What is the motivation for participating in debates regarding social transformation?

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In Western society the general basis for human interactions and existence is formed, to a large extent, by processes of democracy and the realization of the importance of human rights for all people. Although equal opportunities for all people and the ability to compete on a 'level playing field' are objectives of a democratic system, these ideals are rarely achieved. This begs questions like "Do human rights secure equal opportunities?", and "Are equal educational opportunities a human right?". In the South African context we see students from previously disadvantaged communities still entering tertiary level education with huge disadvantages, even 15 years after the democratic election. These disadvantages are usually the result of huge variations in educational standards at different schools. To give just one example of the emotional result of this situation: at a recent talk at UWC (2010) Prof Leon Tickly said that if he were a parent in South Africa he would be very angry about the current education situation. He strongly encourages South African parents to actively start participating in debates and acting against unequal educational opportunities.

In this presentation I will focus specifically on the motivation to participate, or not, in debates regarding democracy, human rights and social transformation. Psychology identifies two broad ranges of motivations: intrinsic/internal motivation and extrinsic/external factors driving a person to act or change. Leon Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory holds that one constantly seeks stability among one's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours and therefore one will resist changes in influences or expectations. Dissonance could be eradicated by reducing the significance of the 'incompatible' belief, or by obtaining new beliefs as replacement, or by ignoring the 'incompatible' belief, attitude or behaviour.

In the smaller context of the university the motivations for participating in, for instance, the Pedagogy of Hope project or the colloquium on Hopeful Pedagogies could therefore yield interesting insights. A possible motivation to participate could be to achieve or maintain a power position. Another possible motivation could be to deal with one's feelings of guilt about the past. Another possibility is doing it because it is what one believes to be ethically correct, to act from philanthropic motivations by opposing the inequalities that affect many marginalised communities around Stellenbosch.

Some motivations to not participate might be fear of having to lose some of one's privileges, or losing some power. One could be scared to start thinking in this way because it could expose many uncertainties. This fear could be the reason for the lack of interest to participate in conversations such as these.

It is exactly these types of fears and sensitive emotions, which I recognise in myself but also in my students, that motivated me to start a Citizenship project which I introduced into the Visual Communication Design curriculum. The Citizenship project aims to address social transformation through using conversations, community interactions, reflection writing and art as a medium to work through sensitive issues. Themes that were discussed this year are stereotyping, power relations, blackness/whiteness and social discrimination. An Action Research methodology is used as a framework for the Citizenship project.

The project is structured in such a way that the students' tasks are dependent on their conversations with their Kayamandi learning partners. This forces the students to learn from communities around them and also to appreciate indigenous knowledge. The extrinsic motivation for entering into a conversation with their learning partners is based on the fact that they need the information to enable them to pass the project. I hope that this will become an intrinsic motivation, keeping the conversations alive outside the Citizenship project. There are examples of students

who have stayed in contact with their learning partners three years after their community interactions.

One of the aims of the Citizenship project is that the space that is created for conversations should be non-threatening. It should be a space where everyone does not have to agree, but where they learn to accommodate differences. The reality of our world is based on difference; and difference is also the space where creativity could be engendered. Creativity is dependent on variation, otherwise it becomes stagnant. For creativity to thrive we have to participate, converse, negotiate and act, otherwise there would be no products deriving from this potentially creative space.

I will ask the participants to make a quick drawing of their motivation for participating in these conversations, and then to discuss it briefly with the person next to them.