

# Confronting a Culture of Silence in an African Classroom: An Exercise in Philosophical Practice\*

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**Abstract:** Can Philosophy perform a useful function in contemporary society? This question is usually answered in the affirmative by philosophy teachers who point to the development of the mind as its most important tool, claiming thereby that this prepares students for entry into any profession. Over the years this answer has become less persuasive as students and academic administrators become more and more interested in courses which either train students for entry into a profession or add value to such training. The advent of Philosophical Practice has attempted to remove this doubt concerning the instrumental uses of philosophy and what follows consists of an attempt to show how courses in Critical Thinking can be used to redress perceived shortcomings in students' attitude and approach to learning. It focuses on the 'culture of silence' which describes the tendency of university students to shy away from intellectual conversations in the classroom and has been identified as a detrimental learner/graduate attribute in an African university and demonstrates how a form of critical thinking therapy can redress the problem.

**Key words:** Critical Thinking, Philosophical Practice, Positivism, Ubuntu (an African philosophy), University of Botswana

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## **1. Introduction**

The fortunes of Philosophy as an academic enterprise has been on the rise in many African universities after a dark period of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century when the advent of hyper-positivism as the dominant philosophy in higher education and the corporatization of universities nearly led to its demise. Hyper-positivism, with the natural sciences as its model, has as its “ontological assumption that the world is orderly, lawful and therefore predictable” (Williams, 2015: 24). The outcome of such hyper-positivism has been the ascendancy of Business and Technology programmes and a decline of such academic disciplines as Philosophy, History, Literature, etc. which do not fit this positivist model. The end of this dark period has been attributed to many factors, some of which have to do with a reengineering of course offerings to suit the demands of the market place. At the University of Botswana, this resurgence has been largely due to two important developments. First, has been the awareness by lecturers in different fields of a general decline in academic rigour among students. This decline which has been evident in the work submitted by students, motivated lecturers to seek to stem this decline by enhancing students’ capacity for critical thinking at the foundational level. Following this, many academic departments recommended philosophy courses to their students in the hope that it will help them both in the construction and evaluation of arguments as well as the appreciation of general intellectual rigour. Their choice of philosophy as the vehicle for this reawakening was based on their belief that “Philosophy is not about knowledge as such, but the ability to search for knowledge through logical thinking” (Schjelderup, 2009: 1). Secondly, Philosophy courses were also adopted as required content material for Business programmes and Moral Education. In both cases, philosophy courses were expected to have the therapeutic effect of helping students synthesize information, evaluate arguments, analyse ideas, assess meanings and generally enhance critical thinking skills.

A related reason for adopting philosophy as therapy was informed by the 1999 dialogue between the university and the private sector which resulted in a document titled “Private Sector Perception of University of Botswana Graduates”. This document observed among others things that,

1. Graduates of the university have too much respect for authority. This tends to make one a ‘yes person’ which makes it difficult for them to move up from the bottom of the food chain. It is important for graduates to be critical, giving technical and intellectual reasoning.
2. Graduates of the university generally come across as not having a natural sense of communication. They tend to have a problem of communicating even at the point of selling themselves during a job interview.
3. The university should teach people to think. The ability to think will augment their adaptability and responsiveness.

The opinion articulated above has been corroborated by scholars of Botswana education who attribute it to the Botswana traditional culture which “encourages children/students to keep quiet and never query any point of view or opinion” (Akindele & Trennepohl, 2008: 157). They also observe that “the vast majority of students admitted into the University of Botswana come from a secondary school background where the pedagogy used hardly attempted to develop independent thought, group activity or the culture of questioning authority (Akindele & Trennepohl, 2008: 156). Thus, for many current and past students at the University, it is within the academic life of the institution that they are first confronted with the alien culture that requires them to disagree, argue and confute. They noted that such students “are sometimes shocked and unpleasantly surprised when they are forced to participate in class.” Lecturers in the Communication and Studies Skills Unit who participated in the study noted, “we are shocked to note that despite efforts to make them to contribute to lectures,

they remain quiet.” The students, however, do not have any problems communicating among themselves. Indeed they “find it easy to participate in group discussions; have no fears expressing themselves in a group, and prefer to talk rather to listen during a conversation” (Magogwe, 2010: 35). This shows that their tendency to uncritically accept authority and shy away from academic conversation, which Akindele & Trennepohl refer to as a ‘culture of silence’ may not be due to shyness or deficiency in exuberance but rather is either a trickle down from the traditional culture or due to the fear of making errors in reasoning.

