

The Human Rights Scholar's Acknowledgement: Knowledge Stewardship for Transformative Social Innovation and Changemaker Education

By: Rochele Padiachy*

*Royal Roads University

Keywords: knowledge stewardship, human rights education, wisdom teachings, ethno-epistemologies, educational philosophy, transformative learning, humanity, anti-oppression, declaration, global indigenous wisdom

Abstract

The Human Rights Scholar's Acknowledgement (HRSA) explores the intentional development and grounding of the human rights learner. It builds on a learner's personal declaration toward humility and responsibility in the acquiring and stewardship of knowledge. Knowledge that is often connected to the traumas and continued resilience of the oppressed. The HRSA challenges human rights learners to be introspective. In doing so, it asks them to make connections to wisdom teachings and tenets present within their own communities and lived experiences. Grounding of the learner through this declaration nurtures transformative social innovation and changemaking connected to knowledge stewardship. Thus, the learner is better able to transcend from a learning space of surface knowledge to that of deep wisdom.

Introduction

My journey of learning began long before I entered any formal classroom or academic space. Like many individuals, my formative years were heavily influenced by an array of complex identities that shaped my learning pathways. The convergence of my racial, gender, ethnic and religious identities played a vital and constant role in how I came to interact with knowledge and spaces of learning.

I am South African-born, a former refugee, and a settler on Turtle Island. I come from a long and very diverse ancestry of people, where the knowledge and wisdom of one's lineage are present in all ways of knowing and being, irrespective of time and space. Central to these teachings are the covenants of community, where humility, responsibility, faith, and truth framed my earliest learning. These wisdoms



Figure 1. Irene Susan Padiachy- Elder, mother, grandmother, mentor, knowledge keeper

were taught and modeled by a strong line of matriarchs, including my grandmother and respected elder Irene Susan Padiachy (Figure 1).

A striking example of how these wisdoms continue to move through the community can still be observed within the interactions of daily life, where people often greet one another by saying “Sawubona.” This is an ancient IsiZulu greeting meaning ‘*we see you.*’ Not *I* see you, but *we* see you. This beautiful word not only represents an acknowledgment of one’s physical entrance into a space but their presence as part of a lineage, ancestry, and common humanity that is carried with each of us as we walk through the world.

Sawubona is an exchange that not only recognizes the physical person but the interconnection between one’s humanity to another’s. More intrinsically, it allows us to consider the limitless possibilities and potential of this seeing of one another.

As a woman who has been shaped by the teachings of my matriarchs, I instinctively carry their wisdoms and stories into learning experiences. However, at times, when navigating the many levels of Western academia, I have found that the relevance and legitimacy of these teachings struggle to find a place. Some of my experiences have highlighted a common undercurrent that benchmarks Western epistemologies as foundational within systems of learning while dismissing other diverse ethno-epistemologies as simplistic ventures of curiosity.

I found that this undercurrent results in great impact on all learners. It emphasizes a single narrative, framing which particular ways of knowing are valued within spaces of learning, and it imposes a single truth where many alternatives exist.

As I was ready to embark upon the final leg of my formal learning journey into graduate studies, I was shocked to discover that feelings of accomplishment and triumph were very much overshadowed by an intense feeling of being at odds with myself. I felt displaced at the fact that for so long, I had been focused and driven to engage in acquiring as much knowledge as I could, at a high degree of excellence as possible, all the while never having to intentionally ground myself as a learner. Within the context of this journey, intentionally grounding myself as a learner meant more than extractive learning. Rather, it called for a much deeper connection, humility, and appreciation toward the knowledge being accessed.

The Human Rights Scholar’s Acknowledgement (HRSA) was inspired by a drive to create a space where the wisdom teachings of one’s ancestry, community, and mentorships could effectively be afforded their rightful place of honor alongside established academic frameworks in the development of the whole scholar.

The Human Rights Scholar’s Acknowledgement (HRSA) Situating the HRSA in Community

The HRSA was born of coursework I completed at York University in an independent directed study course: Building Critically Conscious Global Communities.

As an accompanying component to The Wisdom Project pilot, focusing on early intervention human rights education, the HRSA was developed to foster a greater critical consciousness within human rights learners by framing an essential linkage between a learner of human rights and a learner of humanity. The Wisdom Project provided an outlet to discuss and examine large concepts such as human rights, human development, and human security and their translations at a local community level through a series of candid interviews. By engaging the community in this manner, The Wisdom Project endeavored to re-imagine the connection between institutional and structural concepts of human rights and tenets of humanity taught to and carried by young learners within the York Region.

Working alongside Professor Maggie Quirt and the Human Rights Education Classroom housed at the York Regional Police Safety Village, I had the opportunity to have deep and meaningful conversations with community members, including mentors, parents, civil servants, educators, and students.

