

# **Learning Management: Challenges and Opportunities in Fixed Assets Disciplines in Low Income Countries: the Kenyan Case**

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**Key words:** Knowledge economy; Learning Management; Fixed Asset Disciplines, formal education.

## **ABSTRACT**

The Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) envision improved levels of literacy by 2015. With all noble intentions represented by this objective, it is yet to be clear, how this objective negotiates with practical development issues, in low income countries. The often subtle use of numerical data as an appealing tool for development under 'improving literacy' often eclipses real experiences of the 'literate' populace. A lot is implied in all these sorts of numerical makeshifts. Either, it is thought, literate population is the secret to entrepreneurial success, or, literacy equips the individual for job opportunities –or even sometimes both. In a grand follow up of these implications, heavily loaded concepts such as 'knowledge economy' have become buzz words. And well they might. After all, global economic forms are rapidly shifting from traditional to innovative (or modern), from agricultural based, to service based.

With the above in view, this paper has argued that the benefits often associated with the knowledge (learning) management discourse are in fact discipline specific. They are also outcome oriented accordingly profoundly neglecting process issues. Bundling these process issues, we have proposed a process oriented road map for fixed form<sup>1</sup> disciplines, such as land economics- a learning process basics approach, accordingly recommending some guideline indicators. In the end, the paper is tethered on theoretical efforts to balance out process issues as a positive step towards addressing poverty and inequality traps in land related disciplines. As such, by addressing process issues, the paper offers a useful tool towards a necessary realignment of political social and economic outcomes in Kenya.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors use this term to denote studies that focus on fixed assets such as property –generally house and land.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The positivist appeals that accumulate around ‘knowledge economy’ tend to mismatch theories with real life experiences-particularly as it concerns low income countries. The experiences of these countries tell somber and often surprising stories about the undignified platforms, upon which literacy, however defined, revolve around. Particularly in developing countries, formal learning is a critical if not a compulsory factor for better livelihoods. Normatively speaking, informal learning often plays a minor role in addressing structural poverty. Importantly, informal learning in developing countries hardly deals with land survey issues. Yet these are the sorts of studies whose survival thrives on formal learning systems of developing countries. Notwithstanding, these [formal education] systems often possess profound fractures, which question their ability to deliver meaningful results. The most salient of these fractures include, but are not limited to, system decay, system overload and systems disconnect –what we term as unholy trinity. Following this logic, land surveying and related learning becomes a fundamental deficit in developing countries.

This paper departs towards expediting this unholy trinity specifically in the context of land survey education, following the structure outlined below. First it will explore the concept of knowledge economy, locating it within dominant theories of development. In a funnel shaped structure; section two moves on to dissect issues of formal education in Kenya, particularly threshing out structural issues that underlie formal education system in Kenya. Again the context here is on fixed assets [which include land surveying] discipline. Using theoretical tools, this section will examine how learning management relates to internally based factors as well as with formal employment in Kenya. In section three we adopt a problem solving approach, as we attempt to draw up a road map model, which seeks to mainstream processes of education systems in learning management.

## **1. KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY: THE CONCEPT AND THEORETICAL ALLIANCES**

### **1.1 The concept and its ‘development’ weight**

Sequences of history have determined much of the present civilizations. A critical determinant of where we are today however, (at least as development literature seems to suggest), is knowledge. A series of sources attest to this claim. For example, Sheehan (1999) points out that similar to the 1760-1820 decades of industrial revolution, the 1985-2020 years will mark the ‘global knowledge economy’. Sheehan’s argument is based on what he sees as knowledge foundations emerging from new sets of ‘economic activities, economic arrangements and institutions’ augmented by information and communication technologies. By 1998 the World

Bank was committed to publicizing what Stiglitz (1999; 2) calls weightless economy or "...intangibles of knowledge, institutions, and culture in an attempt to forge a more comprehensive New Development Framework". On this shift, Stiglitz (1999;3) claims, the Bank's agenda was to move from being viewed as a 'construction' industry to a knowledge based one, which focuses on "...education, institutions and culture". If there are no theoretical controls to retain the value fixed assets sectors such as land within the globalization wave, this focus, will be potentially harmful to fixed assets disciplines. On this, Rosecrance (2005) makes a convincing argument that the expansion of knowledge economy is increasingly alienating land as a factor of production. This logic poses uncomfortable questions to land surveying discipline.