This paper mirrors an attempt to break this “culture of silence” and promote intellectual conversations within the classroom through philosophical practice. It details an attempt to use Critical Thinking, its tools and methods, not only to promote reflective thinking but also to enhance academic conversation in the classroom and thereby raise the standard of intellectual reasoning and interchange among students. It considers the relative successes of both the general and infusion approaches to teaching Critical Thinking in redressing this culture and identifies the infusion approach as more suited to this particular situation. It recognizes the traditional culture as the probable source of this ‘culture of silence’ and reasons that the best way to redress it would be to appeal to the same traditional culture that produces it. To this end, it shows how the traditional *pitso* can be integrated into the modern Critical Thinking classroom in an attempt to generate and sustain academic conversations. The implementation of this contextualized local appropriation of Critical Thinking demonstrates how Critical thinking, as a tool of philosophical practice, can engender academic conversation in a context where dominant socio-cultural ethos and customs seem to promote contradictory behaviour.

## **2. Traditional Culture and the Culture of Silence**

The ‘culture of silence’ which Akindele and Trennepohl

associate with traditional Tswana culture could be said to be tied up in two aspects of that culture: viz, the concern for good manners and the importance of decision by consensus. Perhaps one need not distinguish between the two since decision by consensus is itself a manifestation of good manners. In traditional Tswana culture, good manners is summed up in the concept of *botho/ubuntu*, a term which the English language does not completely exhaust, but which has been characterized as “the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community” (Nussbaum, 2009: 100). Simply put, *botho/ubuntu* consists in having a “humane, respectful and polite attitude towards others” (Ramose, 2002: 42) and is encapsulated in the aphorism, *motho ke motho ka batho* which roughly translates; “I am because we are”. A fuller though not exhaustive explanation of this aphorism is that being human and affirming ones humanity entails recognising the humanity of others and the close ties that each person’s humanity has with the humanity of all. Recognizing this shared humanity and the need to promote mutual coexistence sometimes leads to an unquestioning acceptance of authority and the absence of an aggressive interrogation of ideas. Wiredu (1980: 37) refers to this when he observes that “our social arrangements were shot through with the principle of unquestioning obedience to superiors. Hardly any premium was placed on the curiosity of those of tender age, or independence of thought in those of more considerable years.”

Respect for authority and the tendency to unquestioningly accept the ideas of superiors is not peculiar to the Tswana traditional culture but could be said to cut across several African cultures as illustrated in this account by Appiah (2005: 51) of his experiences in the United States.

The American student asked us what has struck us both as the most important cultural difference between Ghana and the United States when we first arrived. “You are so aggressive” said my Ghanaian friend. “In Ghana, we would not think that very good manners.” Of course what he had

noticed was not aggression but simply a different conversational style. In Ghana, but not in America, it is impolite to disagree, to argue, to confute.

It is against the spirit of *botho/ubuntu* to pointedly disagree, argue or confute, even when one is aware that the other party is in the wrong. This of course does not mean that the other person will be left to wallow in his ignorance; instead, a more subtle method is used in pointing out the mistake of the other party so as not to offend or strain relations with him. Again, this does not mean that friends do not disagree, argue or confute with each other as part of their everyday interactions, for indeed they do. It means that such disagreement should not be taken to a point where it hurts anyone's feelings and should definitely not extend to elders of the community.

Also, African societies are also noted for their pursuit of consensus in decision making. Wiredu makes this point when he opines that "decision making in traditional African life and governance was, as a rule, by consensus" and that "in interpersonal relations among adults, consensus as a basis for joint action was taken as axiomatic" (Wiredu, 1997: 303). This view of consensus in African life has been corroborated by various scholars of African culture, with Edward Wamala" discussing at length how consensual democracy worked among the Ganda of modern day Uganda and Joe Teffo doing the same for South Africa (Matolino, 2012: 112). What is often overlooked in this discourse is the fact that traditional society was a gerontocracy where there was "respect for authority of elderly persons for their wisdom, knowledge of community affairs, and "closeness" to the ancestors" (Safa Dei, 1994: 13). This, perhaps inadvertently, created a situation where, for the most part, the free discussions that often lead to a consensus were and continues to be dominated by elders of the community. Indeed consensus was viewed as when the elders sit under the shade of a big tree, and talk until they agree (Wiredu, 1997: 303; Chakunda & Chikerema, 2014: 77). In such discussions, the other members of the community were often excluded and where present their voices

were effectively suppressed by the need to show good manners. Youths hardly have a say on issues and it was and still is uncommon for youths within the traditional culture, to disagree with the decision of elders.

