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Nelson Mandela believed in the philosophy of Ubuntu, which is the idea that all humans are connected to one another and should therefore strive to understand and care for one another. Knowing this, it may seem strange that he would encourage the use of a “weapon”, traditionally thought of as an object that inflicts physical damage. In this quote, by using the word weapon to refer to education, the acquisition of knowledge, Mandela suggests that the use of education, and the understanding of the world that it brings, to solve problems would make other forms of weaponry obsolete.

I believe that education brings an understanding of fellow human beings that is discouraged when physical weaponry is used, and thus allows us to change the world in positive ways. The use of weapons necessitates the dehumanization of the weapon’s targets. Those with political beliefs, religions, or heritages are transformed by the weapon user into objects to detract from the reality of harming another human being. Education on the other hand, expands students’ view of the world. Through our study of literature we gain insight into the experiences of others, through our study of history we see how the actions of the past are affecting the present and future, and through our study of science we learn that all nature, all life is fundamentally the same. Mandela, in his quote is telling the reader that if they utilize this understanding of the world and the people in it gained from education they will be better able to enact change in this world.

The 1993 interim South African Constitution read, “there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance”, meaning that the way to recover from periods of injustice or suffering is not to place blame on another, reducing their value, but to understand one other moving forward. Education, although it does look to the past for knowledge, sets the eyes of students to the problems that they see in their own world. Education, in its capacity as a weapon, should not be used to harm other humans but to destroy the entities which are afflicting people of the world. The immense body of human knowledge is waiting for us, and we can use it to solve in new and innovative ways the challenges that our society faces today. From the vaccine for Malaria to the injustice faced by minorities in America to sources renewable energy, education gives us the ability to change our world.

When Nelson Mandela said “Education is the most powerful weapon that you can use to change the world”, he meant that education provides us with the ability to understand our world and one another, and by doing so eliminates the need for weapons that cause us to harm others. Education is the most powerful weapon because it does not destroy, does not harm. Education provides the clear vision that we need to recognize the changes and the abilities that we need to implement those changes.