Can indigenous knowledge systems (IKSs) come to the rescue of distance adult learning facilitation?

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Abstract
The aim of this article is to investigate the integration of indigenous knowledge systems (IKSs) into adult learning facilitation at a distance. Pertinent issues in a majority of indigenous knowledge systems, such as information access and communication mechanisms, may be built into the process of adult learning facilitation to ensure a successful learning experience. Issues such as mnemonics, metaphorical speech, storytelling, demonstration and observation, group learning, visualisation and repetition may serve as learning enhancing techniques. In this way, IKSs may come to the rescue of adult learning facilitators who teach at a distance in their endeavour to mediate a successful learning event.

INTRODUCTION
Education as a subinterest of indigenous knowledge systems

South Africa is producing more and more research on IKS – the 2004 SAARDHE conference being but one example of local scholars’ dedication to this matter, and the initiatives of the University of the Free State to transform and restructure its higher education system constituting yet another (Nel in Business Day 12 March 2004). So urgent is the matter that the IKS research programme in South Africa currently receives priority funding from the National Research Foundation (NRF) (Higgs & van Niekerk 2002).

One characteristic of the debate on IKS is its interdisciplinary nature: educators, ecologists, philosophers, information scientists, sociologists, agriculturalists, anthropologists, linguists, theologians, and even corporate business, to name but a few, are increasingly becoming interested in this field.

One constantly notices that education is being regarded as part and parcel of IKS (Odora Hoppers 2002, 8). Crossman and Devisch (2002, 103) confirm the potential impact of indigenous knowledge on a vast variety of fields, among them education. The focus on education in IKS research programmes, therefore, has in many cases led to the development of innovative new curricula and new approaches to the transfer of knowledge that take local knowledge systems into account (Odora Hoppers 2001; Tomaselli 2001; www.scidev.net). Odora Hoppers, one of the main proponents of IKS research, is of the opinion that education and
training of various kinds should begin with people’s life worlds. Any educational enterprise should begin by discovering and recognising the content of learners, which includes ‘a heritage of knowledge which is the basis of their interpretation of the world . . .’ (Odora Hoppers 2004).

Focus of this investigation

The problem posed in this paper, therefore, is the challenge faced by adult learning facilitators to accommodate their learners’ indigenous knowledge systems within a distance higher education landscape that is characterised by diversity and transformation. A secondary aim could be to investigate ways to bridge the sociocultural gap that is often found between adult learners, on the one hand, and facilitators of adult learning, on the other. This paper will, therefore, try to address the issue of indigenous ways (or rather techniques) of learning (or of acquiring and sharing knowledge) and add to that a critical reflection on the possible incorporation of these techniques into adult learning facilitation practices (especially in distance education).

This interest was born from challenges to educators, like the one by Michie (1999): ‘to develop strategies for teachers to contextualise their lessons through deliberately including students’ cultural background knowledge as part of the teaching/learning process’. Michie claims that students have to make sense of conventional knowledge in the context of their own background learning. I interpret learners’ own background learning as consisting not only of contents, but also of techniques of learning and acquiring knowledge. Cavallo (2002) warns that new methodologies for designing learning environments should be based on an existing culture, because new learning environments are supposed to function by linking up with, building upon and deepening the interests of the learners. When tools are created which are of interest to learners, they are given the freedom to express themselves in a manner that is faithful to their own thoughts. This paper will focus on the practical use of some of these tools.

An example of ways to include indigenous knowledge systems into one’s teaching practices comes from the Department of Social Work at the University of South Africa (UNISA), which demonstrates efforts by adult-learning facilitators to recognise (and incorporate into the learning experience) learners’ contextual learning tools.

CHANGING THE TARGETS, CHANGING THE TECHNIQUE

From Eurocentrism to redress: a context for indigenous knowledge systems in education

Jansen (1999, 4) reminds us of the critical turning point in the curriculum debates in South Africa that occurred since 1990. The focus has changed from a racist, Eurocentred, sexist, authoritarian, prescriptive, unchanging, contextually blind and
discriminatory educational system to thinking about a democratic education policy after apartheid, which emphasises nonracism, nonsexism, democracy, equity and redress. It is within this new framework that we ought to see the upsurge of IKSs research and practices in higher education in South Africa. It is also within this new ‘thinking about’ that we ought to look at IKSs for ways of including learners’ life worlds into the learning event.