The Human Rights Education Classroom is a unique learning space that empowers young learners with early intervention human rights teaching through an upstream approach. This approach allows students to acquire effective tools and basic rudimentary human rights competencies to navigate one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse regions in Canada. The classroom was named Daessinigewin by elder Susan Hoeg of the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation. Daessinigewin means accepting into one's heart. The Human Rights Education Classroom itself allows an entry point for students into critically conscious spaces of learning where the teachings and diverse identities they carry are valued. From a wisdom teachings perspective, we understand that learning spaces are sacred spaces and within sacred spaces, transformation occurs.

Key Concepts That Inspire the HRSA

The concepts which have inspired the HRSA include both theoretical and community-based wisdoms. At the heart of this work is the aggregating of ethno-epistemologies, such as the African philosophy of Ubuntu and Indigenous beliefs on relationality, in order to broaden the learner's perspective. These ideas were echoed in some of the interviews with community members in the Wisdom Project pilot as well.

Ubuntu

Ubuntu is an African philosophical axiom premised on the practice of human interdependence and its connection to acts of "social responsibility, citizenship, and an attentiveness to otherness" (Waghid 2020, 300). To this effect, Waghid argues that Ubuntu can disrupt western paradigms of learning which are often "competitive, individualistic, and focused on excellence and/or efficiency through measurement" (2020, 300). For example, within spaces of higher education, embedding the Ubuntu logic of what Waghid refers to as pedagogies of "co-belonging" emboldens students and teachers toward self-determination, freedom to act, and a heightened ability to isolate key issues in need of imperative transformation (2020, 306).

Indigenous Relationality

trawlwlwuyⁱ scholar Lauren Tynan's discussion of relationality reveals how the world is understood within her Indigenous community. Relationality, as outlined by Tynan, is how "the world is known and how we, as Peoples, Country, entities, stories and more-than-human kin know ourselves and our responsibilities to one another" (2021, 600). The logic of Indigenous relationality offers the possibility of multiple truths imparted by the land (Tynan 2021). To this effect, Tynan contends that knowledge and expertise are plural as well (Tynan 2021). Thus, a combination of these pedagogies, theories, and local wisdoms have contoured a research logic of responsibility in place of an ethic of rights-based entitlement within my work and aligned with Tynan's discussions on extractive research (2021, 604).

Community Participation

Community participants helped to define the usage of three key terms inspiring the HRSA. Firstly, the concept of "knowledge" was framed as information and awareness of facts about a particular subject that may foster expertise. Secondly, the concept of "wisdom teachings" was embraced as experiential, practical, or spiritual knowledge, guidance, teaching, council, or advocacy offered by community elders or mentors (University of Ottawa, n.d.).

Finally, the idea of human rights learning was connected to the scope and degree to which we see and affirm each other's humanity within communities. Humanity that is deeply connected to wisdom teachings and not just the conventional legal instruments and frameworks which the concept is more commonly associated with. Suriya Veerappan stated,

I think humanity is something central to everyone right. I mean how do you define humanity? Is it your humanness, being a human being? But it's more than that, it's more than the physical attributes of being human. It's the appealing to your higher self.

The content and reflections offered by community members allowed for a more holistic understanding of the linkage between a learner of human rights and a learner of humanity. To this effect, concepts of human rights supporting tenets of humanity were highlighted as having a direct bond to the ways in which individuals understand their presence, place, and purpose as members of a community. By anchoring the learner to this idea, what is achieved is a meaningful transition and transformation from surface knowledge to deep wisdom, which emphasizes the fact and potential of interconnectedness as understood through Indigenous relationality and Ubuntu.

The Human Rights Scholar's Acknowledgment

The human rights scholar acknowledges, with the utmost respect, that this field of knowledge is premised on the lived experiences, traumas and continued resilience of the oppressed. The human rights scholar steps forward on a journey of unlearning, which carries a deep commitment and responsibility to ameliorating and eliminating oppression and subjugation in all its forms. With humility, respect, and an understanding of the interconnected nature of all beings, the human rights scholar aspires to purposefully

engage in transformative learning that advocates the shared and common humanity of all. Written by: Rochele Padiachy

The HRSA is my proposition for grounding the person before they step forward on a learning journey. It asks the learner a profound level of introspection to connect to the idea that a learner of human rights is, in fact, a learner of humanity. The HRSA is a necessary means to express a deep level of connection to the human experiences which inform our knowledge, respect, and responsibility to the oppressed. Furthermore, the HRSA has been my personal declaration as a means to confront conscious or unconscious tendencies toward extractive learning.

