

Chapter 59

A Critical Perspective on the Challenges for Blended Learning and Teaching in Africa's Higher Education

Alfred T. Kisubi

University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter challenges the readers' thinking forward in some essential areas of educational change driven by the international imperative for Information and Communication technologies (ICT). It grapples realistically but also hopefully and creatively with many of the seemingly intractable difficulties that people involved in African change encounter, especially during this ICT age: Government policy makers and their usually politically handpicked higher-education administrators who see education reform as a national security priority, but, nevertheless, cede the responsibility of not only financing, but also implementing reform to international donors, who seldom serve Africa's interests, but push their own agendas disguised as global development "aid." These international "development" agencies inadvertently subvert equity oriented change efforts and substitute them with those of a comprador team of global and local state elite gainers, who push the responsibility of development through the state's means of coercion down to the local, scarcely funded entities, such as the African higher education institutions (HEI). This wanton, undemocratic devolution or "structural adjustment," results in the African HEIs, and governments' extensive and deep-seated failings that make any hope of improvement appear to be far beyond reach. This chapter illustrates how and why that happens and makes suggestions for solutions.

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INTRODUCTION

Casting a sharp bird's eye, particularly on African Higher Education Institutions (AHEI), this chapter uses the four-way test of things we, as humans, say or do for or to each other:

- Is it the truth?
- Is it fair to all concerned?
- Will it build good will and better friendship?
- Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

The “it” in these research questions and in this chapter is the ICT-driven change being touted by African policy makers (the globalized), and their foreign donors (the globalizers) through the means and ends of ICTs as the magic bullet in higher education reform and national development.

The chapter also tries to answer the following questions about ICTs in AHEIs:

- What is (are) the problem(s) in this story?
- What is the main problem?
- What is the cause of this problem?
- What are some consequences of this problem?
- Identify the values, the ideology that makes the “problem” a problem in our global society?
- Who suffers when a problem exists such as the one in the story?
- Who do you think benefits (gains) from the problem such as the one(s) in the story?
- What can you, as an individual citizen of the global village and a professional do about the problem(s) in this story?

HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN AFRICA: AN OVERVIEW

The first universities in Africa were modeled very closely on European origins, particularly in Anglophone and Francophone Africa, where

the overall purpose “of these institutions was to provide the necessary indigenous support staff for the colonial administration.” Within these institutions “there was an overemphasis on the arts and humanities, with little attention given to the science, technology, economics and other professional subjects” (Ng’ambi, 2006, p. 15).

This colonial mission changed with the gaining of “independence” by African nations. Instead, African universities were expected to serve the interests and join in the development agendas of their respective countries. According to Mamdani (2007), writing about Makerere University in Uganda, “the first serious discussion on the need to reform this elitist colonial institution was at the time of independence in 1962. It focused on two issues: first, the need to Africanize the academic staff, and then, the relevance of teaching programs” (p. 2). The turmoil that followed independence may have stalled African universities but since the rejuvenation of the continent, through the movement for multiparty democracy following the end of the Cold War, there has been renewed interest in higher education in Africa, particularly after the years of neglect. However, the Foundation-Partnership (2006) reports that some universities have shown a higher aptitude for engaging innovative reforms than others, and sees the former as “on the move,” towards transformation, both from both an institutional and wider society perspective (Ng’ambi, 2006).

These institutions now offer innovative and diversified curricula, including vocational and professional education programs, greater subject choice (rather than specialization), and an emphasis on African culture, not only through the humanities and social sciences but also through incorporating important aspects of indigenous knowledge into courses in medicine, technology, and architecture (Foundation-Partnership, 2006; Ng’ambi, 2006).

It is in light of the current state of the African university that some have argued that innovative reforms offer the best way out of the crisis. In

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