



Sustainable Rural Learning Ecologies: A Pathway to Acknowledging African Knowledge Systems in the Arena of Mainstream of Knowledge Production?

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Abstract

This article proposes an idea which to most might seem misplaced and unrealistic. Its aim is to demystify myths around African scholarship and rural learning ecologies that are misrepresented in discourses dominant in the global North. Sustainable rural learning ecologies located within African-centred philosophy should be understood in this context as a transformational agenda and a vehicle for knowledge construction. The concept of sustainable rural learning ecologies is simply about acknowledging knowledge constructions within the rural contexts as knowledge embedded in African value systems. Knowledge construction in a rural learning context should be celebrated for its strengths and opportunities, as having its own comparative and competitive advantage in the global discourse arena. Sustainable rural learning ecologies (SuRLEc) should be understood as an epistemological discourse that makes meaning and critiques the dominant body of knowledge by affirming rural context and cultural constructs. The paper examines hegemonic dominant discourses that try to monopolize knowledge production systems and domesticate other parameters for the interpretation of realities as historically obsolete, irrational and pre-modern. It argues that SuRLEc is a platform that holds people's experiences as sources for the construction of forms of knowledge. I therefore argue for learning ecologies that acknowledge different formations and foundations for the construction of pyramids of knowledge. I conclude by dismissing views that hold that any one pyramid of knowledge is by its nature eminently superior to all others.

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Résumé

Cet article propose une idée qui, pour beaucoup, peut sembler déplacée et irréaliste. Son objectif est de lever les mythes autour de la recherche africaine et des environnements d'apprentissage ruraux qui sont dénaturés dans les discours dominants dans l'hémisphère Nord. Les environnements d'apprentissage ruraux durables figurant dans la philosophie centrée sur l'Afrique devraient être compris dans ce contexte comme un programme de transformation et un moyen de construction de la connaissance. Le concept d'environnements d'apprentissage ruraux durables consiste tout simplement à reconnaître les acquisitions de connaissances dans les contextes ruraux comme des connaissances intégrées dans les systèmes de valeurs africaines. L'acquisition de connaissances dans un contexte d'apprentissage rural devrait être célébrée pour ses forces et ses possibilités, comme ayant son propre avantage comparatif et compétitif sur la scène mondiale du discours. Les environnements d'apprentissage ruraux durables (SuRLEc) doivent être compris comme un discours épistémologique qui fait sens et critique le corps dominant de la connaissance en affirmant le contexte rural et les construits culturels. L'article examine les discours dominants hégémoniques qui tentent de monopoliser les systèmes de production de connaissances et de domestiquer les autres paramètres pour l'interprétation des réalités comme historiquement obsolètes, irrationnelles et prémodernes. Il fait valoir que les environnements d'apprentissage ruraux durables sont une plateforme qui utilise les expériences des individus comme sources pour l'acquisition de formes de connaissances. Je défends les environnements d'apprentissage qui reconnaissent différentes formations et fondations pour la construction des pyramides de connaissances. Je conclus en rejetant les points de vue qui soutiennent qu'une pyramide de connaissances est de par sa nature éminemment supérieure à toutes les autres.

Introduction

The starting point in making an argument for sustainable rural learning ecologies (SuRLEc) is to question the relevance of rurality as a socio-political space, and of Africanization in this century. Scholars around the globe are contesting the notion of Africanization as a socio-political discourse because of its connection with issues of ideology, power and knowledge. However, SuRLEc couched within African philosophy, should be understood as reflecting the dynamic and fluid lived experiences of African people subjected to conditions of neo-colonization and neo-apartheid. Africanization is about repositioning our knowledge constructions in curricula from the historical past and deciding on the shape and form of our own destinies.

In setting the stage for Africanization and SuRLEc I will use anecdotes about African people in rural settings who are becoming themselves by ac-

knowledging their worth and their African value systems. For example, if there were no apple trees where Sir Isaac Newton lived, where and when would the laws of gravity have been discovered? When one drives a Mercedes Benz, or a Bavaria Motor Works (BMW), one identifies with the best of German engineering. These anecdotes about Isaac Newton and German engineering accomplishments point to the fundamental of origins and roots of knowledge construction, its meaning and context, its relevance, its interactiveness, its use and its culture-relatedness. It is significant that knowledge has roots where it originates and moves from the local to the global (Makgoba 2005).