Social constructivism as an educational philosophy seems to fit the above-mentioned switch from Eurocentrism to redress perfectly. Mergel (1998) (quoting Jonasson 1991) indicates that constructivism offers learners the opportunity to construct their own reality, or at least to interpret it, on the basis of their perceptions of experiences. Duffy and Cunningham (1997, as quoted by Perot 2001) stress the social context in which this active process of learning takes place. An individual’s knowledge therefore becomes a function of his/her prior experiences, mental structures and beliefs that are used to interpret objects and events. Tenenbaum, Naidu, Jegede and Austin (2001, 88) speak of a shift in dominant educational philosophy, where ‘shift’ indicates a moving away from thinking about learning as being equated primarily with the attainment of behavioural outcomes. Garrison (1993, 201) confirms this notion and notes that learning from constructivist principles goes beyond the assimilation of facts and implies the construction of meaningful and useful knowledge structures. Research on learning styles can be closely linked to basic tenets of constructivism. Morrison, Sweeney and Hefferman’s (2003) research on the learning styles of on-campus and off-campus marketing learners concludes with two points of advice to educators: (a) match teaching and learning styles and (b) develop potential areas of weakness in each segment.

Perot’s (2001) emphasis on the characteristics of adult learners is a further link to the debate, namely that adults should develop competency in using intellectual tools that are designed for accessing, processing and transforming information into new knowledge. The fact that adult learners value an individualised learning experience highlights the need for a more exhaustive front-end needs analysis which includes the learner in an active role. Adult learners, specifically need authentic learning contexts, the ability to self-direct their learning and opportunities to use and build upon prior experiences and opportunities to recognise the implications and applications of new knowledge. ‘This re-focusing of the instructional process’, Perot concludes, ‘shifts the orientation from ID [instructional design–author] as a series of phases or procedures to a more dynamic model that is learner-centred.’ This learning process can consequently be termed open-ended, dialectic, iterative and skills-based.

The shift that Jansen refers to, namely from a system focus to a person focus, therefore, has definite implications for pedagogic practices.
Indigenous tools for knowledge/information transfer

Tenenbaum et al. (2001, 89) state that learning occurs through the establishment of malleable mental constructs. Learning is therefore enhanced through the creation of an environment that promotes the continual adaptation of the learner’s mental schemata to the external environment. We shall now turn to a number of immediate learning and broader social environments that may provide sources for constructing meanings of concepts and phenomena that learners are confronted with in institutions of higher learning.

Mundy and Compton’s (1995) discussion of indigenous communication and indigenous knowledge may serve our purpose of coming to grips with indigenous ways of learning. It is not my intention to oversimplify a complex phenomenon, but only to focus on a number of communication channels that may have the potential of being used by educators in an attempt to latch onto learners’ mental schemata. Mundy and Compton (1995, 115–116) list the following indigenous communication channels:

- **Folk media**, which include a wide range of art forms such as festivals, plays, dance, song, storytelling, poetry, debates, parades and carnivals. These form the equivalents of modern (exogenous) mass media.
- **Indigenous organisations and forms of social gatherings**, which may include religious groups, village meetings, irrigation associations, mothers’ clubs and loan associations.
- **Deliberate instruction**, which plays a large part in the enculturation process and the aim of which is to modify behaviour and induce habit formation.
- **Records**, which include formal information (written, carved, painted or memorised). Other vehicles of transmitting cultural information include proverbs and folklore.
- **Unstructured channels**, such as informal, spontaneous conversations at the well, in the house, in the fields, etc.
- **Direct observation**, which forms part of unintentional communication (e.g. one farmer sees what another farmer does successfully, and imitates it).