Yet, while this high rise rhetoric (knowledge economy) is presiding over global policy frameworks, its definition remains vague at best. For instance, Brown (2008) titles his commentary 'education, globalization and the knowledge economy' yet mentions the term knowledge within his text only four times, all of them in passing. The Australian government appears even more positivist by claiming to explain what knowledge economy is, only to end up explaining the forms it takes. Wang and Fang (undated) join this 'network', self-qualifying themselves as the custodians of a 'calm approach' to knowledge economy; yet in the end they fail to spell out what it exactly means. It is in Smith (2002) where we get a reasonable proposition, which states that there is simply no coherent definition of the term, except that it is used as a metaphor. These are selected representatives of the tendencies to bend away from explaining what the concept really means.

## 1.2. Defining knowledge

Revisiting the meaning of 'knowledge' might enlighten on the definition and meaning of knowledge economy. Smith (2002) appears to delve into the definition issues more boldly, dismissing conventional terms such as tacit or codified knowledge as 'hazy'. He introduces institutions as indispensable in any attempts to define the term knowledge. For Smith, both the access and the generation of knowledge are fundamental principles in explaining its meaning. In this line of thought, the ability to understand and resolve uncertainties which are somewhat involved in an explanatory structure defines the 'generation' part of knowledge while the "transmission of data within understandable guidelines constitutes the other aspect of knowledge (Smith, 2002). Smith appears to focus on the avenues of knowledge, rather than knowledge itself. Whichever way this knowledge is accessed, whether through Smith's 'innovating new [in existing] principles' or accessing existing [new] principles; is a separate discussion. What should be clear though is that knowledge could be understood either on a creative level or application level, yet in the context of innovation. This view assumes that the content rather than the source of innovation takes precedence.

Smith's explanation however deserves acknowledgement as he goes beyond the conventional methods which at best skate through the complexity of the concept. And considering his institutional approach, formal institutions are well placed to yield maximum benefits under given conditions. In usual circumstances these institutions flow from, or into each other, in which case any forms of disconnects could potentially deliver profound social deficits. Along

this line of thought, this paper employs Smith's institutional thinking as we examine (i) the connects or disconnects between formal schooling systems and work systems, (ii) the fractures of both formal schooling and work systems and (iii) the overloads of formal education systems-; constituting what we have conceptualized as an unholy trinity.

### 1.3. Knowledge and its Theoretical Alliances

As we will point out in this section, the roots of Schumpeter's innovation have largely directed the theoretical alliance of the concept of knowledge. Although a centre left leaning proponent, in his capitalism, socialism and democracy work, Schumpeter (1942) observed innovation as an internal force that sustains capitalism by creating a new form of production in the process of destroying another one-what he called creative destruction. This thinking has been shared by numerous authors. Khan (2002) points out the examples of Max [1867, 1946], Aghion and Howitt [1992], Iwai [1984 a, b; 1991; 2000; 2001] and Scott [1989]. The richness of this network of authors is clear, given Max's socialist view, Aghion and Howitt's patent view; as well as Scott's macro economic view (see Khan 2002). Overall these authors see innovation as intertwined (if not synonymous) with Research and Development (R&D).

The United Nations (2005) understands R&D as comprising four categories; namely; (a) Basic Research [traditionally done by universities] (b) Applied Research [done for commercial purposes] (c) Process development and (d) Product development. Khan (2002) goes on to state that R&D is intimately related to growth; a view which is shared by other authors including Svensson (2008); The bulk of arguments positively correlate R&D and macro economic growth. The World Bank's re-branding of 'knowledge industry', yet with a strong macro-economic agenda is a case in point. In similar veins the neoclassical tendencies to uphold economic growth as the solution for social problems features prominently in the 'knowledge discourse'.

The 'economic growth' obsession finds reactions by Neo-Marxists, who dismiss the neo-classical doctrine of methodological nationalism (see Gore; 2005) (which evaluates performance of nation states without considering international factors while pushing for the globalization agenda) as insincere at best. Criticisms from within neoclassicals are also traceable. Among them, Samaniego (2006) cautions against quick positivist conclusions; claiming that these are often arrived at considering long term patterns and without considering other factors of production beyond R&D. Griffith (undated) follows suit by questioning whether R&D translates into what she refers to as 'knowledge stock' or alternatively to additional cash for the R&D specialists, in the end she bases her conclusions on the former; arguing that firms-initiated R&D results to more profits while government initiated R&D potentially yields better social outcomes.