The above notwithstanding, in traditional Tswana culture and other ancillary cultures of southern Africa, provision is made for members of the community to participate in making decisions that affect their lives. This forum which is referred to as the *pitso*, is a gathering of all adult males of the community convened on the order of the *Kgosi* (Chief) to inform and seek the opinion of the community on important decisions of the *Kgosi* (Coertze & de Beer, 2007: 48). The ideal practice at such gatherings is to encourage a free and open deliberation of the issue in order to give the *Kgosi* sufficient information since his final decision on the issue is expected to reflect the weight of public opinion (Comaroff, 1974: 42). Watson refers to this practice when he observes that “all citizens were entitled, and sometimes even forced, to attend these assemblies, where the *Kgosi* brought matters of public concern before his subjects and various positions on the issues were discussed (Watson, 1977: 396). Indeed the views of individuals at the *pitso* could be vigorously asserted as was the case in the *pitso* that followed the attempt by *Kgosi* Lentswe of the Bakgatla to convert to Christianity, thereby accepting Christianity on behalf of his people without consulting them. Schapera described the discussions at that *pitso* convened to review the chief’s decision as ‘often acrimonious’, a reflection of how the people valued the representation of their views in decision making (Schapera, 1933: 63). Maundeni (2004: 620-21) also maintains that everyone present at a *pitso* is entitled to speak and that this was a means by which the tribal council ascertained public opinion on every subject matter. More often than not, however, the decisions reached at *pitso*s are generally those already formulated by the *Kgosi* and his personal advisers, who because of their standing are able to persuade the others to support them, but it is not unknown for their wishes to be overruled. “Notwithstanding its limitations, the *pitso* system not

only allowed free expression of one's opinion, but also afforded participants the opportunity to discuss wide-ranging issues with political, social and administrative significance” (Makoa, 1997: 6-7). What this shows is that the consensual decision of the elders does not merely reflect their collective opinion but may sometimes reflect the wider views of ordinary members of the public.

The above notwithstanding, the fact that *botho/ubuntu* governs interpersonal relations at such fora dictates that discussions be tempered with civility and that the respect that is accorded the *Kgosi* and his elders be maintained. *Botho/ubuntu* also dictates that one's opinion should not deviate too far from the general trend, since reaching a consensus actually entails “taking into account, individual person's views and opinions before all important decisions are made, the esteem and promotion of mutual tolerance, patience and an attitude of compromise” (Kaphagawani, 1993: 78). But even when one's view is far from the general trend, *botho/ubuntu* dictates that one should not disagree vehemently, argue extensively and confute vigorously, especially in opposition to the views of the *Kgosi* or other elders at the gathering. The process of acculturation then ensures that children growing up within such a culture adopt a behaviour that reflects this culture, even after leaving the context within which the culture operates.

### **3. Traditional Culture and the University Experience**

The four critical thinking courses that became part of the university curriculum after the 1999 University of Botswana-private sector dialogue were developed in response to the perceived need to promote students' capacity for independent and critical thought. This was based on the belief that “people need critical thinking in order to help them assess knowledge claims by distinguishing the stronger from the weaker” argument and that the process “helps us avoid thinking uncritically and acting

unreflectively” (Lipman, 1991: 144). The courses were envisaged as a therapy for perceived deficiency in critical thought but were later redesigned to accommodate the need to combat the “culture of silence” and the general dearth in intellectual conversation. The courses, *Introduction to Logic*, *Logic and The Sciences*, *Critical Thinking: A Life Tool* and *Theories of Truth*, were introduced in 2001 and have, over time, evolved both in method and content while keeping in focus the ultimate aim of promoting rigorous thought and reasoned intellectual discourse on various subjects. The first course to be introduced, *Introduction to Logic* was designed following the general approach to the teaching of Critical Thinking where the principles of critical thinking are taught in a separate and dedicated course (Miller, et. al., 2009: 93) that is generally content-free. Two of the remaining three courses, *Logic and the Sciences* and *Critical Thinking: A Life Tool* followed the infusion approach whereby, the teaching of general critical-thinking skills is embedded in subject matter such that what one needs to become an effective thinker is a set of general heuristics that are likely to be effective in a variety of problem situations, along with the meta-knowledge about situations in which specific heuristics are more appropriate (Angeli and Valanides, 2009: 323). The rest of this paper is an overview of these courses, the methods used and their efficacy in curbing the culture of silence and promoting intellectual rigour. It also show how traditional culture and its underlying philosophy can assist Philosophical Practice where, hitherto, it had been viewed as an impediment to critical thinking and its objectives.

