

# **Towards Contextually Relevant Epistemology of Knowledge Production in Teaching and Learning in the Humanities**

**Denzil Chetty**  
**Tennyson Mgutshini**  
**Sunette Pienaar**

## **Abstract**

Over the past decade, we have seen the production of knowledge in the academe undergo fundamental change. This change has challenged traditional disciplines, practices and policies that form the foundation of established educational institutions. Elements such as the interrelatedness of abstract and applied research, the transdisciplinarity setting, the heterogeneous institutional setting, increased reflexivity (i.e. a more dialogical process), and new ways of assessing the quality of knowledge, have all challenged the type of knowledge produced and facilitated within higher education. Additionally, critical disparities regarding the role of the community and critical stakeholders, and the purpose for which knowledge is produced, have received noteworthy attention. Within this transitioning environment, contradictory impressions of ‘social accountability’ and ‘relevance’ continue to place the humanities under a critical lens. It is against this background of purported transitions and increasing theoretical aspirations that the authors problematize and probe the prospects for a contextually relevant epistemology of knowledge production. While cognisant of the many theories and approaches that seek dominance within this field, the authors explore a Gramscian approach of ‘organic’ knowledge production within the humanities. In so doing, the authors explore the relationship between researchers and the researched through the critical lens of Gramsci’s theorizing. This focus supports a critical engagement with the broader social and economic issues of knowledge capital, and offers possibilities for positioning the humanities more critically within the broader domain of knowledge production.

**Keywords:** Knowledge co-production, organic knowledge, organic intellectuals, contextually relevant, humanities, teaching and learning.

## **Introduction**

The societal role played by Universities and institutions of higher education have been considered by many, with some literary contributors including Perkin (2006) arguing that, they play important roles within many advanced civilizations. Furthermore, Perkin (2006) posits that, throughout the ages, their functions have remained comparatively unchallenged and centre primarily on their role as centres of teaching and learning; research and innovation; and community or civic engagement . This modern day depiction of university priorities into a tripartite model of function, is most widely attributed to Boyer (1990) whose seminal work ‘Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate’ critically appraised, amongst other things, the relevance that academia has on the betterment of civic society. In his assessment, Boyer (1990) re-emphasises the role that universities play as centres responsible for knowledge production. This idealist supposition has been subjected to notable critique by others including Rooney, Hearn and Ninan (2005), who argue that universities are far removed from societal concerns primarily because of an obsession with the exclusive production of largely abstract knowledge by an academic elite, for the benefit of the higher echelons of society and in most instances, for consumption only by other academics. This viewpoint asserts a need for the legitimization of ‘bottom-up’ forms of knowledge such as folk culture (oral tradition), which are not normally seen as valid (cf. de Roux 1991: 38-44; and Fals-Borda 1991). An ideal ‘cogenerative dialogue’ in which academic knowledge draws from multiple ‘insider’ contexts is seen as the gold standard that academic knowledge production should seek to achieve. It is unsurprising therefore that, the true mantle and importance of universities has increasingly become synonymous with how well the knowledge produced by a limited few can inform social and community development. Cottom (2003) and Djeflat (2009) offer a summative overview of contemporary debates within the discourse and conclude that institutions of higher education have increasingly become irrelevant to the communities they serve, largely because they have been unable to ensure that their knowledge production endeavours translate to meaningful innovation.

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Accepting this, higher education institutions have supported the emergence of participatory research methods in which community members partner with academics within the research process from problem conceptualization all the way through to dissemination of findings (cf. McIntyre 2008). Such co-production of knowledge is acknowledged as illustrative of the fact that ‘research and innovation’ portfolios within universities have created a blueprint for deeply ingrained methods that support contextually appropriate knowledge production within higher education institutes. By contrast, ‘teaching and learning’ portfolios within higher education institutes have by Olawoyin’s (2010) account, failed to develop relevant methods of knowledge production. In the main, teaching and learning activity has failed to demonstrably move from the long-held and inaccurate belief that universities are bastions of knowledge and instead, curricula are often poorly synchronized with human labour force demands of society.

Guided by this observed disparity between theoretical aspirations and reported realities, this paper explores a Gramscian approach for contextually relevant epistemology in knowledge production for teaching and learning in the humanities. In so doing, this paper analyses the key theoretical constructs in Gramsci’s postulation of ‘organic’ knowledge. However, before attempting to frame Gramsci’s theoretical constructs, it is important to understand the prevailing context of knowledge production. In order to do so, in the following sections we will explore (1) the qualitative trends in knowledge production discourses; (2) its shifting application in higher education; and (3) a synoptic précis highlighting the production of knowledge in the humanities today, which will form the background to the positioning of Gramsci’s epistemology.

### **A Gramscian Epistemology of Knowledge Production**

Throughout this paper, certain critical concepts employed by Gramsci, such as the subaltern; the dominant group; discourses of power, etc. are used as the basis of analysing issues related to coproduction of knowledge. Even so, a critical question which warrants attention is ‘why the focus on Gramsci?’ Firstly, the current era thrust with discourses of globalization, neo-liberalism, terrorism, etc. makes it an apt environment to engage with Marxist critique (cf. Allman 2010). In addition, the post 9/11 era (and more especially the

post-apartheid era in South Africa) demands renewed ways of critiquing global relations of power and pedagogical ideas that have dominated higher education. Secondly, in the past few decades, we have seen Gramsci emerge as an intellectual influence on critical and progressive thinking, within the context of the role of culture within politics; and also as the basis for developing a critical relationship between praxis and theory (cf. Reed 2012). In addition, scholars such as Borg, Buttigieg and Mayo (2002) have explored the educational implications of Gramsci's critical constructs such as 'hegemony'; 'subaltern'; and 'organic intellectual' for the current era. It is within this context that the authors position Gramsci as an important theorist to unpack the constitution of a contextually relevant epistemology to knowledge production in the humanities.

