one should aim at placing the value of the humanities before the public through one's influence on the products of the pedagogic process. Consistent with Oladipo's view, one's aim should not just be knowledge for its own sake but rather for creative implementation of a solution. The scholar should encourage the students to think outside the box and develop as creative individuals. Ignite the fire in each student and impress it upon such that they can create change.

This calls for a convivial learning atmosphere, which demands that one tries to build a warm, compassionate, open and supportive class environment that enables the students to share ideas. Make the students relax in one's presence. This convivial atmosphere results in a learning community driven by collaborative care for learning and aiding and assisting one another in that process.

The call to make impact and influence one's social environment through one's products requires making some changes in the various disciplines in the Humanities by way of reviewing their curricular contents to reflect the realities of the social environment. This implies playing down on the banking concept of education. In place of it, one's students should rather be seen as co-investigators in dialogue with the scholar. The students under the scholar's instruction and guidance are part of the social environment and are affected by what is happening in the social environment. The raw materials for reflection and action should be drawn from the social environment and critical thinking brought to bear on such. This procedure involves what Paulo Freire refers to as problem –posing and problem solving. It culminates in a constant unfolding of reality and critical intervention in reality. As students are increasingly confronted with the realities on ground, their consciousness will be raised to respond to those challenges. The point being made here is that one's scholarship should resonate with one's social, economic and political concerns, for example, sexual violence, violent extremism, terrorism, human trafficking, education, gender and sexuality, religious bigotry and fanaticism, suicide, technology, poverty and disease.

As the shaper of future leaders of the world, the university should prepare the products for life beyond the ivory Tower, to engage ideas and realities in a way that is productive, inspiring and transformative. It should offer the products opportunity to become change makers in their public space. It should ignite the fire in them and allow them to continue to make change through the promotion of courses that will shape and empower them and the next generation.

The students should be groomed to a point where they can be deliberate about their impact and not leave anything to chance.

There are quite a number of barriers in the way of achieving these lofty goals. For instance, inadequate and dilapidated infrastructure caused by under-funding, bad examples for our products, namely, examination misconduct on the part of both students and invigilators, and sexual harassment. These need to be tackled. If the instructors continue to influence the products in the wrong ways, this will rub off on the wider society negatively. Corruption has permeated all aspects of life in the country, including the ivory tower. It manifests in the buying and selling of grades, extortion on the part of lecturers, sexual harassment. These social problems can constitute objects of reflection for literary, playwrights, dramatists and musicologists and by so doing raise mass awareness and give rise to positive revolutionary alternative to the prevailing contradictions.

In his own catalogue of barriers, Ezeigbo mentions inadequate grants, criteria for promotion and support, materials for effective teaching, quality of lecturers who teach and the fact that many no longer strive for excellence, but are more concerned with pecuniary gain, the poor quality of students, as well as students over population that hinders satisfactory instruction and poorly equipped libraries with little or no reference books and textbooks (Ezeigbo,133).

He asserts that these disabilities have rubbed off on the quality of the products resulting in what he referred to as ‘half baked’ graduates’. According to him, these ‘half baked’ graduates lack culture or sense of commitment in anything they do giving rise to the crisis the society has in the form of undisciplined, corrupt and fraudulent individuals at all levels of national, even at the leadership level. “These badly educated people are injected into the public and private sectors of the economy with disastrous consequences. We see their handiwork; experience their lack of discipline... in lack of respect for law and order... and inordinate ambition to amass wealth. It is also from this pool that half of the youth caught in armed robbery as well as ignorant and misinformed individuals who murder people in the name of religion are drawn. Due to their incompetence and intellectual disabilities, they run the nation’s economy and utilities down (Ezeigbo, 133)

This calls for upholding of standards, as well as values in one’s discipline and being good models as scholars; and avoiding cutting corners. The “put my name” culture needs to be terminated while the scholar commits himself or herself to truth and excellence in the profession. Scholars must be above board if they are to influence their products positively. In other words, scholars should hold themselves accountable.

The Humanities are change agents as the work of scholarly humanists generate ideas that drive progress. The question at present is: have the humanities lost their relevance in today’s world? What relevance do the humanities hold in time of crisis? According to Ezeigbo, true satisfaction

and fulfillment in life comes from making a positive impact in the lives of others. The relevance of humanities' scholarship is attached to the impact such can make. All the training, exposures to assorted ideas and perspectives and education are the tools to help the scholar make impact and achieve relevance influencing others and affecting their social environment (127).