Considering the above positions, there are strong leanings to locate knowledge from 'economic growth' or business development platforms. These sorts of accounts appear to fortify the neo-classical school with 'knowledge'. And this is not to say that formal schooling is neglected within the knowledge economy discourse, except that it receives relatively less attention particularly on implicit levels. These affinities further alienate knowledge towards

built environment issues. Specifically, fixed form disciplines such as land surveying suffer a progressively major blow.

When broadly defined neoclassical economics is understood as methodological individualism, which freely rewards individuals with confidence on their ability to effect prudent economic decisions without much assistance from the state. This school rides on mobility of labor and capital [in all its forms, including information capital] a conceptualization which re-defines the traditional understanding of what the state is, and what its scope should be. Accordingly, Griffith (undated) calls for state intervention to R&D suggesting that this option might positively influence social outcomes. Lichtenberg (1993) adds weight by arguing along similar lines. The very ‘call’ to *socialize* R&D presumes social deficits in the operations of the concept. On this note, below we explore these ‘connection deficits’ that accrue to formal learning and work environment in Kenya.

The implications of these sorts of theoretical alliances restore debates back to the contents and discontents of globalization –are we really moving to a more dangerous future, or has over-reliance on land been the danger which we are moving away from? And in submission to globalization, countries that have traditionally relied on land based resources such as Botswana are under psychological pressure to ‘diversify’ otherwise they will remain condemned to the perils of single resource reliance. While this section attempted to look at the alienations and accreditations of knowledge economy, the following section tries to show that the system deficits of formal education further alienates reliance on fixed assets studies.

## **2. SUSTAINING UNBUILD BRIDGES? EXPLORING THE UNHOLY TRINITY REPRESENTED IN FORMAL LEARNING AND WORK SYSTEM IN KENYA**

### **2.1 Patterns of Formal Learning Systems in Kenya.**

Formal education in developing countries has become an important deliverable of public policy. Given the traditions of poor public sector performance on the one hand, and ‘who you know’ games within the private sector in Kenya, we argue that deliberate persuasion of school systems on both private and public sector to operate on functional and effective levels; is necessary. Here the paper selects interests on formal knowledge rather than tacit knowledge, although we would be less crude than Smith who dismisses tacit knowledge (mainly firm-related) as hazy. On the other hand, various issues surface when dealing with the subject of formal education. These include; (a) the kind of philosophy that informs formal education and (b) market relevance of Kenya’s formal education programme and (c) the entry barriers in formal education as well as work environment. Among others, this section closely examines these otherwise problematic issues.

#### 2.1.1. Individual enlightenment versus individual economic relevance.

The traditional mainstay educational theory as cited by Breithorde and Swiniarski (1999) is the progressive school. Initially developed by John Dewey (1916), this school tried to identify both the need for individual intellectual enlightenment and the need for social and economic

relevance of education. But as Breithorde and Swiniarski (1999) observe, balancing these two has been one of the weaknesses of formal educational history. The leaning has been, as the aforementioned authors argue, towards individual intellectual enlightenment. Modern versions of this line of thinking are traceable in politics and economics, as systems absorb and defend market fundamentalism—that individuals left by themselves will automatically yield better economic benefits. To achieve this end, teachers tend to “...conceive of their responsibilities as limited to the welfare of each child in their classroom, rather than extending to the welfare of the nation or the world” (Breithorde and Swiniarski 1999:2).

### 2.1.2 Market relevance of formal education in Kenya

Market relevance of Kenya’s education system is a decades-long debated issue. There have been attempts by government to respond to market relevance concerns, by appointing several commissions over a span of less than five decades. The education sector policy overview paper (see Ngigi and Macharia, 2006) outlines the various commissions as (a) The Ominde report (1964), the Gachathi report (1976), the Mackay report (1981) the Kamunge report (1988) and the Koech report (2000). The paper further notes that post 2000 there has been efforts to rework the education system for ‘access, retention, equity, quality and relevance, and internal and external efficiencies within the education system” (Ngigi and Macharia 2006; 4).

