

## Epistemology of the South - “Navigating and Traversing the Proverbial Avalanche post PhD in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century - A Narrative Reflection”

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### Abstract

Knowledge can be transmitted, facilitated, developed, and produced in a variety of ways through education. As a matter of fact, universities in particular, are defined in terms of knowledge generation. We should not be surprised, then, that discussions about decolonizing (Western) education have expanded to encompass provincializing (Western) epistemology, given the close ties between education and educational institutions and epistemology. This presents a danger as epistemological pathways inform thinking partners and behavioural dynamics of societies. Deconstructive debate that seeks to discuss educational decoloniality from the Global South cannot articulate that with the exclusion of southern epistemological position towards reality with through the lens of its inhabitants. This is what confronts the post-doctoral scholar of the Global Centre for Academic Research and South Valley University, as independent entities within the Global South. This narrative reflection provides a baseline for a cogent discourse in favour of deconstruction of southern epistemological trajectory in education and social perspectives.

**Keywords:** Doctoral education; Decoloniality; Social Discourse; Southern Epistemology

### Introduction

The transmission, facilitation, development, and generation of knowledge all take place in the context of education. This is a cliché that almost sounds trite. Particularly universities are explicitly characterized in terms of knowledge creation. Given the close connection between epistemology and knowledge and education and educational institutions, it should not be surprising that discussions of the provincialization of (Western) epistemology have been part of decolonization discourses about (Western) education (Hall & Tandon, 2017). In this brief contribution, I want to challenge claims about the “(de) provincialization” and/or “(de)colonization” of knowledge and epistemology in the fields of education and research. I also want to explore whether postcolonial notions of diverse and local epistemologies do not contain an incorrect understanding of the term “epistemology.” I make the case for an applied epistemology that is grounded in the real world, arguing that there are valid justifications for having a clear understanding of knowledge and epistemology in education and educational research, as well as for being able to distinguish between knowledge and non-knowledge (Andreotti, et al., 2011). Differences based on geography, ethnicity, race, or genders are not pertinent factors in any such demarcation (Le Grange, 2016). They raise issues of social justice rather than epistemological relevance when they are used as criterion. In other words, personal reflection of inhabitants of diverse geographical areas is informed by epistemic drive in doctoral and post doctoral education.

In this reflective narrative (Savitha, et al., 2021) number of pointers are arguably presented for close scrutiny as a so called “proverbial avalanche”, post attainment of a PhD qualification by with Global Centre for Academic Research (GCAR) and South Valley University (SVU) scholar.

## Pursuing scholarship with a lens of Southern Epistemology

Firstly, I want to persuade you to get involved in knowledge production and enhance your scholarship (McKiernan, 2017) lo. I believe that scholarship is all things about reading, intellectual stimulation and remaining relevant throughout - beyond what we learn (Dobson, 2021). That means, what we learn during any particular period of our scholarship becomes part of a repetitive and cyclical rhythm, that traverses and transcends tons and tons of what one would have originally imagined. Thus, Socrates averred that the more he acquired knowledge was a defining moment that he did not have knowledge and had to pursue discovery (Lipton, 2005). Discovery requires determination and an inquisitive mind - to be curious and live by pursuing to answer the question, "what if" or "what then" (-Jirout, 2020). That question is a demonstration of the highest echelon of thinking - for it is characterised by evaluation of outputs, options and scenarios. That is the mind of the leader. It remains a fact that to get there you would have explored basic elements of knowledge, comprehension and application. You would have extended these with the ability to critically analyse, critically think and critically write (Wilson, 2015). A scholar will need to possess these attributes.

Knowledge alone will require astuteness and discipline to be able to self-check all information that you absorb, disseminate and use for decision-making. Clearly, all decisions are predicated and hinged upon some form of information, which could be used for knowledge. The question will be how you use information for knowledge power. You would need to understand that knowledge on its own has four important perspectives (White, 2019).

*First is factual knowledge.* Refrain from engaging or sharing information without facts - that is dangerous. Further refrain from making conclusions based on fact-less information. That is where *epistemic truth is tested*. You must be able to answer the question about how you know what you claim to know and what is your relationship with that which you claim to know. Sources of facts that inform your decision or knowledge needs to be verified and their credibility needs to be established. Generally, life practices are not different from practices you learn during your time in your degree. For instance, it was always required that your sources need to be verified and even where they originate was important. Life beyond your degree will require you to put this in practice, be it in the workplace, business or even with family. Weak and obscure sources might not provide credible basis for decision-making (White, 2019).

