

# **EDUCATION AND LEARNING IN AFRICA: INTERCONNECTING AN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION WITH CRITICAL AND FEMINIST PEDAGOGIES**

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The very popular quote about the future of education and learning by American writer and futurist, Alvin Toffler, which asserts that “the illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn” is as poignant today as it was in 1970 when he wrote the book *Future Shock* as a way of describing the social paralysis induced by rapid technological change. I think the theme of this conference “Education and Learning in a world of Difference: African Perspectives” in many ways is trying to address this issue and other issues and I believe papers presented at this conference will contribute to the ongoing debate on the trajectories of the future of education and learning in our African contexts.

The central and reoccurring argument is that education systems must provide relevant skills for today’s market and the jobs of the future. That the high level of employment experienced in many countries in Africa is because there is a mismatch between the skills provided by education systems and the jobs required by the labor market. As Harrison (2017) argues, among the profound changes in the contemporary world of work, employee expect newly minted graduate employees to have leadership abilities, advanced conceptual skills, technology-enhanced learning, and high-value professional capabilities. In essence, “governments, employers and other stakeholders have come to expect higher education to contribute to the development of a variety of complex ‘skills’, which—they argue—enhances the stock of human capital and makes for national economic well-being” (Knight and York 2003: 3).

Fundamental questions have been raised about the difference between learning and formal education. Joi Ito, the director of the MIT Media Lab, is often quoted as saying that “Education is what people do to you. Learning is what you do for yourself.” This quote insinuates that formal education is passive, intrinsic and driven by curriculum whereas learning is active, extrinsic and driven by curiosity. My presentation today, however, is not going to focus on this debate. By asking a lot of questions I will try to navigate the pathways to learning and education in a world in which technology is acting as a catalyst for an explosion in the production and publication of free learning materials,

access to formal education and innovative ways of learning and the role of educators, learners, the state and the private sector in ensuring that education and learning is transformative and catering to the human justice and development needs of Africans.

### **Where we stand**

The world is indeed changing rapidly, and for education to continue to fuel growth and prosperity, systems must adapt with the changing world and education is particularly important, if Africa is to develop its human resources and catch up with the rest of the world. According to Nelson Mandela, “Education is the most important weapon with which to change society”. There is a lot of truism to that statement if we do not limit education to only formal forms of acquiring skills and knowledge but to the process of learning, unlearning and relearning.

Approaches for the advancement and acceptance of technology in Africa have often been couched in development discourse that have been critiqued for failing to develop Africa. Many African scholars and thinkers have used a postcolonial theoretical framework to analyze the global discourse on the role of education, learning and technology, positing that internationally determined agendas fail to take account of context and culture (Salmi 2001, Boateng 2002). The political aspect of postcolonialist analysis seeks to expose the inconsistencies in externally defined development rationales for developing countries. They argue that northern texts and discourses often fail to recognize southern ideologies, thus contributing to their ongoing marginalization and silencing of the very voices that might contribute to the strengthening of alternative discourses to influence policy on a global level. A number of African writers claim that there are distinctively African philosophical worldviews that are associated with concepts of connectedness, communalism, interdependency and intersubjectivity (Bell, 1997, Preece 2013). A primary indicator of these ideas is the way the individual is positioned in relation to others. For many Africans the individual ‘exists for society and society for the individual’ (Fordjor et al., 2003, p. 190; Fasokun et al., 2005) where knowledge is a shared, seamless resource and learning is firmly rooted in the African experience of living within one’s own society (Lekoko and Modise, 2011, Preece 2013). Ramose (2004) argues that for us to change and embrace an African philosophy of education, we have to fully understand the undeserved dominance of the colonizer’s philosophy of education. He further asserts that “the ethical imperative is to construct a philosophy of education reflective of the totality of the experience of all the peoples of Africa” and that African tertiary institutions should have an unwavering commitment to the creation and maintenance of the conditions for free inquiry and creativity (139). In essence, these scholars are advocating for an African philosophy of education that addresses both the intellectual and social needs of learners. In this light, how do we as educators and our institutions of higher learning continue to build on the core strengths of higher education; teaching, learning, scholarship, creative work, research, and the ability to transform lives, in a world of difference? What do we need to foster the

acquisition of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills? The burden, I think, lies squarely on educators as on state governments and private sector to invest in education, learning approaches and technology that can support teaching and learning and boost creativity and critical thinking.

