

ON STUDIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF (HIGHER) EDUCATION?

Y. Waghid

Department of Education Policy Studies

Stellenbosch University

Stellenbosch, South Africa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2565-824X>

ABSTRACT

Over a decade my reading of Giorgio Agamben's writings on philosophy in relation to politics, aesthetics, and religion revolved around how notions of infancy, (im)potentiality, becoming, community, rhythmic and kairotic action can guide an understanding of higher education. Although Agamben has not written specifically about education the above concepts can be recognised as significant to a theory of higher education particularly because his ideas invariably radicalise any understanding of higher education. Such a radicalisation of higher education involves thinking anew about higher education that remains unfinished or what Igor Jasinki (2018) refers to as "education without ends". In this article, I offer a way of how to think differently about a philosophy of higher education concerning the notion of "education without ends" and in reference to Agamben's (1985) idea of studious play.

Keywords: studiousness, play, philosophy, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Since the 2000s higher education in South Africa has undergone momentous changes from a dominant positivistic view of the concept to understandings that resonate with pragmatism, criticism, and poststructuralism. Pragmatic higher education has been overwhelmingly concerned with what works in practice and how the discourse can most appropriately respond to claims of relevance and rationality. Thus, one finds that the *White Paper Three on Higher Education Transformation* of 1997 accentuated concerns of transformation that can equitably address injustices of the past which can concomitantly pave the way for higher education discourses to guide national development and global competitiveness. Critical notions of higher education articulated empowering concerns whereby individuals (academics and students) can advance liberatory expressions of higher education. Poststructuralist views on higher education are mostly concerned with looking at higher education differently, such as reimagining, reconsidering, and reconceptualising the notion as is evident in some of my own work and collaborative works (Waghid, Waghid, and Waghid 2018; Davids and Waghid 2019; Waghid

and Davids 2020; Waghid, Terblanche, Waghid, and Waghid 2021; Waghid 2022). None of these contributions engaged with the notion of studious play as enunciated in Agamben's seminal thoughts.

ON STUDIOUS PLAY

Agamben (1985, 64) writes of study as an “interminable” encounter whereby those who study “roam among books” and are simultaneously opened to new paths through their encounters. Firstly, roaming implies that the studier meanders through the content (of books) without limits; thus, invoking a kind of *radical openness* to what is read and understood in the encounter (with books). Secondly, pursuing new paths on the part of the studier implies an openness to never-ending possibilities, thus confirming that “study ha[s] no rightful end” (Agamben 1985, 64). My initial encounters with philosophy of education texts have always been about being open to thoughts that would “shock” (Agamben 1985, 64) or surprise me as I make sense of such thoughts in the context of higher education in Africa. Simultaneously, I remained “stupefied” (Agamben 1985, 64) about what has struck me at times unable to initially grasp concepts but powerless to not engage with the new thoughts. In this way, my encounters with philosophy of education texts seemed to have oscillated back and forth between a state of surprise or astonishment at what has been read and an incapacity to simply absorb or comprehend what I had been exposed to. Thus, my encounters in studying philosophy of education texts have been *rhythmic* in the sense that my “shuttling between bewilderment and lucidity, discovery, and loss ...” guided my engagement with such texts.

Now the idea of studying as having openness and rhythm brings into consideration the notion of play. For Agamben (2007, 85), play signifies that one deactivates the use of something and opens a new possible use of that something. A child plays with a toy spoon when she uses the same as a possible stick to play the drums. Similarly, when a philosopher of education plays with concepts, she remains rhythmically open to new uses of concepts by detaching them from their previous uses.

WHY A PHILOSOPHER OF (HIGHER) EDUCATION PURSUES A STUDIOUS LIFE?

For a philosopher of (higher) education, a studious life comprises at least two actions: Firstly, as a human, she remains in potentiality to be and to not-be because of her capacity to act ethically or studiously (Agamben 1993, 42). My own reading on the African philosophy of (higher) education inculcated in me a consciousness to analyse concepts such as Africanness, humaneness, and experience in relation to my own intellectual growth on what these concepts

could mean. In my writings, I have shown that my understandings were always ideas in potentiality because of my standing in the field of philosophical inquiry. My analyses of such concepts in many ways reflected my own (human) (im)potentiality as a studious scholar.

Secondly, for Agamben as for me, studying (philosophy of education) cannot be associated with genus and species as these mannerisms imply being condemned to the “torment of qualifications” (Agamben 1993, 27). Qualifications are considered as completed or destined incidents of human experience. I have encountered several academics who associate the completion of doctoral studies as ends in themselves and a confirmation of the arrival of scholars. Similarly, for some academics having ascended to the level of the professoriate is a vindication of their arrival as scholars (in higher education). On the contrary, being engendered from qualifications and the professoriate implies that scholars would be “rising forth” (Agamben 1993, 27) to pursue their scholarly interests (in philosophy of higher education) towards that which is not yet. In this regard, Agamben (1993, 28) posits that “being engendered from one’s own manner is the only happiness really possible for humans”. As aptly stated by Jasinski (2018, 57), “the potentiality to be or to do without any specific destination [destined qualification], and study is precisely that transmissibility [in reference to what has been transmitted across generations]”.

STUDIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF (HIGHER) EDUCATION AND LIVING CONTEMPLATION

I never looked at two major texts, namely *Philosophy of Education: Major Themes in the Analytic Tradition (Major Themes in Education)* edited by Paul Hirst and Patricia White (1998), and *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Education* edited by Nigel Blake, Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith, and Paul Standish (2003) as finite works in philosophy of education that should be learned and implemented. Rather, in Agambenian fashion, these texts are considered “a point of contact with an external space that must remain empty” (Agamben 1993, 66). These texts are “at the threshold” or “at the door” of what lies “outside” of these texts (Agamben 1993, 67). In other words, there is still much to know and find out beyond the meanings espoused in these texts. This means that a practising philosopher of (higher) education is ongoingly concerned with “being-within an outside” (Agamben 1993, 67) – an “outside” that remains open to new possibilities where “new constellations of thinking about education [are] in the process” (Jasinski 2018, 96). When this happens, philosophers of (higher) education engage in playful studying or living contemplation.

Jasinski (2018, 96) aptly reminds us that doing philosophy of (higher) education is not about proposing solutions to learning problems, advocating better learning methods, or

otherwise helping further educational goals or outcomes. Instead, doing philosophy of (higher) education is a matter of sharpening one's consciousness and intellect – a matter of living contemplation – in the quest to study what is relevant and irrelevant, useful, useless, responsible, and irresponsible. When doing philosophy of (higher) education in such a way, one would be doing it with “ease” where scholars can “move freely” (Agamben 1993, 25). Tyson Lewis (2018, 5) sums up doing philosophy of (higher) education with ease as follows:

“The Agambenian philosopher of [higher] education is the educational philosopher-as-not-an-educational philosopher, embodying an intellectual life of ease by ‘letting philosophy of [higher] education be irrelevant, useless, and irresponsible’.”

My own work in articulating an African philosophy of higher education has been done with ease in the sense that I juxtaposed what is relevant against irrelevant in advancing a form of higher education for Africa without propagating a doctrinal view of such a philosophy of education (Waghid 2019).

BEING INSPIRATIONAL AS A PHILOSOPHER OF (HIGHER) EDUCATION

For most of my professional career, I tried not to instruct (from *struere* or piling up), or implement (from *implere* or filling up), as Jasinski (2018, 96) would assert. Instruction and filling up students would always undermine the capacities of students to engage with my thoughts. Such a mechanical approach to teaching and supervision would have undermined the higher pedagogical relations I embark on together with students. Rather than offering recommendations for our educational practices, I thought it apposite to inspire students to experiment with thought and practice in and about higher education. Similarly, I never thought that students should be told everything they needed to know for that would have been tantamount to instructional and implementable pedagogical action. Like me, students also had to live contemplation, trying to make sense of the concepts and practices they were engaged with in their pursuit of philosophy of higher education. My work as a philosopher of higher education concerned with African knowledge interests, *vis-à-vis* democratic citizenship education, involved inspiring students to think differently and anew about educational practices.

TOWARDS A CONCLUSION: PLAYING WITH A PHILOSOPHY OF HIGHER EDUCATION?

Many times, I heard some colleagues announced their lack of a toolbox to render philosophical explanations of higher education. In fact, they have been wrong in assuming that the presence of such a toolbox would enable them to play better with philosophical views of education.

Instead, my contention is that we need to play more studiously with understandings of higher education specially to create conditions for new understandings of such concepts and practices – understandings never thought of before. Why would we not consider looking at concepts and practices within higher education differently if we are incessantly confronted by challenges in higher education today? Why do we not reconsider studiously, and playfully African philosophy of higher education often driven by intimation of truths aimed at “valid” and utopian answers? If we do so, only then, would we engage in the pleasure and joy of doing inspirational philosophy of higher education.

Finally, playing studiously with a philosophy of higher education cannot be the task of an individual philosopher of (higher) education only. Agamben’s (1993) idea of a positive community, without confirming an identity whereby humans (scholars) co-belong without any representable condition of belonging, remains open to possibilities to think differently of how philosophy of higher education can respond communally to Africa’s complex challenges. Thus, studying individually and in community across and beyond disciplinary boundaries can inspire scholars and students towards alternative ideas of African higher education that would invariably counteract dogmatism and oppression so detrimental to any form of education.

REFERENCES

- Agamben, G. 1985. *Idea of prose*. Translated by M. Sullivan and S. Whitsitt. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Agamben, G. 1993. *The coming community*. Translated by M. Hardt. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Agamben, G. 2007. *Profanation*. Translated by J. Fort. New York: Zone Books.
- Dauids, N. and Y. Waghid. 2019. *Universities, pedagogical encounters and openness: Reconsidering democratic education*. Lexington Publishers with Nuraan Dauids.
- Jasinski, I. 2018. *Giorgio Agamben: Education without ends*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- Waghid, Y. 2019. *Towards a philosophy of caring in higher education: Pedagogy and nuances of care*. New York and London: Palgrave-MacMillan.
- Waghid, Y. (ed.). 2022. *Towards an ubuntu university: African higher education reimagined*. London and New York: Palgrave-MacMillan.
- Waghid, Y., F. Waghid, and Z. Waghid. 2018. *Rupturing African philosophy of teaching and learning*. New York & London: Palgrave-MacMillan.
- Waghid, Y., J. Terblanche, F. Waghid, and Z. Waghid. 2021. *Higher teaching and learning for alternative Futures: A renewed focus on critical praxis*. London and New York: Palgrave-MacMillan.
- Waghid, Y. and N. Dauids. 2020. *The thinking university expanded: On profanation, play and education*. London: Routledge.