These visions and revisions have doubtless been fruitful in some ways. On the overall however, there are serious fractures that sustain market irrelevance of the current formal education system both as a whole, but also the separate parts of the whole. On this, Mwangi (undated) sees major cracks within higher education and thus poses questions like, “what next after schooling”? She also recognizes that the ‘education relevance’ question in Kenya’s context is a close ally with other problematic issues such as the commercialization of university education, which systematically excludes a large section of the population as well as the realities of classes with large student numbers. Other authors such as Chacha (2004) present their reservations, arguing that although the Commission for Higher Education (CHE) was formed in 1995 with quality and relevance as one of the central objectives, it has tended to slide towards accreditation of private universities as its primary role. He also notes that the politicization of the institution has resulted to a serious deviation from the mandate of planning and development of quality education.

The above being the case, it is left to individual educational institutions or even units within the educational institutions to brand themselves in order to maintain their marketability. Yet in spite of their endeavors, a good number of ‘suppliers’ do not often meet the demand side challenge.

## **2.2. The Unholy Trinity: Disabling access and ‘in-system’ traps in formal schooling and work environment.**

Above, the paper looked at cracks that are found within the higher education system, simultaneously pointing out, albeit vaguely, how these influence the links between education

and work. This section delves deeper into assessing the access and ‘in-system’ traps accordingly attempting to find innovative means towards a way forward.

### 2.2.1 System Breakdown

By 1997, completion of primary school rates was below 50% (Kippra, 1997). Kippra goes on to state a range of factors responsible for this sort of down scaled completion rate; among them are; “...education policies and management processes - mis-allocation of resources to educational levels; school based factors – teachers attitudes, time utilization, school environment; and household based factors - poverty, socio-cultural factors, and gender issues”. Clearly, some of these are access factors [pre-system] while others are ‘in-system’ factors. More specifically, these are bundles constituting of hard side factors on the one hand- such as poor school buildings, lack of sanitation facilities, or in general the built environment and on the other hand soft side factors such as teachers attitudes, time utilization, poorly trained teachers and the like. Both these soft and hard kinds are equally responsible for system breakdowns, the ultimate result being poor education process and outcomes.

### 2.2.2 Systems disconnect

By 2004, access to higher education was equally a problem (see Chacha; 2004). Chacha (2004; 7), further finds that

“...students lucky enough to get a university degree have no guarantee of finding employment. Whereas in the 1970s, university graduates were able to step into managerial-level civil service posts, today's job prospects are less obvious, due to tough structural adjustment programmes and recruitment restrictions”.

Tripple disconnects are evident here; which are; (a) household factors which make it difficult for access into school (house-entry level disconnectedness) (b) school based factors which progressively force a phased out termination of studies on secondary level (secondary-tertiary disconnect) and (c) end system factors –literary education-work disconnects. These disconnects progressively reduce the possibilities for meaningful job opportunities-that is, considering employed work. It is no surprise that in Kenya education levels are generally high, yet with a 46% level of unemployment.

### 2.2.3 System overload

Reverting to tertiary education, interestingly, in 2007 the amount of bribes paid to access higher education was highest, if we track corruption within the entire Kenyan education system (Transparency International; 2007). This suggests deeply networked traps that exist in the mid-way system. On the one hand there are secondary school graduates who are ‘destined’ for university education, as long as they can afford. This tradition suggests that the controls at entry level do not necessarily intend to ensure manageable students in the system, rather ‘affording’ students regardless of their number. The logics that sustain this kind of system almost yields apparent results, specifically overloaded system which in turn scale down the quality of education.

On placing the above traps in perspective, the discourses that uphold the so called ‘knowledge economy’ tend to leave out fundamental determinants on how this knowledge eventually becomes of economic, social and political value. Although in the main Houghton and Sheehan (2000) form part of the school which dis-embodiment knowledge from its dis-organizing factors, they caution that the knowledge economy agenda is “...not simply about pushing back the frontiers of knowledge; it is also about the more effective use and exploitation of all types of knowledge in all manner of economic activity” (page 1). Not much however has been done to (i) redistribute knowledge to less earning Kenyans and (ii) effectively use the knowledge which the education system in Kenya provides to those who are fortunate enough to go through the filter. On similar account, Doftori (2004) argues that little has been done to keep children from underprivileged families in schools, and provide for their learning needs.

