

Knowledge as Power for Social Transformation

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Article history	Knowledge is power and this power is the building block for the society.
Received: 11/11/2016	Africa in particular and the world in general is in need of social transformation on every front and the academic sector is the right place to
Received in revised form: 6/1/2017	start. Transforming the education sector would be the first step towards social transformation and since education is the principal tool for training
Accepted: 2/2/2017	and empowering people to transform their societies, knowledge can be considered the power for social transformation. This editorial captures the
Keywords:	essence of the articles in this issue. It sets the pace for the articles in this
knowledge, social transformation, power, education	issue and articulate what social transformation is, as well as how knowledge makes for social transformation.

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INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions are principal centres for the creation and construction of knowledge, a process that may be influenced by the theoretical, philosophical and methodological perspectives of stake holders. Innovations produced by these institutions are motivated by the continuous search for, and application of knowledge by individuals and organizations at different social and political levels in society. The possibilities of knowledge are endless, but determining how and when to apply particular facets of knowledge is where the onus lies.

Intricate knowledge of computers, for example, gives an individual the power and means to manipulate them to manipulate them for the desired results. When one considers how the

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computer has affected the world, one needs look no further for proof that knowledge is power and that with power lies the ability to transform society.

Societal transformation in recent times has emerged as the focus of higher education programs (Harvey & Williams, 2010), as seen in quality assurance guidelines from different continents (Hopkins, 2015). Education (the pursuit of knowledge) has the potential to illuminate the individual in particular and the community in general, bringing about multi-faceted changes in the world. Although, as Davies (1994) argues, that the maxim “knowledge is power” is not new, at the global level this dictum is becoming increasingly true as a result of rapid advances in information technology in the Global North. Davies adds that “knowledge (including the capacity to create it) is becoming the key economic input which, at the extreme, supersedes land, capital and labour in importance” (p. 1). The rise of multi-billionaires like Mark Zuckerberg, and Edwardo Savarin on the platform of ideas and the manner in which these ideas have influenced social action further demonstrate the power of knowledge to transform the society. Pitsoe and Letseka (2012) argue, as does Foucault, that power is hegemonic because it is used to deny individuals access to knowledge. They add that the discourse of knowledge as power dates back to Nicholai Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes and that when individuals within a particular community are empowered with the right kind of knowledge, they take actions that bring about transformation in the society in which they leave.

Wolf (2013) advanced this debate when he points out that Foucault’s writings reveal how forms and formations of knowledge become the basis for political activity. Foucault’s argument granted, knowledge, like the computer, may be manipulated for hegemonic results. Therefore, in order for society to be transformed from the grassroots, knowledge constructors need to articulate knowledge in ways that individual in every strata of society can consume. Giving every individual the opportunity to consume the knowledge constructed in different institutions is a way of sharing power: the opportunity to bring about changes not only at the level of society they occupy but at the global level.

But what is it in knowledge that gives it the power for social transformation? Fukugawa (2005) and Zhan, Tang and Zhang (2013) argue that there are several characteristics of knowledge that drive social transformation. Because ZOE International Journal of Social transformation is devoted to the construction and application of knowledge, it is appropriate here to elaborate on each of these characteristics.

The first characteristic, the paradigmatic context of knowledge, deals with the lens through which the knowledge is constructed and what that knowledge means for the society as a whole. Arguably, knowledge constructed from a positivist perspective would be different from that constructed from a critical perspective. However, the lens through which the knowledge is constructed gives credence to its value and power in the particular society.

The second characteristic, the degree to which knowledge is integrated within a paradigmatic context, demands that the knowledge constructed must remain true to the approach used in constructing it. For example, a critical or Marxist perspective must be able to contribute to

Marxist ideals, while the feminist perspective must alienate gender discrimination. When knowledge is integrated within such paradigmatic contexts, then, “it has several aspects which are ‘pre-understood’”; that is, its underlying machinery has generally already been thought through. Relationships between the facts provided are, therefore, more uneasily understood. The pre-existing conditions make knowledge generalizable and appropriate for effective utilisation (Palya, 2000).

The next characteristic centres on the purpose of knowledge and what this knowledge is geared to do in the society. Knowledge might aim at correcting a misconception, illuminate the society on a particular issue, or change the way a particular thing is done. The breadth of the findings or knowledge will determine the applicability of the knowledge. In Literature, for example, knowledge may cut across prose, drama and poetry or it may focus on one particular genre.

Another characteristic is the generality or degree of abstraction of knowledge. This is quite critical, especially when the knowledge is to be consumed by every individual in the society. How abstract or generalizable the knowledge is will determine the level of its consumption. In the business world, for example, the marketing strategies of a web design company cannot be generalised to a brewery company. The level of generalisability and consumption is highly dependent on the level of abstraction.