In electing to teach the principles of critical thinking as a separate and dedicated course the assumption was that the absence of intellectual discourse was as a result of a deficiency in reasoning. It was also assumed that the persistence of the ‘culture of silence’ was due to a lack of confidence by students in their reasoning ability and that it was the fear of making mistakes in reasoning that forced students into silence. The plan, therefore, was to augment the reasoning capacity of students in the hope that it will improve their intellectual outlook and booster

confidence in their reasoning ability and thus ensure their participation in intellectual conversations. The approach therefore was to teach the students the rules of reasoning in the hope that it will enhance their capacity to distinguish good from bad arguments. But learning the rules of reasoning and the qualities of a good argument did not change students' attitude towards participation in academic conversations. Even in the Logic class where the rules were taught, students merely learn the rules of reasoning to enable them answer assessment questions correctly but remain uninterested in academic disputation and arguments. This seems to suggest that either their reasoning ability was not responsible for the culture of silence or that students did not relate what was learnt in the classroom to real life situations.

The shortcomings of the general approach to the teaching of critical thinking were made more explicit by the adoption of blended learning and in this regard, the social media features of the eLearning platform played a vital role. It was clear from the onset that students were very excited and comfortable with the medium since it is part of the digital world of which they are prime citizens. They were carrying on lively discussions on the platform on a number of issues, including those that had nothing to do with the course. It became apparent from monitoring their posts on the discussion forum that the lessons on the rules of reasoning and qualities of good arguments did not have much impact on the claims they made and the arguments they offered for such claims. Students were still very likely to generalize from insufficient evidence, set up and attack strawmen, engage in personal attacks on each other and succumb to many of the other fallacies that their logic lessons had expose them to. This is despite the fact that the same students did quite well in identifying such crooked reasoning even when they were embedded in long passages such as feature articles in newspapers, government policy documents as well as soapbox speeches and addresses. Thus it became increasingly apparent that something needs to be done to connect the content of lessons to experiences outside the Logic classroom.

What was done was the adoption of the infusion approach to the teaching of critical thinking. In order to make a scientific argument concerning the viability of either approach in our peculiar situation, two new courses, based on the infusion approach, were developed instead of adopting the infusion approach for the existing course in Introduction to Logic. These two courses, *Critical Thinking: A Life Tool* and *Logic and the Sciences* were designed to play the experimental role while *Introduction to Logic* played the control role in the controlled scientific study. The aim was to see which approach will help bridge the gap between the classroom and reality and is therefore better suited to the needs of the student.

The monitoring of students' conversations on the eLearning platform's discussion forum also provided vital insights into students' perception of their relationship with their lecturer and his position in the hierarchy of knowledge. It was observed that the lively debates that students were engaged in on the platform on a number of issues will cease and the thread will become dormant once the course lecturer offers an opinion on the issue under discussion. The discussion on that thread sometimes picks up again after about a week of non-participation by the lecturer but usually follows a different trajectory from the one the lecturer had commented on. This seems to confirm the belief that the traditional culture disposes students to look upon the lecturer as an authority that should not be contradicted. Thus any post by the lecturer, even when it is presented as an opinion, becomes the de-facto final word on the subject. This confirms Magogwe's (2010: 38) findings that Botswana children are expected to show *botho* by talking less and listening more when communicating with an older person. Following the principles of *botho*, it is impolite to directly question authority, even though the same *botho* encourages deliberative participation at the *pitso* during civic consultations. This also confirms the observation by Akindele & Trennepohl (2008: 156) concerning the divergent beliefs of university teachers and student about culture and university teaching, whereby students believe that they should listen to the

lecturer, take notes and not query or challenge what is taught. In view of this, the two new critical thinking courses were designed to be less formal and to achieve two basic objectives. The first was to encourage a healthy scepticism concerning the dictates of the various cultures represented in the university and the second to take advantage of the traditional culture of deliberative participation in an attempt to undermine the culture of silence.