In her doctoral thesis on the transfer of scientific agricultural information to rural communities Meyer (2000, i) (a lecturer in Information Sciences at UNISA) highlights the fact that all attempts to transfer information to rural (indigenous) communities without considering the information-usage behaviour of target groups have proved to be ineffective. She therefore comes to the following conclusion that ‘[I]nformation from the information resource system of the developed world can best be transferred when transfer techniques and mechanisms from the indigenous information system are applied. The service of a facilitator who is knowledgeable of both worlds and who knows how to coordinate and manage information, is imperative’ (Meyer 2000, i).

Meyer (2003a, 2003b) offers an extensive list of techniques and mechanisms
that are appropriate for the information-transfer process among rural, indigenous people.

Techniques to concretise and store knowledge include the following:

- mnemonic patterns (which include patterns such as formulas, repetition, alliterations, assonances, epithets, proverbs and riddles)
- adding on by means of ‘AND’ (e.g. as in genealogical lists indicating social relationships)
- fixed expressions (which also serve the memory)
- repetition of statements (by both speaker and listener)
- observation and practice (which lead to imitation through apprenticeships)
- riddles and proverbs (which keep information relevant to the life-world)
- homeostasis (the readjustment of memory by unlearning obsolete information).

Information is interpreted and processed through

- the sanctioning of elderly people as stores of wisdom
- community and family structures (information is channelled through the headman or family head)
- the opinion and authority of the group (unclear information is explained by the group, which acts as a sounding board)
- situational thinking and association (thinking in terms of real-life situations and checking information within the existing frame of reference).

Information is communicated through

- face-to-face interaction (clearing up possible misunderstandings through questions and answers)
- metaphorical speech (relating information to existing perceptions)
- storytelling, dancing, acting and role-playing
- visual demonstrations.

There seems to be an urgency for educators to investigate these traditional tools in an attempt to both recognise and use the existing knowledge systems of learners.

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND ADULT LEARNING FACILITATION

In the introduction it was promised that specific applications of the use of IKS, in adult learning facilitation would be highlighted. The example comes from the Department of Social Work at UNISA.

The Department of Social Work practises what it preaches

This department maintains a unique approach in training learners in Social Work as
a helping profession (Makondo & Schenck 2000, 7). In this department, there exists a clear relationship between (1) the theory underlying the discipline, and (2) the skills that learners are taught in order to fulfil their responsibility as helpers. A third element in this relationship, namely the teaching practices that emanate from the relationship, is of specific interest here, and will be highlighted.

The theory which academics in this department have found to be the closest to the traditional social work philosophy and values is the Person Centred Approach of Carl Rogers (Grobler, Schenck & du Toit 2003). The Rogerian Person Centred Approach not only forms the core of the content of the modules, but also informs the teaching practices of lectures in this department. Social Work learners at Unisa are taught that a person centred approach focuses on the individual’s drive towards growth (p. 39).

Learners are taught that the people who they, as social work facilitators, will be working with have to be given opportunities to guide the facilitator through their customs, experiences, history, knowledge, beliefs, needs, joys, values and practices (p. 217). Ways through which this indigenous wisdom can be communicated include, among others, local music, sport, stories, dancing and folk tales. It is therefore the responsibility of the facilitator to open up communication channels between the parties to enable them to interact and create a safe environment in which they can communicate with one another, and in which they can share and learn.

Learners in the Department of Social Work are therefore taught that the old coping mechanisms of both domination and subordination are obsolete in the person centred approach, and that there is no leader and no expert who has all the answers (p. 39). Social Work learners at UNISA are therefore not taught some techniques, but a lifestyle (a philosophy) whereby they have to integrate basic ‘conditions, such as congruency or realness, empathy and unconditional positive regard, into their own way of being in order to bring these to the therapeutic relationship or into the group context where they operate’ (p. 42).

Examples of how the person-centred philosophy manifests itself in the pedagogics of this department will demonstrate the point.