Globally, access to education is increasing as many more people continue to access varied forms of education. However, the reality is that the efficiency and productivity of higher education institutions in Africa have been thwarted by long-standing problems of finance, efficiency, equity, quality and governance and these have been compounded by new challenges linked to the growing role of knowledge in economic development, rapid changes in telecommunications technology, and the globalization of trade and labor markets (Salmi 2011, Willaims et al 2003). This is also linked to the fact that the capacity to generate and harness knowledge in the pursuit of sustainable development and improved living standards is not spread equally among nations.

### **Technology, Education and Learning**

Technology is clearly now seen as central to helping students to discover and develop their own greatness but has also been seen as both a challenge and, potentially, the solution to the challenges faced by learners and educators in a rapidly changing world. The focus has been on driving learning towards usable lifetime skills and preparing students for viable futures in a technology-based society. For Peter Claxton (2018), technology and social media have given rise to challenges, inside the classroom and beyond, that require a realignment of skills and a greater emphasis on an individual's thoughts, emotions and behaviour." In many developed and developing countries, the internet has created access to sheer volume of new knowledge and has changed the landscape of education and learning. Teachers and learners are able to access rich and current materials of varied genres for people of all ages and abilities. Early digital platforms like Wikipedia and Google have already transformed how we search for information, videos, slides, podcasts and advanced social tool have expanded the possibilities for learners. This is however not the case for many learners in Africa wherein even though there are millions of great learning materials freely available online, internet connectivity continues to remain a challenge for many educators and learners. It's not simply a case of making knowledge available, but also making it accessible. How do we as educators engage with this explosion of information? How do we use it to enhance learning? How do we ensure that we don't raise lazy students who do not think critically but plagiarize by downloading and passing other people's work as theirs? These are all challenges some of us have with access to connectivity and information.

For me, technology should be used as a tool and not a means. Critical thinking and a sense of justice is what I try to share with my students. As *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman posits "The future isn't about what we know, because digitized

libraries and powerful search engines allow us to find even the most specific details – about virtually any subject – with lightning speed. Instead, the future is about what we can do with what we know.” And this brings me to our role as educators.

### **The Role of Educators and Higher Educational Institutions**

Educators and institutions play a crucial role in how learners develop curiosity and intrinsic motivations to explore the world and I believe that fairness and justice should be integral to the propagation of learning and education in this our changing world. As an African feminist and a gender equality and social inclusion activist, I pay attention to the complex experiences faced by all women of all cultures on the African continent as well as the complex experiences of other marginalized and socially excluded groups such as people living with disability. As such, I am concerned about the particularities of each learner’s life-world experiences, how the different dimensions of their difference intersect, what it would take to meet the needs of each learner and how I negotiate learning pathways that are appropriate to students’ interests and dispositions, without short-changing the disadvantaged. I try to create the sense of belonging that is central to inclusive education because I understand that the paradox of belonging today – to the nation, to the workplace, to the classroom – is based on an understanding of difference. I try to pay attention to the dimensions of learner diversity because I understand that their material (class, locale), corporeal (age, race, sex and sexuality, and physical and mental characteristics) and symbolic (culture, language, gender, family, affinity and persona) values and experience influence how they learn and use knowledge. As Kalantzis and Cope (2009) posit, I believe that “Learner transformation is a central mission of education. It occurs through the extension of the learner’s repertoire of knowledge and capacities. It involves boundary crossing and expanding their horizons in a world of differences.”

In essence, free enquiry and creativity has been my own pedagogical approach to teaching and learning. Because I am grounded and believe in political and critical consciousness, I see the most promising ways to help students develop the ability to be open and reflective about their learning histories, values, beliefs, and actions is through critical and feminist pedagogy. Teaching for transformation through critical and feminist pedagogy, I believe, creates the agency through which students are able to question hegemonic discourses, explore alternative ideas, perspectives and ways of taking action. I believe students have to be exposed in ways that will help them reflect deeply on commonly accepted knowledges.

Our institutions, including educational institutions, function as major sites for the production and reproduction of gendered identities and inequalities. Rhetoric of women’s participation, empowerment and inclusion abound both at the national and institutional levels but the reality is that women continue to be excluded in decision-making at all levels. Tertiary institutions are no exceptions where we find that the majority at the professorial level are men while women are at the lecturer level. This is

problematic because academia should be a place where students' minds are broadened and not sites for the entrenchment of gender biases. It is therefore imperative for academic institutions to restructure their policies, processes, curriculum in order to establish gender equality.