The two courses, *Critical Thinking: A Life Tool* and *Logic and the Sciences* were designed as general education courses aimed at enriching and widening the experiences of students. The Life-Tool course was designed to encourage a healthy scepticism concerning human knowledge and its sources and take a critical look at such knowledge sources as induction, expert testimonies, analogies and correlations. It also encourages students look beyond reasons to the values and passions that underlie such reasoning, as well as how our decision making processes are influenced by loyalty, provincialism prejudice, stereotypes, superstitious beliefs, wishful thinking and self-deception. It was designed to encourage students to pay particular attention to their use of language as well as evaluating the reasoning process that leads to decision making. In doing so, emphasis is laid on real life situations to which the students are familiar, thus ensuring that the tools of reasoning are used in situations that are relevant to the everyday life experiences of students. The course in Logic and the Sciences was designed to counter the widespread belief in scientism, “the idea that any question that can be answered at all can best be answered by science” (Dupré, 2001: 2) and the corollary believe that “science is the one area of human experience that constitutes, on the whole, a vast, almost unqualified, epistemological success” (Dupré, 2001: 114). It has been designed to encourage a healthy scepticism concerning science, its methods, its processes and its products. It contains topics from the philosophy of science relating to science and value, progress in science, the distinction between natural laws and scientific laws, a smattering of David Hume’s induction, Karl Popper’s characterization of science and Thomas Kuhn’s

Scientific Change and Revolutions. The lessons were designed to force students to reevaluate the commonplace belief in scientism and confront the fact that science may not be the existential colossus that it often portrayed to be.

### **3.1 Traditional Public Discourse and the Contemporary Classroom**

The two objectives, viz., encouraging a healthy scepticism concerning the dictates of cultures and taking advantage of the traditional culture to further critical thinking may appear contradictory given the fact that the “culture of silence” which is a product of traditional culture appear to be antithetical to intellectual curiosity and the questioning of authority. But a case could be made for this since according to Botho/Ubuntu, “our deepest moral obligation is to become more fully human” (Shutte, 2001: 30) and part of our being human consists in working “for the full realization of others, or the self-fulfilment of each human being, leading to the edification of the Other as an-Other self, i.e. as a process of self-realization through others” (Gianan, 2011: 76). Becoming fully human, even in traditional society entails acquiring knowledge and ensuring to ensure that information that inform decision making is properly scrutinized and vetted. Also striving for the full realization of others entails correcting them and ensuring that they do not escape with such ignorance that may subsequently be injurious to themselves and the community. Since one can never be sure what such ideas are, having Botho/Ubuntu entails correcting the unsound ideas of others and replacing all ignorance with knowledge. Thus even though disagreeing vehemently, arguing extensively and confuting vigorously goes against the desire for good manners, there is still room to present a different opinion and work towards ridding oneself and others in the community of ignorance. It is the pursuit of this objective that makes participation at the *pitso* an important aspect of being human and therefore, of having *Botho/Ubuntu*.

Contributing to the development of the community and its

members through giving opinions at the *pitso* was portrayed as essential to having *Ubuntu/ Botho* and following this, an argument was made for a classroom *pitso* that will perform the same functions of the traditional *pitso* in the academic setting. In this academic *pitso*, students were regarded as members of the community whose opinion is being sort by the lecturer on a variety of issues. The *pitso*, which has the form of a philosophical dialogue, was adopted following the view that “the most significant means to foster critical thinking is philosophical dialogue among peers within a community of inquiry” (Daniel, 2001: 63). Thus even though the dialogue had the structure of the traditional *pitso*, it retained the rigour of a philosophical conversation with the promotion of reflective reasoning as the desired goal of every such conversation. In the Life Skills course, the *pitso* was allocated one out of the three contact hours per week and the initial topics of discussion were selected from aspects of the culture of which the lecturer had no authoritative knowledge. Two such issues were;

1. Is the Tswana traditional belief that the first human came out of a hole in the ground plausible?
2. Does “House Music” involve an authentic creative ability or is it a form of imitation?

