

Thoughts on Research from a Lockdown

Steve Little University of Bolton

Taking Stock Virtually

For many of us in the UK the Covid-19 Lockdown has provided an opportunity for reflection. Clearing through files and papers from decades of research has revealed echoes of earlier investigations and arguments and some insight into the growing debate on the longer-term impact of the current pandemic.

For example, the foundations of our now ubiquitous social media can be found in research into Computer Mediated Communication from the late 1970s and 80s exemplified by the work of Sproull and Kiesler (1991). The problem of ‘flaming emails’ is still present in the more toxic form of online trolling, for example, but the enduring lesson from this early research, however, is that social learning around a new technology, not just technical learning, is necessary to successful and effective adoption.

This understanding has provided an opportunity for actors outside the process of technical development both to access and to adapt emerging technologies for situations and purposes beyond those envisaged by their originators. One example is the UK Open University collaboration with TESSA (Teacher Education in Sub Saharan Africa)¹ which utilised the then available technology, cell phone and texting, to create distributed communities of practice, providing support for isolated and relatively inexperienced teachers. In Rwanda the introduction of drone delivery of medical supplies in 2018 is a striking current example of rethinking and utilising emerging technologies².

Such opportunities allow invaluable social learning around the prospect of virtual adjacency in areas lacking basic infrastructure. However, such ‘windows of opportunity’ may be closed by further mainstream developments unless actors have access to that process of definition and development of technology (Little, 1997).

Nevertheless, in some circumstances actors at the periphery of the global system can seize an opportunity to define the direction of development. Such is the case of M-Pesa which combines state-of-the-art fintech with available smart phone technologies to deliver secure payment systems beyond the reach of conventional banking infrastructure.

The shift to virtual adjacency delivered by online technologies offers a means of leveraging human capital and crowdsourcing ideas relevant to Africa. It can bypass the infrastructure deficit across the continent while the postcolonial repurposing of road and rail and even air routes which still reflect external needs can be completed.

Building a Virtual and Virtuous Academy

In the education sector the transformation of traditional distance learning via synchronous and then asynchronous online mentoring has created a new, interactive pedagogy where the online learning community becomes a collective resource (Salmon and Little; 2000).

The UK Open University pioneered ‘blended learning’ in the 1970s, combining face-to-face and distance elements with broadcast TV and radio. Building the necessary trust in pedagogic relationships and in wider social networks traditionally involved face-to-face contact but is equally dependent on repeated exchange in which parties understand that they are engaged in the development

¹ See <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/society/international-development/international-studies/teacher-education-sub-saharan-africa-tessa> accessed 01/05/2020

² See <https://www.flyzipline.com/> accessed 01/05/2020

of longer-term relationships.

However, under a subsequent neoliberal consensus the Western academy has undergone ‘massification’, commodification and marketisation. As a consequence of intensified competition between individual institutions collegiality has become regarded as an eccentricity. At a time when global society is faced with an increasing array of ‘wicked problems’, the necessary cross disciplinary or even cross faculty working is seen as mild disloyalty in the context of internal competition for resources.

Some years ago I asked a former fellow student, then a senior government researcher, whether he had considered a career in the academy, his reply was “No, it is too individualistic”. There are however exceptions. For example CERN in Geneva acts as a hub and centre of socialisation for a global community of high-energy physicists and when key decisions are made, the needs of the doctoral students, who provide much of the day-to-day monitoring of experimental equipment, play a significant role (Little; 2009). It is no coincidence that Sir Tim Berners-Lee developed the prototype for the World Wide Web in support of the collaborative research conducted there.

At the 2019 UK General Election the British Labour Party proposed a National Education Service mirroring the National Health Service and providing access to learning and re-skilling for the British population. It proposed an integration of the different pathways of UK post secondary school education and viewed technical and University education as complementary. However, over the last four decades University sector in Anglophone countries, particularly Australia and the United Kingdom, has become a major export industry as much as a resource the indigenous population. Following rapid expansion of the sector, the current British government seems to be content to allow second tier and regional universities to face bankruptcy and liquidation in the wake of the current crisis.

During this period established Western models of academic publication, by which the results of research are disseminated, have come under severe economic pressure. The metrics used to determine the standard of academic research are subject to increasing criticism, especially in relation to their metrics for the impact of research (San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment; 2012).

One response has been the emergence of Open Access journals, an innovation intended to make research results more widely available. However, the ‘gold standard’ models, preferred by UK funding bodies example, impose significant upfront publication costs that exclude all but heavily funded researchers from the publication process. As a consequence, alternative collaborative peer-reviewed open access journals are appearing entirely online bypassing the traditional publishing infrastructure and relying upon the engagement of online research communities to maintain standards.

The African academy must engage fully with its global counterparts and utilise the principles determining quality and replicability of research. It must also develop the models and metrics needed to support Africa’s indigenous development and to ensure that the rich diversity of African cultures and insights is harnessed to deal with the problems and opportunities of the continent on its own terms.

A Pan-African Academic Platform

Kaplinsky and Morris (2009) argue that the dominance of China and India in mass manufacturing prevents the pathway of development through traditional industrialisation and manufacturing models. Alternative routes to sustainable human and economic development must be developed.

A Pan-African academic platform would allow collaboration and benchmarking around African priorities rather than those of the dominant global model. It would represent Ciborra’s concept of a

virtual and flexible platform organisation at a transnational level (Ciborra, 1996) and would provide the space to develop mission focused research programmes (Mazzuato 2019) targeting the ‘wicked problems’ involved in African development

The mission-focused approach is intended to consolidate resources across disciplines in order to match the complexity of the problems being tackled. Gaim and Clegg (2020) argue that Afrocentric frames of reference such as *Ubuntu* offer an alternative to individualistic Western orientations and a third alternative to the established dichotomy between Western and Eastern world views on dealing with the paradoxes inherent in complex situations.