Discussion and Application: Social Innovation, the Changemaker, and Knowledge Stewardship

So, you may be wondering how this all connects to this idea of social innovation and changemaking. A changemaker is someone who is motivated to take action toward solving social issues and who is willing to implore a high degree of openness and creativity when doing so (Ashoka Learning Lab 2016). A social innovator is focused on changing complex systems in creative and iterative ways that actively engage solutions outside of traditional problem-solving paradigms (Price 2022). I believe the HRSA has great potential to directly impact both actors in a few critical ways. Firstly, it offers the changemaking learner and social innovator an opportunity to ground their practice and purpose through a statement of intent. Secondly, it expands the potential of the changemaking learner to disrupt a common and deeply embedded practice within traditional Western academic spaces. These practices often rely on the understanding that once we learn something, we own it. Yet, there are many examples of global Indigenous traditions which operate in contrast to this paradigm, where much like land and other non-human-kin, knowledge itself is never something that can be owned or imperialized. Thus, in seeing knowledge through the wisdom teachings lens, we then understand that knowledge is something that you are granted access to and thus become a steward of. And, along with stewardship comes responsibility.

I believe that the changemaking learner and social innovator stands in no better position to use this grounding declaration to cultivate action so that the limitless potential of the learner and their social impact are realized at the highest degree.

Social innovation and changemaking access a diverse range of disciplines and ways of knowing in order to effect positive social impact. To this end, the HRSA's inclusion of interconnectedness can effectively support the human-centered connection to the ideas that we cultivate, the projects we attempt to innovate, and the intention of social consciousness we wish to uphold.

The absence of grounding the learner before one embarks upon the acquirement of knowledge not only silences the deeper connection to wisdom teachings present in one's very own communities, much like the potential and possibilities of truly seeing one another (Sawubona greeting) but also deepens the space between the learner and the human experiences

which inspire the need for change and social innovation. Thus, grounding our practice in situating the importance of knowledge stewardship over knowledge ownership allows for a broader range of possibilities, translations, conversations, and sustainable outcomes to manifest.

The HRSA opens the possibility to shift entrenched paradigms within any discipline by challenging our propensity toward imperializing knowledge for the outcome, as opposed to pushing back at complicity through learning that is grounded in humility, respect, and revitalizing the wisdoms and knowledges that nurture not just what we learn, but how we learn it.

Using the HRSA

This declaration can be utilized to inaugurate any gathering, meeting, educational lesson, or lecture. Personally, I have included the HRSA as part of my personal and academic written work at Royal Roads University as a means to give credence to the lived experiences connected to the exchange of knowledge within various systems of learning. But, on a deeper level, the HRSA has allowed me to anchor the wisdom of interconnection as a guiding lens through which I explore the field of Human Security and attempt to make greater sense of the world. Where the act of learning appeals to a higher self, as well as the diverse identities and wisdom teachings I carry. As a result, I am able to move forward as a learner with a stronger voice and confident engagement that expands opportunities for transformative innovation within spaces of learning and beyond.

The HRSA stands as a living declaration and is not meant to compete but rather support and honor existing land acknowledgments. The HRSA is rooted in the willingness of the learner to connect with the unlearning required to support anti-oppression. In doing so, the HRSA can be utilized as a powerful tool, as it drives the learner to think critically about the kind of humanity they wish to express within all systems and structures, which must, above all, align with the sanctity of the land, its peoples, and histories.

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the teachers and knowledge keepers who have and continue to guide my journey of learning. I would like to express many thanks to the reviewers for their time and deeply thoughtful feedback. Your guidance through this process has challenged my learning and helped bring this paper to life in more ways than one. Thank you to my mother Padmini, my late father Owen, Melanie, Eric, Sarojini, Ricky, Krishna, Shanthi, Keveshan, Suriya, Collen, Ramie Mummy, Ava, Ma, and Koa for your continued support and belief in this work.

References

- Ashoka Learning Lab. 2016. “More than Simply ‘Doing Good’: A Definition of Changemaker What Children, Truckers, and Superheroes All Have in Common.”
- Price, U. (2022, January 18). *What Is Social Innovation?* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGh3ZEW2INw&feature=youtu.be>.
- Tynan, Lauren. 2021. “What Is Relationality? Indigenous Knowledges, Practices and Responsibilities with Kin.” *Cultural Geographies* 28 (4): 597–610. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740211029287>.
- University of Ottawa. *Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers: UOTTAWA guide to Indigenous protocols*. Indigenous Resource Centre. University of Ottawa. Accessed November 10, 2022. https://www2.uottawa.ca/about-us/sites/g/files/bhrs336/files/2021-09/icca_19_1126_reference_guide_eng_final2.pdf.
- Waghid, Yusef. 2020. “Towards an Ubuntu Philosophy of Higher Education in Africa.” *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, March. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-020-09709-w>.
- Suriya Veerappan, interview with author, recording, Human Rights Education Classroom YRP, 2020

ⁱ This word is intentionally lower case, as the original language of Tasmania palawa kani has only lowercase letters. Leaving the word lowercase acknowledges ho Tynan wishes to be identified as well as the continued efforts at language preservation in Tasmania.