The first topic was deliberately chosen because of its contention potential, given the fact that a large section of the class was made up of “born again” Christians who were expected to deny the issue and defend the Christian creation myth. It was also meant to spur on the more nationalist students who always defend everything Botswana and were expected to argue that traditional Tswana believes are not inferior to Western beliefs. The second topic was also chosen for its potential to be contentious. It was meant to give an opportunity to those who claim to have update knowledge of musical genres to show off their knowledge. It was also targeted at the nationalist with the assumption that they would rise to the defence of local house musicians against their

competitors. To achieve the objective of generating participation and encouraging scepticism, two students who were generally seen to be quiet and reserved were planted to raise questions on these issues. The hope was that the participation of these students and the sceptical questions that they raised will encouraged others to venture into asking similar questions and in the process help to develop a sceptical conversation around the issues.

The re-enactment of the traditional *pitso* as described above follows the basic principles of philosophical dialogue, which is “a conversation in which two people, equally committed to and fluent in philosophy disagree about a fundamental issue” (Roochnik, 1986: 148). In this case however, the conversation is not limited to people who are committed to and fluent in philosophy since “every person capable of rational thought can contribute to philosophical insights, and, on the other hand, what counts as philosophical truth has in principle been understood and acknowledged by every rational person” (van der Leeuw, 2006: 25). The *pitso* scenario is predicated on the desire by a group of people who disagree amongst themselves on an issue but are equally committed to exploring different alternatives with the hope of finding one that is most reasonable in the circumstance. To this end, the conversation is not limited to philosophers but could involve any two reasonably intelligent people who genuinely seek to discover the hidden meanings and explore various possibilities concerning any subject matter. As in the above, the issue under scrutiny need not be fundamental in the philosophical sense but merely needs to be seen by those concerned as an issue requiring a better understanding. Such an understanding may be achieved by asking questions to establish leads which are further explored either to establish its viability or to demonstrate its absurdity. Students participating at the *pitso* are encouraged to accept the general principle that,

Genuine philosophical dialogue is not a site of intellectual egocentricity and perfunctory flashiness. ...It is not a space for one-upmanship, where one's aim is to outdo one's philosophical competitors, leaving them cognitively and

affectively devastated and broken under the weight of one's penchant for philosophical jousting and discursive onslaught. Rather, genuine philosophical dialogue involves mutual honesty and respect, though not apotheosis. The aim should be to strive to understand the other and the position of the other (even as one might not agree with the other or the views of the other), to provide constructive criticism, and to share a passion for achieving greater conceptual clarity and perhaps even, ...existential clarity and vulnerability in the face of an issue that is all too muddy (Yancy, 2013: 99).

To this end, the conversations presuppose reciprocity and cooperation in the sense that it emphasizes the construction of ideas from peers' points of view in order to solve a common problem or to attain a common objective.

The '*pitso*' takes place at every third contact hour of the week leaving the first two hours in the week for lessons in the tools of reasoning that are meant to facilitate conversations at the '*pitso*'. Although the '*pitso*' was introduced as a deliberate attempt at breaking the culture of silence, there was still need to pursue the objective of promoting rigorous thought and ensure that skills learnt in the critical thinking class migrate to open discussions. To this end, certain Critical Thinking topics were specifically chosen for their capacity to add value to discussions at the '*pitso*' starting, first with lessons on the identification and streamlining of the issue under discussion. This is designed to prevent a situation where students spend a lot of time arguing on different issues while believing that they are discussing the same thing. A lesson on Value Assumptions was also included and was designed to help students appreciate the extent to which decisions and viewpoints are a reflection of our values and help them appreciate the relationship between reasoning and action. Students were encouraged to use the *pitso* to demonstrate their understanding of Critical Thinking tools and reflect on how their approach to arguments have been challenged as by the lessons. Also, since the Life Tool course was initially envisaged as a

forum for the evaluation of moral behaviour, it was important to make moral issues part of the discussion at the *pitso*. Such issues as crimes of passion, responsible drinking, financial responsibility and other topics suggested by students featured at the *pitso*. Although the topics appear to be straightforward right or wrong issues, very interesting angles were often brought into the discussion. It turned out that the more controversial the topic the more animated the discussion with some of the bold students willing to hazard an opinion that was at variance to what is culturally acceptable. A lesson on Kant's Categorical Imperative is usually introduced midway through the semester and the idea universalising a particular moral behaviour usually generates heated arguments.