**Personal contact with learners**

Practical work makes up a huge part of the Social Work course (e.g. a seven-day workshop is part and parcel of the module SCK305–B). It is during these workshops that lecturers make use of simulations and discussion activities to develop learners’ knowledge and skills in the field. A great deal of creativity is used during these workshops. Since social workers in the helping profession heavily rely on their communication skills, creative alternatives to conventional communication techniques are sought during these sessions. In order to elicit information from their clients learners are introduced to techniques such as
storytelling, idiomatic expressions, singing, pictures, drawings and diagrams, acting and dancing. 

Since the department practises what it preaches, these techniques are also used during the workshop sessions with the aim of exploring their (i.e., learners’) own cultural wisdom regarding themes and terminology that are prevalent to the course itself.

Indigenisation and making use of biographical material

The inclusion of learners’ indigenous knowledge in workshops has led to a learning process for the lecturers concerned. By eliciting local cultural knowledge, practical life skills and wisdom from learners there has been a move towards indigenisation of learning material. Proverbs of South African languages have been used in the study guides to familiarise learners with community work/development terminology and ideas that learners need to understand. Also, learners are encouraged to explore their own cultural wisdom for related ideas.

The following examples in this regard come from a third-level module which forms part of the Social-Work course, namely Community Work (theory and practice) (SCK305–B). Indigenous knowledge is utilised to explain concepts that may be uncommon to non-English-speaking learners. For instance, when discussing the principles of participatory development, a number of African proverbs are cited, namely:

- **Ntja pedi hae hloewe ke sebata**: a Sesotho proverb that can be translated as ‘It is better to do things as a group than as an individual’.
- **Izandla ziyahlambana**: a Xhosa proverb that explains the concept of community work/development as ‘The hands wash each other’.
- **Umuzi ngumuzi ngokuphanjukelwa**: a Zulu proverb saying ‘A home is a real one if people visit it’. (Louw & Dicker 2001, 24).

The workshop activities are therefore based almost entirely on learners’ personal knowledge and practical work experience. This recognises the importance of including learners’ own experience in the learning event and gives preference to local indigenous knowledge as a primary source of learning instead of relying solely on external (nonindigenous) learning content and teaching strategies.

In a letter (quoted verbatim and in full, because of its relevance to this discussion) to the lecturer on the value of cultural diversity, which forms part of the Social-Work course, one learner, Phuthi F Semenya, reflected as follows:

**INTRODUCTION**

The move to encourage students to use their own cultural idioms and proverbs in teaching community development is of utmost importance. It is like allowing them to be themselves. And because the learning takes place in groups students have the
opportunity to learn other cultural ways of communicating. The idea of using one’s own idioms and proverbs promotes the use of the black languages; and facilitate communication between the developers and the people they serve; and bridge what Korten refers to as the elite bias.

Why cultural diversity

Community developers are unable to go down to the level of the majority of the people they serve, that is, the poor, the illiterates and the socially isolated. They are the people who have never been exposed to the Western cultures or have little understanding of the culture. The gap causes a serious barrier; especially when coming to effective communication.

Until now social work training in South Africa is mostly English bound and students are inclined to communicate feelings; experiences and thoughts in English. The use of English idioms and proverbs is directly or indirectly preferred over the other languages. This incapacitates students and practitioners, for example, many social workers could hardly pronounce with ease concepts such as empathy and congruence in black languages. That is not in any way equal to the non-existence of the concepts in the black languages. The knowledge and the expression of the words is somewhere out there. It needs to be recognised, respected and nurtured.

During my MA studies at UNISA, students were encouraged to make use of their own cultural idioms to express their understanding of the concepts used in person-centred approach (PCA) – and community development. It was during this venture that I developed awareness and more knowledge of the Northern Sotho idioms and proverbs, and how they could be used in my studies and working with the people.

Theories such as PCA are embodied in the philosophy behind most of the black cultures; which value respect, understanding and believe in the people’s potential. As students we need to start using our hidden expressions to communicate our understanding of theories used to explain human behaviours.

The following are some of the Northern Sotho proverbs linked to PCA – which I became aware of after I was encouraged to use my mother tongue.