Beyond the Ivory Tower: Making the Rational Real

If there is a time the humanities could be considered relevant, it is now. Its relevance lies in its training in critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is the ability to exercise or exact the human mind to generate ideas or proffer the best overall solutions regarding any given problem. Critical thinking embodies critical analysis which entails the ability to subject respective circumstances to evaluation to determine what they truly represent, so as to know how best to deal with any challenges or problems arising there from.

Buchi Emecheta's writings on gender have greatly influenced the society by giving one insight into the contradictions of gender dichotomy and the plight of the female sex in the society and calling for a change of attitude. No human society can ever make progress without taking critical thinking seriously. According to Richard W. Paul and Linda Elder, "in an increasingly competitive world, it is the quality of thinking that gives an edge-an idea that opens new doors, a technique that solves a problem, or an insight that simply helps make sense of all" (xx) Abraham Lincoln, is quoted to have said that "Reason, cold reasoning, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials molded into general intelligence, sound morality and in particular a reverence for constitution and the laws... (8). The major highlights of Lincoln's speech can be summarized under three major elements viz. critical thinking, sound morality and respect for the rule of law. Allow these elements free reign in our public spaces and our social environment will be better for it.

The study of critical thinking makes it possible for humans to be more critical of their attitudes and actions and more appreciative of other people's views and actions. The tendency to apply reason to every facet of one's lives creates in one the inclination to be more tolerant and less dogmatic. With this inclination, one cultivates the attitude to judge oneself, to confront all sorts of issues, to respect what others have to say and to submit to the authority of reason (Mayor, 8)

Where one fails to apply reason, a lot of disabilities are suffered. According to Bertrand Russell in his *The Problem of Philosophy*:

The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation and from convictions which have

grown up in his mind without the cooperation of deliberate reason. To such a man the world tends to become definite, finite and obvious, common objectives rouse no question, and unfamiliar possibilities are contemptuously rejected (91).

This awareness of reason, which can be applied in every sphere of our lives not only makes people better citizens but also enhances democracy. As a skill, Critical thinking is acquired and nurtured via the humanities. This is not synonymous with being well educated.

Thus, instead of the prevailing negative attitude of marginalizing the humanities and questioning their relevance, critical thinking should rather be introduced, reinforced and made compulsory at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. It should be designed and made available to leaders and all who are involved with policy formulation, implementation and legislation through work shopping. This is to be combined with the teaching of ethics and national values and the respect for the rule of law as Lincoln suggests. Thus, the Federal Executive Council decision at its 20th meeting held on Wednesday 19th August, 2020 to approve the National values curriculum for the teaching of 12 core values in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions is a welcome development. Directly or indirectly, it is a positive endorsement of the value of the Humanities in character development in our clime. However, critical thinking paradigm should be made an integral part of the curriculum.

In effect, one is saying that the Humanities disciplines stand as the veritable tools for arresting the drift in the social environment. It is expected that those who are the products of Humanistic pedagogy should be able to manage the various segments of the social environment: the parliament, the army, navy, air-force, hospitals, public and private sectors and contribute to their development. Where the products are half baked, to use Ezeigbo's parlance, they will make ship wreck of the responsibilities entrusted in their care. The Humanities disciplines, by their nature are supposed to impact instructions on morals and spiritual values and if they fail in this, the society will be driven by men and women who lack what it takes to sustain human existence, as well as lacking in morals. Non adherence to ethical standards and critical thinking principles explains the level of corruption in public institutions.

Conclusion

This paper set out to interrogate the interaction between the humanities scholar and the social environment. To accomplish this objective, it highlighted the drive behind the humanities as the study that interrogates what being human means and that it is about people, their culture, language, philosophy and religious practices. It further highlighted the content coverage of

social environment with a view to articulating the interface between such and the humanities scholar.

Beyond this, efforts were made to show that the value of the humanities scholar lies more in the impact or influence such brings to bear on the students or products of the ivory tower, the universities and other institutions of learning. Beyond the ivory tower, the paper tried to show that the value of the humanities lies in bringing critical thinking to bear on the different spheres of the social environment. That is, bringing the ideal, the noble, sound reasoning and the values to bear on the practical and existential needs of the social environment. Specifically, making the rational real by transforming the social environment to be in line with what is reasonable and noble. Given the assorted points raised in this paper, it has become clear that the prevailing attitude of sidelining the humanities, assessing it in terms of monetary value and giving the impression that they matter less would do the social environment more harm than good.

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