The concept of third space has emerged as a means of overcoming the barriers of cross-cultural collaboration (O’Hara-Devereaux and Johansen; 1994; Seremani and Clegg, 2016) a Pan-African research framework could itself provide such an interface with the global academy.

At the national and regional level, the physical Talent Hub offers a ‘thirdspace’ between the academy and society where mentoring and support link scholarly learning to the delivery of practical outcomes for economy and society. It provides an appropriately resourced problem-based learning space (Little and Sauer; 1997) and action-research framework (Badham, Couchman and Little, 1995) directed at practical action through links with local business and government..

Pilling (2020) offers a glimpse of how Africa’s response to Covid-19 is drawing on the social resources of local custom and practice to promote necessary changes in behaviour. Just as several East Asian countries were better prepared for the current crisis through their earlier experience with SARS, many African countries climbed a steep and costly learning curve during recent Ebola outbreaks.

Pilling was previously financial times bureau chief in Japan and observed first-hand the response 2011 triple disaster and how that nations culture had been shaped by adversity (Pilling, 2014). Japan’s ageing demographics are in marked contrast to those of African countries. However, the transfer of skills from older to younger age groups and the role of life-cycle migration (Go and Little; 2013) mirrors the potential role of return migration and ‘brain circulation’ (Kale and Little; 2005) for African development.

The disruption created by the CV-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift from bricks to clicks in Western economies and exit from the lockdown should require a reboot of both economy and society, not a return to business-as-usual. Such a situation provides a window of opportunity for actors previously on the periphery to engage more closely with the construction of the new status quo, unburdened by the task of un-learning obsolete received wisdom.

References:

- Badham R., Couchman P. and Little S. (1995) "Getting smart: developing an action research approach to the integrated management of technical and organizational innovation" *Journal of Human Systems Management* by 14 (1) pp.91-103
- Ciborra, C. (1996). The Platform Organization: Recombining Strategies, Structures, and Surprises. *Organization Science* 7(2) pp. 103-209
- Gaim M. and Clegg S., (2020) Paradox beyond East/West orthodoxy: the case of Ubuntu Research *The Sociology of Organizations* April 2020
- Go F. and Little S. (2013) ‘Older workers in a global economy – life cycle migration and knowledge transfer’ in Taylor P. (ed) *Older workers in an Ageing Society*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar

- Kale D. and Little S. (2005) 'Knowledge Generation in Developing Countries: a Theoretical Framework for Exploring Dynamic Learning in High Technology Firms' *Electronic Journal of Knowledge Management* 3 (2) pp 87-96
- Kaplinsky, R. and Morris, M. (2009). The Asian drivers and SSA: is there a future for export-oriented African industrialisation? *The World Economy*, 32(1) pp. 1638–1655
- Little S.E. (2009) 'CERN Through The Looking Glass: Narrative, Meta-Narrative and Strategy in a Twenty-First Century Organisation' APROS 13 Stream 4: Strategy and Change: Living with Maps, Masks and Mirrors! Monterrey, Mexico, December 2009
- Little S. (2007) Models of Development: finding relevance for Africa in China's experience of development' in: Kitissou M. (ed) *Africa in China's Global Strategy* ISBN 9 7819 0506 8883 Adonis and Abbey, London pp.182-197
- Little S.E. (2006) "Meeting the Information Challenge: Exploring partnerships with Africa" Grieco M. Ndulo M. (eds) *Meeting the Information Challenge: the Experience of Africa*, Cambridge Scholars Press, Uxbridge, ISBN: 1-84718-010-8 pp.137-153.
- Little S.E. (2006) "Twin Towers and Amoy Gardens: mobilities, risks and choices" in *Mobile Technologies of the City* Sheller M. and Urry J. (eds), Routledge, London and New York, ISBN: 0 4153 7434 0 pp.137-153
- Little S.E. (1997) "Windows of opportunity: accessing key technologies in an age of information apartheid" in Elohimjl, Parra-Luna F. and Stuhler E.A. (eds) 'Sustainable Development', Proc. 14th International Conference of WACRA-Europe, University Complutense, Madrid
- Little S.E. and Sauer C.S. (1997) "Organisational and institutional obstacles to a problem-based approach" in: Boud D. and Feletti G.I. *The Challenge of Problem-based Learning* (2nd ed) Kogan Page, London, ISBN 0-7494-2291-2, pp.81-88
- Mazzucato (2019) *Governing Missions in the European Union* Brussels: European Commission https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/research_and_innovation/contact/documents/ec_rtd_mazzucato-report-issue2_072019.pdf accessed 01/05/2020
- O'Hara-Devereaux M. and Johansen R. (1994) *Globalwork: bridging distance, culture and time* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Pilling D. (2014) *Bending Adversity: Japan and the art of survival* London: Allen Lane
- Pilling D. (2020) Africa's Covid-19 response is a glimpse of how things could be different Financial Times 28 April 2020
- Rittel, H. and Webber M. (1973) "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning." *Policy Sciences*, 4, pp. 155-169.
- Salmon G.K. and Little S.E. (2000) "Sharing knowledge: what really works? An account of synchronous and asynchronous electronic tools and their use by the Open University" HEBUS: London Network for Higher Education and Business Conference: Meeting the e-learning challenge London Chamber of Commerce, November 2000. Both
- San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (2012) <https://sfdora.org/read/> accessed 01/05/2020
- Seremani, T. W., and Clegg, S. (2016). Postcolonialism, Organization, and Management Theory: The Role of "Epistemological Third Spaces". *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 25(2), 171-183
- Sproull L. and Kiesler S. (1991) *Connections: new ways of working in the networked organization* MIT Press, Cambridge, U.S.A