I argue that Africanization and SuRLEc are all about showing respect for and acceptance of African cultures and value systems. My understanding is that any form of knowledge has its foundation on the experiences of people informed by their own sociological and cultural constructs. Africans are faced with numerous challenges, not only to transform their social status, but to seek revival, rebirth and renewal to signal their identity as people. It is necessary to scrutinize African cultural identity as it is understood in the article. I am mindful of the fact that there are numerous other positions on the definition of African cultural identity. In this discussion, African cultural identity may be and is a social construct. The dominant ideologies crystallized in colonialism and apartheid have attempted to define African identity and how knowledge is constructed. I am mindful of the multiplicity of other definitions; Africanization remains a contested terrain that can never be neutral. The concept has been the subject of many disciplines, ranging from anthropology, sociology, cultural studies and political science to history and beyond. Meanings are as many as there are theorists and discourses around the notion of Africanization (Mahlomaholo 1998: 81).

SuRLEc located within Africanization cannot be theorized out of existence; it is important to understand that these ecologies are a position in discursive spaces and practices. The dominant ideologies have defined and theorized Africanization as a static concept to the extent that African people could be described as primitive. I wish to demystify these myths by arguing that knowledge construction located within African cultural values is a multiple dynamic and fluid process that involves lived experiences of Africans. African knowledge construction refers to discourses that Africans share with the globe, both within and outside their cultural milieu. Africans, irrespective of where they come from, position themselves in terms of geopolitical spaces (for example a rural setting) in counter-hegemonic discourses. This will give a different meaning and understanding to what it means to be an African in a rural setting. The onus is on Africans in those socio-political spaces to radically position themselves as equal partners in knowledge construction on the global stage.

Dominant discourses have monopolized the parameters for interpreting realities. These dominant ideologies have continued to teach Africans that everything African is pitiful, despicable and embarrassing and should be subjected to cleansing with global Northern or Western tools (Odora-Hoppers 2002). This is evident in South African rural settings, where knowledge constructed by people from these socio-political settings is subjugated or pushed to the periphery in the advancement of global dominant ideologies. To counter this neo-colonial mentality, it is relevant and important to acknowledge and respect SuRLEc located within Africanization, because knowledge is relative to culture and context. If we acknowledge rural learning ecologies, we will overcome the penalties of the colonial master that valorize and amplify the dominant ideologies, with little faith and pride in African achievements, heritage and cultural dynamics.

Theoretical Frameworks Adopted

This discussion is underpinned by an eclectic mix of theoretical frameworks. A hybrid of theoretical frameworks was chosen, motivated by the power and possibilities of challenging dominant ideologies of meritocracy and macro- and micro-aggression. This piece wants to disrupt, dismantle and trouble the complex struggles of ideological beliefs rooted in Western/Eurocentric/global Northern epistemologies. Eurocentric epistemological dominance seems to militate for the maintenance of superiority through the production of knowledge and disregard of 'other' epistemological stances.

This paper is informed by the assets-based approach, critical theory, critical emancipatory research and critical race theory. The aim of adopting this eclectic mix is to trouble Eurocentric epistemological perspectives that have been dominant ideologies in the arena of knowledge production rooted in white superiority that subjugates, devalues, delegitimizes and marginalizes others forms of knowledge construction. These theoretical frameworks share a counter-hegemonic stance that disrupts the mainstream and brings social justice, hope, democracy, emancipation and equity to 'other' forms of knowing. Common features of these theoretical frameworks are validation of the marginalized, emancipation of the devalued, amplification of the voices of the voiceless, and empowerment of the disempowered. The shared golden threads in these frameworks are aligned to and focused on the subject matter (see Delgado Bernal and Villalpando 2002; Huber 2009; Mahlomaholo and Nkoane 2002; Nkoane 2012).