- Khudu ya marega e tsehja ke mong wa yona: the proverb explains Rogers’ propositions 1 and 2.
- Motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe: propositions 9 and 10.
- Nama kgapeletšwa e phuma pitša: implication, this can be used to express the anxiety that arises in people due to the incongruence between the real self and the ideal self.

Other proverbs that can be used to describe the language used by developers are as follows:
• **Makhura a kgoši ke batho:** means that a leader would only enjoy other people’s (her/his followers) respect and recognition, if s/he too treat them with respect. This describes the importance of a non-paternalistic approach to working with people.

• **Maithuta ga se makgona makgona ke maboletša:** This fits in with Korten’s idea of embracing error – that we learn from our mistakes: and of community development as a learning process.

• **Nonyana e sa itsheleleng e bola sekhwejana:** people who are dependent and not eager to work for themselves and only rely on others; will starve, once the help is withdrawn. This describes the principles of self-reliance and independence in development.

There are more of these that can be used in the teaching and practising of community development.

**CONCLUSION**

Becoming more aware of different cultural ways of communication and of language in particular, bridge the barrier between the elite and the poor. The poor feel understood and accepted and begin to develop interest in changing their lives for better. The use of our cultural languages increases self-awareness and understanding as students/developers. Besides the use of idioms and proverbs, students must be sensitised to the different cultural aspects that cover technology, belief systems, behaviour and knowledge – that would help them render appropriate services.

A direct translation and brief explanation of each of these proverbs (with appreciation to G. M. M. Grobler of the Department of African Languages, UNISA) will contribute to a better understanding of Semenya’s contribution:

**Proverb 1: Khudu ya marega e tsebja ke mong wa yona.**

Translation and explanation: ‘A winter tortoise is known by its owner’.

A hibernating tortoise remains in one position for a long period of time. It therefore finds itself in a position that is known to its owner. The owner will therefore always know where to find this animal. Rogers’ Proposition 1 implies the fact that limited change leads to limited experience. It is not sure what the student’s exact understanding of this proverb is and how she relates it to the mentioned propositions.

Rogers’ **Proposition 1** addresses human experience at a conscious and unconscious level and reads as follows: ‘Every individual exists in a continually changing world of experience of which he is the centre’ (Rogers 1987, as quoted by Grobler, Schenck & du Toit 2003, 44).

Rogers’ **Proposition 2** addresses human perceptions and reads as follows: ‘The organism reacts to the field as it is experienced and perceived. This perceptual field is, for the individual, reality’ (Rogers 1987, as quoted by Grobler, Schenck & du Toit 2003, 49).
Proverb 2: Motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe
Translation and explanation: ‘A human being exists because of other human beings’. Nobody can go through life without the assistance and guidance of others. People, in one way or another, depend on one another.

Rogers’ Proposition 9 addresses the way our perceptions of our significant others influence the development of the self. It reads as follows: ‘As a result of interaction with the environment, and particularly as a result of evaluational interaction with others, the structure of the self is formed (an organised, fluid, but consistent conceptual pattern of perceptions of characteristics and relationships of the “I” or the “me”) together with values attached to these concepts’ (Rogers 1987, as quoted by Grobler, Schenck & du Toit 2003, 13).

Rogers’ Proposition 10 addresses people’s values (that of the own, and those adopted from other people) and reads as follows: ‘The values attached to experiences, and the values which are part of the self structure, in some instances are values experienced directly by the organism, and in some instances are values introjected or taken over from others, but perceived in distorted fashion as if they had been experienced directly’ (Rogers 1987, as quoted by Grobler, Schenck & du Toit 2003, 65).

Proverb 3: Namakgapeletšwa e phuma pitša.
Translation and explanation: ‘Meat that is forced (into the pot) upsets the pot’. Something that is forced often leads to disappointment.

Proverb 4: Makhura a kgoši ke batho.
Translation and explanation: ‘The fatness of the chief/headman is his people/subordinates’.

A leader depends on his/her followers. A leader’s success can be traced to the efforts of his/her people. A leader can, therefore, not boast to have achieved anything on his/her own.