A further characteristic of knowledge concerns the types of knowledge. There are two basic types of knowledge: structural and functional knowledge. These two types of knowledge address specific issues. The one makes for knowing and the other for doing. These two types of knowledge are quite vital if for transformation since knowing precedes action, but combining the two gives knowledge the power to transform society.

Yet another characteristic of knowledge is the knowledge generation helix, and this aspect of knowledge deals with the breaking-down of a phenomenon of knowledge into its simpler elements. Assuming that social action is dependent on individual action and that individuals can only function as parts of the whole, breaking down knowledge into smaller functional units becomes vital for social transformation. By isolating the parts and by understanding their individual processes, we can best and most efficiently come to be understand complex wholes. The complexity and unpredictability of wholes are due to the action of the many small processes that make up the whole. Thus the breaking knowledge into different phases, thereby producing a different helix, is vital if social transformation is the goal.

Conceptual follow-up, the last characteristic of knowledge, augurs for the continuous viability and social applicability of knowledge. Knowledge should create room for improvement of society; that is, it should provide solutions to social challenges.

On the other hand, Sveiby (1997) offers another range of characteristics of knowledge that are relevant to all spheres. Because these are equally relevant to *XOE*, they also deserve elaboration here. One of Sveiby's characteristics is that knowledge is contextual and can be re-used; since knowledge is constructed in a particular context, it therefore follows that its application will also be contextual and this application can be reproduced in similar context making.

Knowledge is useless if it lacks potential for application, because it is this potential for application that makes for transformation.

Another of Sveiby's characteristic is that the benefits of knowledge can be obtained only if it is applied. Just as a seed not sown is useless, knowledge not applied cannot yield any benefit for the individual or the society in which the knowledge is constructed. Hayek (1945) argues that the use of knowledge in the society is highly dependent on how articulate the constructs of the knowledge are and how different individuals interpret the knowledge. The usefulness of knowledge is highly dependent on its applicability, and applicability is dependent on how the degree to which individuals make sense of the knowledge.

A third characteristic is that the values of knowledge may change over time. Knowledge is therefore time bound, especially because the world keeps changing and the circumstances knowledge responds to keeps changing. In the technological world, for example, solutions to security challenges today will definitely be outdated tomorrow. What constitutes knowledge

therefore keeps changing over time and the application of this knowledge also depends on its validity.

The fourth characteristic, which logically follows from the third, is that knowledge needs to be updated constantly because it is difficult to transfer. Responding to challenges in the educational world demands constant renewal of knowledge which can speak to the increasing needs of students. Furthermore, the make-up of students keeps changing, a consequence of the challenges they are facing. Keeping up with the changing make-up of students is a formidable task, one that requires new research or knowledge construction in particular fields. Also, because of the changing make-up of the students—or any other differences that emerges within the school context—knowledge transferability becomes an equally formidable process. Still, updating the knowledge creates room for transferability even if only to a limited degree. For the same reason, knowledge can be difficult to capture and distribute.

Lastly, knowledge should facilitate ‘sense-making’, enable higher learning, and drive—and be responsive to—the development of new technologies. This process should not only happen in universities or educational institutions but should also extend to the common man and the common woman in the given society. Technology helps to advance the applicability of knowledge, especially in contexts where the application of the set knowledge is dependent on the availability of resources that can contribute to the social transformation process. Stetsenko and Arieviditch (2014) argue that social transformation is the coming together of different isophormic forces to shape and reshape the society until meaningful social changes emerge. These meaningful changes—whether social, economic, political or cultural—should lead to the general improvement of society. Daszko and Sheinberg (2005, p. 1) reverberate that “transformation is the creation and change of a whole new form, function or structure. To transform is to create something new that has never existed before...Transformation is a ‘change’ in mind-set, and it centers on gaining new knowledge and taking resultant actions.” Transforming the society, for example, requires a change in mind-set on the part of individuals within the society, upon whom the onus lies. Transformation is what society needs though there may be disagreements regarding the level to which a specific transformation agenda should be pursued, as well disagreements concerning the direction society should ultimately take. Knowledge is what gives people the power to transform their society, and this power is the core of social action. Taking away this power from the people (through language, access, or whatever means) becomes an act of epistemic violence that should be frowned on or prosecuted.

All of these characteristics of knowledge (those suggested by Sveiby as well as those suggested by Zhan, Tang, & Zhang) frame the context and elucidate the scope of *Zoe International Journal of Social Transformation*. It is our intention that this initial issue and all later issues of ZOE will vivify the relationship between knowledge and social transformation, from different perspectives and in different contexts. In this way the Journal seeks to inspire and empower the masses to take action to ensure the transformation of his or her society, a transformation that tends toward the creation of authentic cultural democracies.

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