Principles for Positioning Sustainable Rural Learning Ecologies

For SuRLEc to be firmly grounded within Africanization it should respond to the following principles that are informed by African cultural values, namely equity, social justice, peace, freedom and hope. Equity forms the foundation of pyramids of knowledge; equity in this piece of work is understood as the disruption and dismantling of dominant hegemonic ideologies. Every society works to reproduce itself within its cultural order and the structure of practices and meanings around which that society takes shape. Cultural values are relayed through various features, and those values are registered to a larger societal structure and way of life. Antonio Gramsci's theories in the early 1970s amplified the necessity of disrupting the hegemony and domination of the thinking, the life-ways and everyday subjugation of the marginalized (Gitlin 1979). Equity becomes a revolutionary strategy to counter hegemonic discourse. Adorno (1974) and Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) also argued forcefully for dismantling and disrupting the dominance of hegemonic ideologies.

I further wish to argue and contribute to the disruption of narrowly defined process of knowledge construction, predominantly informed by Eurocentric epistemologies and dominant ideologies that seem to subjugate other forms of knowledge construction. Authors such as Huber (2009), and Delgado Bernal and Villalpando (2002) refer to the apartheid of knowledge in academia, which is sustained by an epistemological subjugation that limits the range of other possible epistemologies within the mainstream. Dominant ideologies portray other ways of knowing and knowledge construction as deficient and non-rigorous. For unknown political reasons of dominance in knowledge construction, some forms of knowing have been devalued, delegitimized and marginalized. Knowledge construction has been used as a tool and practice of 'othering' knowledge constructed outside the global North.

Equity, as a revolutionary strategy to counter hegemonic dominance of knowing and knowledge construction, could be equated to the understanding of how issues of power are tied to the legitimacy of knowledge. Huber (2009) asserts that knowledge as a discourse of power decides what is considered truth or scientific, and this is tied to the power to legitimate and de-legitimate whether something is scientific or not. Dominant ideologies have used cultural deficit models to denigrate, marginalize and subjugate other forms of knowing as unscientific.

The second principle that should inform SuRLEc is social justice; this principle contests issues of power relations and prejudices about who are the custodians of 'legitimate' or scientific knowledge. Social justice in this article is constructed as a way to disturb tensions of power relations present in educational practice. I am using Foucault's theorization that challenges

hegemonic dominance in knowledge construction and practices. Foucault advocates social justice that acknowledges other forms of knowing, and societal values and cultural structures that move towards equity instead of marginalization (Foucault 1997). The starting point of social justice, according to Foucault, is to challenge power wielded by the strong over the weak. For SuRLEc, responding to the principle of social justice should be seen as a countering of dominant power relations by enabling the individual telling of stories, and thereby allowing people in different geo-socio-political spaces who are usually assumed to be without 'legitimate' scientific stories to be at the centre rather than on the periphery.

The third principle for SuRLEc is peace, by challenging the marginalization and disrespect inherent in claims that certain forms of knowledge are superior to others. The dominant hegemonic ideologies have monopolized the parameters of the interpretation of realities. Western and Eurocentric dominance in Africa, due to various colonial footprints, has managed to maintain dominance over colonized African people. African people were intellectually, socially, economically and politically marginalized from the centre of knowledge production (see Kallaway 2002; Mahlomaholo 1998; Nkomo 1992). Amilcar Cabral (1979: 53) asserted that:

[ext] foreign domination, whether imperialist or not, would choose to liquidate the population of the dominated, eliminating possibilities of their existence; or...impose itself to the culture of the dominated. [ends]

The subjugation of African culture and ways of knowing is common due to colonization and imperialism, which have caused disturbances in the thoughts, emotions and way of life for those who experience such systems. What we need to ask is what Africans could offer to the people of Africa, to the world and the global corpus of knowledge, just as the dominant discourse has engaged and left footprints on the world of knowledge (see Nkoane and Lavia 2012; Makgoba 2005).

The fourth principle is total emancipation, which is critical for SuRLEc to position itself in the centre and move from the periphery. Africans must address social ills, ignorance, distorted consciousness and constraints of ideology. Total emancipation in this piece is understood as African consciousness, from which it derives and celebrates its strengths and opportunities to its own comparative and competitive advantage in the global arena. Irrespective of the socio-political spaces, Africans must draw their inspiration from their environments, as an indigenous plant growing from a seed that is planted and nurtured in African soil (see Makgoba 2005; Nkoane 2012).