As educators in tertiary institutions we should endeavor to produce critical thinkers who will not only come up with home-grown solutions to our problems on the continent but also capable of understanding the injustices experienced by minority groups such as women and people living with disability . Critical theorists like Ira Shor (1999) have argued that education serves the dual function of conditioning members of society to accept oppressive structures, and in the process helps to obscure from their consciousness those fundamental contradictions. Paulo Freire (1968), the Brazilian educationist observes that education itself is a site of domination and that the whole activity of education is political in nature. Politics resides in the discourse of the classroom, the subjects chosen for the syllabus, what is left out, method of choosing course content, setting standardized exams and so on. In the introduction to *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1970), Richard Shaull observes that “there is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes “the practice of freedom,” the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.(16). What all of this point to is the fact that literacy is neither value free nor purely functional and because of this reality, I believe that students need to be exposed to ways in which they can question and interpret social, political, economic, educational, religious and other realities in liberating, emancipatory and transformative ways.

These forms of learning which occur through self-reflection and open up alternative ways of knowing and being are pertinent because processes of modernization, development and new forces of production, have developed structures and ideologies that dominate the majority of the world's population. These hegemonic discourses and ideologies do not only dominate but also tend to marginalize other ways of knowing. Students need to be encouraged to create their own texts using their own experiences and what they know in order to question hegemonic discourses. For example, when I teach Sierra Leonean literature on the civil war, I expect my students to not only do a literary appreciation but to enter the discourse with their own versions of the war experience as well as interrogate how and why some experiences are valid and others marginalized. I want them to question how and why works or war narratives written by Sierra Leonean writers in the diaspora become best sellers but those written by home-based writers are hardly ever heard of? I want them to understand the politics of location and the politics in publishing, so that they begin to think of innovative ways of solving such quagmires.

Much of university teaching on the continent is based on traditional pedagogy and conventional curriculum that is often outdated, not responsive to employers' requirements, and disconnected from the labor market. There continues to be didactic teaching and curriculum with rigid expectations of 'right' and 'wrong' answers in conventional tests. I have found that Educators are often scared to tread in the area of learner agency because the more we take learner agency into account, the more multifarious its manifestations become – material, corporeal and symbolic – and the more complex the matrices and intersections. It is outside of our comfort zone and our pedagogical training to give students a free hand to determine the pathways to acquiring knowledge. As Kalantzis and Cope (2009) argue, "Learning is most powerful when diverse perspectives are brought to bear. Knowledge construction and learning become all the more potent for their productive engagement with diversity. This is the basis for learning and knowledge ecologies that are very different from traditional transmission models of pedagogy and broadcast models for communicating culture and knowledge. The educational outcome is not content knowledge, or at least not that primarily. It is the development of kinds of persons who have the capacity to learn and act in particular ways. They can navigate change, negotiate deep diversity and make and lead change rather than be knocked about by it. They can engage in sometimes difficult dialogues. They can compromise and create shared understandings. And they can comfortably extend their cultural and knowledge repertoires into new areas. They are tolerant, responsible and resilient in their differences."

In essence, I am suggesting that we take a leaf from Experiential learning theory which draws on the work of prominent 20th century scholars such as John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, William James, Carl Jung, Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers and others who gave experience a central role in their theories of human learning and development. These theorists posit that learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcome; All learning is relearning; Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world; Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world; Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment; . Learning is the process of creating knowledge. (Kolb, 2005). We should also take a leaf from African thinkers such as Ngugi Wa Thiongo' Mudimbe, Said, Mazrui and a host of others who have consistently drawn attention to to the epistemology of knowledge production and the philosophical/psychic/historical tendency of a dominant culture to look upon the "other" as inferior. I believe our role as educators is to help students develop the skills to filter discourses including the reliance on educational technologies in this ever-changing world.

### **Way Forward**

Educators continue to constitute the largest share of the employment sector in most countries, the single-most important input into the education process in terms of

determining learning outcomes, but yet the most poorly paid and often considered by many as a lowly profession that mostly attract people who have failed to enter other prestigious occupations. Education strategies often pay little attention to factors affecting teacher effectiveness, such as policies for training, deployment, management, incentives, supervision and accountability for learning outcomes. If we are expected to unlock the potential of all learners, particularly those excluded because of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or learning differences and engage in the application of learning technologies and new media to meet the needs of diverse populations of learners and create learning environments that encourage innovation and a sense of justice, there is a need to promote, support and build systems that support research to understand how teaching and learning can be transformed to unlock such potentials.

Over the years, university autonomy has been usurped by governments, incentives and rewards for research productivity, teaching excellence and associated innovation gradually disappearing which have resulted in low research outputs, decline in educational quality, and the rigid management structures (Williams et al 2003). Investing in physical infrastructure, organizational structures and curriculum is a must for drastic turn around in higher education.

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