

349 Perspectives from the South: a transgressive schema for knowledge-making in Higher Education

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

The schema for knowledge-making presented here is a synthesis of collaborations culminating in two concurrent events that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. One was an online course on African Feminist research Methodology offered to Scottish and African PhD students for a week in 2021; the other was an online research project undertaken with South African students during 2020/2021. Both events grappled with the question of what counts as legitimate, inclusive, relevant knowledge, and how can we work with each other over ontological, geographical, and epistemological differences to find common purpose? Framing, activating, seeing, creating, and imagining, are the aspects and actions of the schema, which have emerged from these two events as a template for future pedagogic and research processes. Using African and Black feminist theory and principles, we explored meaningful knowledge-making together and practised radical care at a time of isolation and anxiety brought on by the pandemic.

Full paper

The paper explains and applies a schema for transgressive knowledge-making which we believe has broad applicability. The two knowledge-making events we describe are vehicles for the schema, and we argue that they both generate new knowledge, show effective connections between research, teaching and learning, and have lasting impact. There are five aspects to the schema, each one signifying a finger on the hand that holds our dreams and offers our contributions. We apply each aspect to the two knowledge-making projects: an African Feminist Methodology online course to Scottish and African PhD students; and a research project with South African undergrad and postgrad humanities students.

The Scottish Graduate School of Social Science (SGSSS) 'Spring Into Methods' Workshops are annual events that host training programs on research methods across various disciplines. Our aim with the course we ran was to introduce African Feminist methodologies to PhD students across continents, and to use African Feminist principles as a guide for our pedagogy. Spread over five days, the course consisted of an hour zoom session each day. We had around 40 candidates evenly spread over both African and UK continents. The course introduced the principles, ethics, positionality, and data generation techniques associated with African feminist research principles. Participants in the course have continued to meet as part of an online African feminist reading group, and some have collaborated in cross-continental projects.

The research project was a collaboration between former Extended Studies (ES) students at Rhodes University, South Africa, and their lecturer, over a period of 9 months. The ES humanities programme provides access to a BA degree to a select group of around 35 disadvantaged students. 24 former ES students volunteered to be part of the project. Participants came up with topics and guidelines, and each one submitted a response to a topic. They then reviewed each other's submissions. Some went on to collaboratively write two academic papers which have been published in international journals, based on the data from the topic submissions.

The first aspect of the schema is: *framing*. The frame is the compass that directs the scope and range of possibilities for knowledge-making. It is the lens and theory that guides our focus. The frame requires us to ask: Whose ideas underpin our pedagogy and research, and whose interests are served by them? For both of the knowledge-making events, African feminism was the frame. In contrast to Western emphasis on rationality, and the Cartesian separation of the mind from the body, African feminist theory sees knowledge as also embodied; spiritual; always political; and oriented towards the collective (Wane 2008, Moletsane 2015, Ntseane 2011). We employed this frame to consider how to connect with each other online, and the paper explains how this worked, and with what effects.

The second aspect of the schema is: *activating*, which is an awareness of the politics and power arrangements of the setting. The disruption of hierarchies is a kind of scholar-activism intrinsic to African feminist scholarship, and we employed this in both of the knowledge-making projects. As Adomako Ampofo puts it, African feminist scholars are strongly committed to teaching, research and activism and the division between scholarship and activism often seem artificial (Adomako Ampofo, 2010). In a world that remains divided along tensed geopolitical lines and conflicting interests that determines who is a knower and what is worthy of being known, we continue to push the frontiers of limitations by those who cast African scholars as mere empiricists and echoes of thoughts emanating from the Global North (Mkandawire 1997).

The third aspect is *seeing*: using the activated frame in how we approached the pedagogy and research, we focussed on ways for participants of both projects to feel recognised and included. Kulundu explains that this kind of transgressive visibility “is an open invitation for each person to become more of themselves in response to what they reclaim as well as what they strip away” (Kulundu et al., 2020, p. 121).

The fourth aspect, *creating*, refers to the setting and platform we set up for the work to happen – in both cases we facilitated communal knowledge-making, or “existence-in-relation and being-for-self-and-others” (Chilisa and Ntseane 2010, p. 619). In both projects, this transgressed a western individualistic onto-epistemology to find new ways of knowledge-making, worth sharing.

Finally, the fifth aspect is *imagining*, and in both projects the futuristic capacity of both to move beyond the initial plans to meaningful collaborations are perhaps the most profound indication of the success of the schema.

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