The last principle that needs to drive and motivate SuRLEc within Africanization is that of hope; it should be a driving force to Africans and the world. Africans should not be copying from foreign dominant ideologies but should be driven by a hope that informs the natural intellectual growth of African social and political habits. Irrespective of their social stations, Africans should not have a feeling of helplessness that seeks validation from dominant hegemonic forces. Validation of their own knowledge construction should generate the knowledge that would contribute to improving the life and work of ordinary Africans in different socio-political spaces. SuRLEc should contribute to the socio-economic and intellectual emancipation of the total human race. Africans themselves must engage with and reflect on their own meaning-making for African knowledge construction to be validated as relevant and responsive.

Knowledge Construction as a Contested Terrain

Knowledge is created in discourses, in the narrow or intervening spaces of relational conversation and lived experiences. For me, knowledge is about imagination and imagining; it is always coloured by perspectives, whether they are African, rural, European or American. Because knowledge is constructed in the regime of truth, it is not one thing only, but an ever-evolving complexity, which is never finite. For sustainable rural learning ecologies to prosper, African knowledge construction must position itself on an increasingly shrinking global stage.

Foucault (2004) avers that knowledge is mere invention, a result of interactions between impulses, desires, instincts and fear. Knowledge is always a fragile compromise, produced in the narrow, intervening clashes of conflicts, interests and instincts. Foucault further argues that knowledge is the outcome of a battle and functions as a strategic relation between living beings. He points out that truth and power are interlinked; they maintain each other, resulting in a specific 'regime of truth' that differs from society to society. This regime of truth defines which discourses are allowed and accepted as true, and provides the mechanism to distinguish between 'right' and 'wrong'.

Hegemonic dominance in the circles of knowledge construction is a political battle in which the discursive weapons of knowledge and power are used and which determine the formation of a context-specific truth. The battle and dominance is about the truth itself rather than the status of being accepted as truth with all its economic and political implications. As a counter-hegemonic strategy, Africans in rural settings should position themselves as equal partners in the corpus of global knowledge. Foucault (1976; 1979; 1988) has described the origins of various systems of ideas developing into scientific disciplines. He reiterates that a specific way of thinking is established on the basis of discovery or construction of an object.

Knowledge is Culture- and Context-relative

Throughout history, dominant ideologies have tried to monopolize the parameters of interpreting realities. Hegemonically dominant discourses continue to teach people that everything rural and African is pitiful, despicable and embarrassing and should be subjected to cleansing with Eurocentric or urban foreign tools (see Makgoba 2005; Mekoa 2006; Nkoane 2006; 2012; Odora-Hoppers 2002).

The use of anecdotes about Isaac Newton's law of gravity and the Mercedes and BMW as a reminder of German engineering in the introduction of this article speak to several fundamentals of knowledge: its meaning, its context, its relevance, its interactiveness, its use and its culture-relatedness. I demonstrated that knowledge always originates and moves from the local to the global. The recognition and signatures of knowledge are all blueprinted in its origins. Knowledge helps us understand more fully the past, the present and the future of our existence, our origins and our destiny.

In order to promote SuRLEc within the philosophical underpinning of Africanization, we should revisit our way of conceptualization about how we theorize and how we do research. SuRLEc should avoid imitation of the dominant discourse. Promoting SuRLEc within Africanization philosophy is about the grounds of a corpus of knowledge, about epistemology, about the objects of our intellectual aspiration. These two concepts (Africanization and SuRLEc) entail an interrogation of curricula and their relevance and appropriateness in responding to African objectives and demands (see Makgoba 1998; Mekoa 2006; Nkoane 2006).

What does Africanization of Knowledge Construction Mean to Me?

According to Asante (1997), Africanization is the orientation of the mind which aims at constructing an African consciousness that valorizes political strength, meaningful identity and the power to transform the social and economic circumstances of Africans and the world. In this article, Africanization is understood as a counter-hegemonic discourse, which interrogates epistemological considerations that are dominant in cultural identities. At an epistemological level, Africanization as discourse attempts to make meaning and critique the dominant body of knowledge by affirming an African cultural construct.