Proverb 5: Maithuta ga se makgona, makgona ke maboletša.
Translation and explanation: ‘Learning something does not mean getting it right; getting something right is the result of repetition’.

A first effort in trying out newly gained knowledge is not always successful. One not is successful; one becomes successful. Success comes through perseverance/persistence.

Proverb 6: Nonyana ye e sa itshelelego e bola sekhwejana.
Translation and explanation: ‘A bird that fails to look for food, will end up with a rotten cram/throat’.
A bird that ceases to make an effort to stay alive (by constantly looking for food), will eventually die. It is expected of people to work for a living.

This example of how a learner of Social Work internalised the learning material by relating it to her own frame of reference demonstrates how adult learning facilitators in the Department of Social Work are eliciting indigenous knowledge systems to enhance their teaching practice (not only eliciting indigenous knowledge, but also using it to enhance learning). In this process, learners, on the one hand, are seen as persons who take responsibility for themselves, who move from a state of dependence to increased independence, from the expression of negative feelings to positive ones, from confusion to insight, and from being paralysed to being active. The lecturer, on the other hand, fulfils the role of a nondirective, person-centred helper who structures, systematises and enlarges the scope of learners’ thinking without reverting to a directive, instructional approach (see fig. 1a and fig. 1b).

Louw and Schenck (2002, 93) reported on their teaching and learning practices in the department and emphasised the fact that ‘[I]n training, students should experience learning that also comes from within, where “foreign” material is connected to familiar values, knowledge and skills.’

Figure 1: A graphic presentation of the facilitative communication process (Figure 1a) and the facilitative learning process (Figure 1b).
CONCLUSION AND CHALLENGES

The aim of this article was to reflect on ways of adapting indigenous knowledge systems to distance adult learning facilitation practices. The example from Social Work gave us a glimpse of the possibilities of such an approach. However, we should not think that this is a relatively easy thing to do, as though all the distance learning facilitator should do is to

- suggest to learners certain mnemonic devices to memorise the study material
- create and regularly use fixed expressions in the study material
- use the principle of repetition by reminding learners along the way of what they have already learnt
- suggest opportunities where learners can go to observe real-life situations that are relevant to the study material
- use riddles and proverbs that relate to the cultural background of learners
- present him-/herself as a ‘professor’ – someone who has accumulated wisdom over a long period of academic endeavours
- let learners work in groups to reach consensus over an academic matter
- make study material more relevant by relating it to real-life situations
- build learner support into his/her teaching strategy by offering discussion classes where lecturers can meet with learners face to face
- use these opportunities for role-playing and observation (let learners see how lecturers accomplish technical tasks, such as essay writing)
- encourage learners to tell their life stories, and to relate academic material to their existing experience and knowledge

Although the above-mentioned strategies may inform one’s facilitation of distance learning (and the learning success of distance learners), we should first, before coming up with quick-fix solutions, critically reflect on the issue. The following questions seem to require our academic interest:

- Can we assume that all our learners are familiar with their indigenous knowledge systems? (During one of the workshops of the Department of Social Work, I observed that learners indicated that they had to ask their grandparents about issues relating to their indigenous knowledge.)
- How can the printed medium (which is dominant in distance education) accommodate the principles of indigenous knowledge transfer and traditional learning, for example role-playing, visual demonstration, and so on? (Remember that the Social Work model owes its success to the practical face-to-face sessions with learners.)
- How successful have attempts to incorporate indigenous knowledge systems into learning material been in distance education environments across the world (in terms of learner throughput)?
- How knowledgeable are academics regarding the IKS of their learners? (I had
to consult an academic who specialises in Northern-Sotho proverbs to understand the letter quoted above.)

- Will academics be able to cope with the rich variety of indigenous knowledge systems that their learners represent? (South Africa boasts 11 official languages.)
- Which structures (departments, institutes and bureaus) within the distance education institution will be competent enough to be tasked with research into these matters?

These critical questions can be multiplied and may, hopefully, clarify the issue of the use of IKS in adult learning facilitation in a distance education environment.

REFERENCES