Although the culture of silence is fairly universal across many university courses, it was even more noticeable in the second Critical Thinking course that follows the infusion approach, '*Logic and the Sciences*.' This course which usually targets students with science backgrounds has an even greater problem of participation thus confirming Alozie and Mitchell (2014: 502) view that students continue to have difficulty in determining how and when to use different types of classroom and scientific discourses. As in the Life Tools course, the main approach to undermining the culture of silence in *Logic and the Sciences* has been to get the students to engage in discussions in an environment where the lecturer is not seen as an authority. But whereas there was a vibrant online discussion among students in the Life Tool course, such online activity was negligible in the case of *Logic and the Sciences*. Thus recreating that online forum using the *pitso* while enthusiastically welcomed in the Life Skills course was not very successful in *Logic and the Sciences*. It was therefore necessary to devise some other means of engendering intellectual conversations within the classroom and this was achieved by making participation in intellectual conversations a course requirement. As in the Life Tools course, *Logic and the Sciences* is organized such that two of the three contact hours of the week are used for formal lectures while the remaining hour is

reserved for discussions.

The nature of the course material in *Logic and the Sciences* made it immediately apparent that the best approach to discussions in the class would be the Socratic Method. The choice of the Socratic Method is based on the assumption that learning can be a social activity where knowledge is created in a dialogue among people (Snarud and Helmikstøl, 2015: 44). Although the Socratic Method follows the constructivist approach to learning, which is sometimes held to be more productive than the instructional approach, the need to introduce science students to the 'strange' claims in philosophy of science, on which knowledge construction was to be based, recommended a mixed method where formal lectures are given on various topics before the class meets to generate questions from the lecture in an attempt to deepen the understanding of the issues raised. Again, although students could have been introduced to the Socratic Method using the myriad of examples in Plato's corpus consisting of such subject matter as epistemic humility, a collective pursuit of truth, curiosity, honesty, humour, and hope, among other things (Davis, 2012: 20), the difficulty faced by science students in navigating the platonic dialogues recommended the adoption of a simpler form of introduction. To this end a dialogical representation of Descartes' Methodic Doubt was introduced and the format of Descartes' doubt was used as a model for demonstrating that certainty should not be taken for granted and that it is possible to intelligently doubt the most obvious truths of everyday life.

The resistance to such comprehensive scepticism about human knowledge usually harvests the first fruits of participation which gradually chips away the culture of silence. Descartes' Methodic Doubt then becomes the model for interrogating such commonplace beliefs as in scientism, the inductive method, progress in science and value neutrality in science. The idea that science does not give us reality but rather an interpretation of reality, along with the idea that scientific laws are not identical to the laws of nature, were initially disconcerting but students' research that precedes the Socratic Seminar usually enables them

to come up with questions that either support or reject such views. In the discussions that follow, there is usually a marked distinction between the core conservatives who attempt to defend science against this sceptical onslaught and the more liberal and sometimes mischievous students who are only too happy to 'slay the lion.' The idea that there are no truths in philosophy but only opinions that are either adequately or poorly defended, while initially scandalous to students, later becomes a source of confidence for students who wish to explore the other side of everyday beliefs. One way of making this apparent while at the same time contributing to developing critical thinking in students involves subjecting the Methodic Doubt to scrutiny where students are encouraged to argue for or against the position.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The success of these courses in generating the capacity for independent thought in the students, improving their ability to question the authority of certain beliefs and generally engaging in academic discourse, is usually noticeable through an increase in the volume of activity on the discussion board of the eLearning platform and in the number of students who voice out their opinion in class. Whereas at the beginning of the course only about 6% of students were participating in class and posting on the eLearning discussion board, the level usually increases to between 66% and 72% at the end of the course. Between the 2005 when these interventions were first introduced and 2015 when the survey was concluded, there has been a consistent improvement both in class participation and eLearning discussion forum activity. The interest in the discussion board encouraged us to allow the courses to remain on the eLearning platform beyond the duration of the course and in some of the years, discussions on some of the issues continued up to one year after the course had terminated. The downside of this experiment has been that some cultural purist sometimes end up taking the attack on the

culture personally and develop a resentment towards those who hold an opposing view. This notwithstanding, the success of the experiment in mediating the culture of silence and promoting critical thinking, even among the cultural purist, cannot be discounted.

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