A worldview shaped by Africanization may lead to empowerment and emancipation, because it connects Africans to their historical traditions, and to a sense of community. According to Seepe (1998), Africanization is the view that the African experience in its totality is the foundation and sources of the construction of forms of knowledge. It means Africans must be the primary and principal communicators of African experience. It disclaims the

view that any pyramid of knowledge is in its very nature eminently superior to all others. Makgoba (1998) asserts that Africanization is a vehicle for defining, interpreting, promoting and transmitting African thought, philosophy, identity and culture. He sees Africanization as a mind-shift from a European to an African paradigm. Africanization involves incorporating and adapting other cultures into and through African visions and interpretations to provide the fluidity and dynamism that is important for the success of African people in the global arena. Africanization is non-racial.

Achebe (1997) spoke about African identity as an identity in the making. There is no final identity that is African. However, at the same time, there is an identity coming into existence and it has a certain context and meaning in which Africa signifies something to some people (see Makgoba 2005; Nkoane 2006). Africanness in this article is defined as dynamic and vibrant and not as fixed or static. Africanness implies a positioning in discursive spaces, and practices of power and knowledge relations that are dynamic and fluid. Mahlomaholo (2004) says Africanness is not about anatomy or geography, because these were nothing but *markers* that people used to single out others for oppression, exclusion and marginalization. Africanness exists more as an orientation of the mind than in reality. These markers were used to justify marginalization, exploitation, exclusion and social degradation, and they used negatively charged cultural constructions to achieve a particular goal.

To use this concept as a counter-discursive strategy, Africanness similarly refers to a position from which peoples can assert themselves. Such positions, because of the history and experiences that people have had (and still have), cannot be denied, because to some extent they have come to define who those people are. They are important positions from which people's basic human rights, privileges and interests can (and should) be argued, advocated and struggled for (Mahlomaholo 1998; Nkoane 2006).

Positioning African Rural Learning Ecologies in Narrow Spaces of Discourses

For me, SuRLEc means knowledge grounded in African communities and cultures. SuRLEc has to draw its inspiration from its environment, as an indigenous tree growing from a seed that is planted and nurtured in African soil. It needs to be useful to Africans and the world and should pursue knowledge constructions that contribute to the transformation of socio-economic and intellectual emancipation of the total human race. I see SuRLEc as an African knowledge system that is emancipatory, responsive, relevant and able reflect the identity of its people.

I am mindful of the realities referred to by Derrida (1995) as sameness which is not identical. Achebe (1997) describes diversity 'not as an abnormality, but as the reality of our planet'. Meaning that the nurturing of diverse cultures, ideas, perspectives, interpretations and worldviews are what enable the construction of knowing to reflect and relate to its society. Said (1996) tells us that our main weapons in the struggle for openness and tolerance are today not military but moral. He reminds us that the struggle against colonization and apartheid was clear about its goals and methods, and the liberation and democratic movements were clear in their purpose of social justice, inclusion and coexistence, as opposed to marginalization and exclusion.

Makgoba (2005) reminds us that for human beings to be totally emancipated we should not be trapped in the stale dichotomies of North and South, developed and developing, traditional and modern, urban and rural. The human race, irrespective of their social stations (i.e. geo-socio-political spaces) should become part of new dialogues and play a pivotal role in determining the national and global scientific agenda in the corpus of knowledge. Africans should also find the courage to claim place and space as trendsetters on the global stage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I argue that Africans should move towards identification, integration and engagement with African society and its realities, whether with languages and arts, music, culture, or worldview and ethics. Africans in pursuit of knowledge construction have the competitive and comparative advantage to preserve and develop rich African knowledge systems and heritage into the future. This could be achieved through differentiated forms of partnership at societal, regional, provincial and continental levels. These could be a set of interdependent, multi-dimensional interacting spheres on a geographical, socio-political, socio-cultural and economic basis. SuRLEc should entrench diversity and promote transformation. This should be informed by social justice, equity, hope, democracy and peace as the foundational principles to enable Africans to pursue their scholarship and acknowledge diverse foundations of pyramids of knowledge.

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