Secondly, *there is conceptual knowledge*. As defined by Hiebert & Lefevre (1986), conceptual knowledge can be described as "understanding of the principles and relationships that underlie a domain". Good conceptual understanding is widely accepted as a prerequisite for success in leadership and other areas of life (Rittle-Johnson & Schneider, 2015). This helps individuals to be innovative, creative and ideate.

Conceptual knowledge is a topic that has received considerable attention, but the role of domain-general skills and particularly executive functions has been overlooked. It is possible that executive functions play a role in both the acquisition of conceptual knowledge and in the selection of conceptually based strategies. Switching attention from a prepotent procedural strategy to the underlying conceptual relationships may be accomplished by inhibiting and shifting attention. These are key attributes that you will need to acquire and embellish in your approach to life and enhancement of knowledge as a scholar, even beyond your degree (Rittle-Johnson & Schneider, 2015).

Thirdly, you will need to attain *procedural knowledge*. It forms part of the essentials of knowledge. You need to demonstrate understanding of procedures generally and as well as those procedures that regulate activities you engage in. In understanding procedures, it is further important to know why those procedures exist. Careful approach in investigating procedures is important, so as not to appear to be undermining the very essence of the existence of the procedure. An example may be drawn from cultural and traditional practices. Questioning the practices that kept you through from childhood up to adulthood - or up to completion of your degree - could appear negative to those around you. So, prudence will be important. Evaluation of procedures helps you to understand them and even answer the question - "what if" (Rittle-Johnson & Schneider, 2015).

The last element of knowledge is *metacognition*. Life is about continued learning, and out of your degree, your learning about issues

is self-regulated. Interaction in self-regulated learning necessitates a strong sense of metacognition, self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation. When it comes to creativity, metacognition refers to the ability to understand and control one's own thoughts and actions. *It is important for you to learn to think about how you think.*

### Linking Knowledge to Southern Epistemology in Digital era

The digital era is another phenomenon that has impacted how knowledge is sourced, developed and applied in different contexts of society. Within the African context, sound knowledge sourcing should apply methods of African epistemic truths for validation of an African scholar. There are repositories on African epistemologies - particularly termed epistemologies of the Global South, yet these remain as basic research, not providing value in solving current African problems. So many scholars have deliberated on this phenomenon, such that Costa (2021) postulates that South Africa is between 45 and 50% in preparation for digital transformation, also known as Dx.

At the Global Centre for Academic Research, my role as an ICT Scholar and Researcher (my PhD was titled "Pedagogical integration of ICT to enhance teaching and learning in Gauteng public Schools") is to link knowledge development and digital tools for supporting epistemological point of view, biased to thinking and practices of the South. The recent social infringement resulting from COVID-19 ushered the capabilities and thinking towards benefits of digital tools, indicating that indeed the dawn of digitization was the only means and approach to navigating and traversing the proverbial avalanche and future uncertainties. Many scholars and academics-felt left out as digital migrants, with terms such as "born before technology" becoming a popular phrase among many professionals, including senior leaders and managers across different sectors. In PhD studies, the need for comprehension and application of digital tools while ensuring rigour determination and alignment to southern epistemologies became critical. One method students could use in knowledge creation through application of digital tools was evidence-based research through systematic review approach.

The G-CAR is continuously creating a path and leading the pack with regard to this approach to inquiry. While systematic reviews is a collection of different non-intrusive strategies, Qualitative Evidence Synthesis is one approach that uses digital tools to create rigorous epistemic truth regarding pragmatic evidence to what works in social sciences, health care and education. A number of tools, including research protocols and rigor methods, ensuring transparency and reproducibility seem to provide an appealing dimension to conducting research that seeks to understand behaviors, opinions, issues related to cultures and beliefs. I have seen the value in this approach in my recent collaboration with Prof. Costa, which was published as a book chapter by Springer Nature, whereby high level of analysis, synthesis and evaluation were applied using digital tools to support a proposition on issues related to cculture and knowledge creation within the educational sector.

### Conclusion

This is an area that is critical for propounding southern epistemology, however, digital tools provide a fundamental and critical dimension that is relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In academia, generally, and PhD studies in particular, there is a disconnect between methods of inquiry and the very cultures, believes and ways of living. There has not been enough boldness to recognise southern cultures as legitimate methods or strategies for credible research approach. Yet, a glance of cultural approaches and their importance in sound scholarship are well documented in historical research and text books - although this is used as literature that is not viewed as scholarship. The tide is turning, as we continue to seek new opportunities for using "ISIKO" as an epistemology and methods of investigating a phenomena of a people, about a people to provide solutions to the people. This is what I profess to be pursuing, pursuant to current work I have already been involved since attainment of my PhD.

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