### **2. 3. Implications of system deficits on fixed assets disciplines**

What the above means is that, system deficits lead to informalization of education. In Kenya for example, private (often unregistered and therefore unregulated) colleges are evolving in replacement to the current system failure. In turn, these ‘replacement’ institutions are going for soft courses, easy to learn and those that attempt to respond to ‘mobile’ economies. Land or even natural resources are not often part of this new deal, given that these are strongly linked to place-and therefore mobile citizens are unlikely to benefit much from them. The options are either, find some innovative ways of mainstreaming land based studies into the mushrooming informal institutions, or, do some fundamental repairs on the formal education system. The later seems more feasible. We explore it further; below.

## **3. RECOMMENDATION**

### **3.1 Integrating a learning process basics approach to development practice.**

There are fundamental hurdles, and traps that block smooth access into a separate yet supposed- to- be connected system. By all means these sorts of traps dampen the impact of formal education on the work environment. It is not a coincidence therefore that informal economy in Kenya is largely occupied by educated personnel, thanks to the education break down barriers to the formal economy. Not to mention that overall, the informal economy remains a survival for the fittest scope, with weaker (if any) social safety nets, high competition, stringent entry levels, and general labor exploitation. These are punctures that could well be prevented, if theories of development re-trace educational problems to the unholy trinity narrated above.

Similar to the basic needs approach and its newer fashion the capability approach, we see greater possibilities for a dedicated tool, a learning process basics approach (LPBA). This kind would mean a rights based agenda for governments to smoothen the learning system and connect the learning-work systems with an overriding objective of availing less advantaged the opportunity and the path to mainstream economy. This would further restore land based studies to economic discourses. Importantly, this is a different model than the ‘basic



learning’’ rhetoric which treats primary education level as a critical objective; the Millennium development goals being faithful ‘clients’ of this approach. Quite beyond the basic learning approach, the LBA premises from an account of some knowledge disorganizing factors such as the unholy trinity issues threshed out in the immediate past section. As such it is largely a process oriented model, which seeks to close process gaps yet with intentions to deliver meaningful outcomes. It also trails in the knowledge economy account which Houghton and Sheehan (2005) see as the global sense of direction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Not only that, but as social theories such as Durkheim’s functionalism (1956) have long argued that education has a far reaching effect on societies, such as processing of moral and social order, the opposite being moral and social disorder. The knowledge process in developing countries therefore predetermines knowledge outcomes, which spread across economics, politics and sociology. For Kenya, this paper posits that mainstreaming the LBA model will most likely neutralize political and social tensions such as tribalism and corruption which are; currently national crises.

Some key indicators for this approach would be:

- (i) Establishing transparency institutions between household factors and leaning performance
- (ii) Provision of a means tested financial support, bundled with psychological as well as career support-what we will term triple support (3s’s).
- (iii) Formation of twin data bases- (a) a national data base of school attendants on all levels, disaggregated in social classes, and sector classes –in particular fixed assets and mobile assets and (b) a national data base of non working school leavers /graduates and a corresponding national data base on work opportunities.
- (iv) An annual national audit for absorption of school leavers and graduates into the economy based on various education levels; disaggregated on fixed and mobile asset sectors.

All the above Indicators engage the private sector in one way or the other, thus subscribing to the Private Public Partnership (PPP). What this means are feasible incentives that would sustain the interests of the private sector such as tax breaks, publicity (which is a marketing tool), among others. This paper argues that, this ‘process’ oriented direction will most likely solve majority of Kenya’s social, political and economic ills.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This paper has theoretically (although with empirical punctuation) navigated through process rather than output/outcome issues. Section one considered the broader discourse within which education is necessarily [at least should be] plotted. Amidst finding theoretical bearings of knowledge economy, this section posed hard questions to the discourse, specifically on the meanings and definitions of the concept, and an ensuing critique of how the discourse is alienating fixed assets in favor of mobile assets. The section that followed picked up a country specific case, namely Kenya, in attempts to establish the process deficits that exist within the country’s formal learning system, punctuating this with fixed assets disciplines; yet

juxtaposing these with the work environment. Section three moved on to propose a process solution to process related problems. In the end, knowledge remains not an end in itself, but a means to economic, political and sociological ends.

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