### **Qualitative Trends in Knowledge Production Discourses**

Universities engage with communities and with stakeholders and one of the perceived benefits of these engagements relates to the demonstration of the benefits of higher education to the wider population. These benefits may include making academic knowledge and expertise available to communities and co-creating knowledge with communities and industry. It is hoped that in the process of engagement, universities will exist beyond the 'ivory tower', 'elitist' medium and become increasingly valued by local communities as approachable empowering entities. By engaging with communities, universities can help to build and sustain learning and knowledge based societies for its people. However, the negative experiences of communities with universities in the process of engagement have been well documented and written about. For example, McKinsey and Company (2012) share study findings which suggest that, some communities have anecdotally experienced academics as exploitative in the way that they extract knowledge from the poor and vulnerable (i.e. a type of subaltern on the periphery of the knowledge economy). Within their observations, they posit that, instead of co-creating knowledge with the community that would enhance development in the community, academics have, at times been accused of conducting their social research projects by extracting information and knowledge from subjects and disengaging with minimal sharing the research findings that could benefit the community. Instead of adding value to the development, universities are often perceived as perpetuating and at times, worsening

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inequalities and disparities in their attempts at engagement (Beech *et al.* 2011).

A further concern that is often cited to substantiate challenges about knowledge production within higher education institutions relates to a reported incongruence between the competencies of graduates and the requirements of the industries for which they have academically prepared. This unique paradox of the ‘unprepared overqualified’ graduate is articulated in the study by McKinsey and Company (2012: 23) who conclude that ‘while young people are qualified – even over qualified, in many cases – to enter the workplace, most of them feel ill-suited to tackle the harsh realities of an evolving job market’. Involving 4900 graduates, the study shows that many students offer negative reflections on the content of what they learned at university and in most instances; they conclude that the lack of inclusion of wider society in developing university curricula perpetuates the continuing lack of alignment between university education and skills for life<sup>1</sup>. The contribution of university teaching and learning portfolios occupies centre stage with respect to this issue both as the cause and likely panacea to the noted problem of contextually irrelevant knowledge that learners are exposed to during their program of study.

Beech, MacIntosh and MacClean (2011) allude to the fact that academics in the management sciences have been paying attention to the relevance of academic research to management practice for the past four decades. This is because research that is highly credible in the academic community seems to be irrelevant to organizational staff and managers in particular, despite the need for such research (cf. Keleman & Banzal 2002). Not all management research is of practical relevance; nevertheless, developing, testing and refining management theory is an important academic endeavour. However, in a developing country such as South Africa, the lack of relevant knowledge to establish and grow small businesses to create jobs for the masses of unemployed people, threatens the ideals of democracy and sustainability. These and other questions about the real value of knowledge raises further questions about the ‘objective’ value-add that university

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<sup>1</sup> It is widely recognized by industry that universities have not yet succeeded in turning out students with the skills and competencies required in the workplace. Graduates struggle to cross the bridge between theories in the academy to practical solutions in the workplace.

education adds to the employability of individuals. In acknowledgement of the above, we find that the humanities is not the only discipline under critical reflection within the domain of knowledge production but rather, wider questions about the value of university may be reasonably posed.

Recent solutions focus on alternative modes of knowledge production such as ‘co-production’ (cf. Pettigrew 2001) and ‘engaged scholarship’ (cf. Van den Ven 2007) to cross the divide between the academy and the world of practice. The idea of co-production of knowledge is that academics and practitioners work together through engagement and dialogue to find practical solutions to real world problems, which simultaneously inform theory.

In critically reflecting on the incongruence between academic knowledge and societal priorities as a result of ‘ivory tower’ obsessions among academics, Beech *et al.* (2011) contend that part of the problem is that universities reward individual success in research over the promotion of innovative and inclusive teaching and learning. This may in part explain why little progress is made in innovation around co-production of knowledge with communities (cf. Cottom 2003). This view is one of a number of asserted illustrative examples that confirm the significant and wide-ranging concerns about a general lack of alignment between academic knowledge and the socio-economic demands of industry and society at large.

South Africa is faced with persistent and serious structural challenges associated with unemployment, poverty and inequality, which have prompted policy makers and citizens to prioritize development. The role of education and training as a contributor to inclusive growth and employment generation has begun to receive much attention in policy documents such as the National Development Plan 2030 (2011) and the New Growth Path (2010). The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET 2013) for example, recognizes the importance of practical experience for students in the world of work as an invaluable part of training as most students are preparing for entry into the labour market. The Department of Higher Education and Training therefore calls for partnerships between higher education and industry. It also recognizes the importance of the education and training system to provide knowledge and skills to the economy. These calls are well intended but pose some challenges in implementation for a number of reasons not least, the complexity of relationships between universities and the communities they serve.

What are the implications on the relevance, access and ownership of

knowledge? Should public colleges and universities, for example, serve the needs of the economy? To whom will core educational and socialization functions be redistributed? Will universities be able to sustain knowledge transmission, production and creation as compatible activities or will higher education face a legitimacy challenge as a result? These are all critical questions that come to the fore in the broader ambit of a transitioning higher education environment.

### **Towards a Knowledge Production Shift in Higher Education Application**

Despite the proliferation of concepts such as ‘stakeholder engagement’ in the private sector, ‘participatory development’ in the public sector and ‘participatory action research’ in academia, the voices of the poor and disenfranchised (i.e. the subaltern) remain absent in knowledge production with lasting social and economic consequences. This is a ‘result of the fact that both material and knowledge production is still the privilege of a selected few and thereby implies a means of domination. As the producer and repository of ‘official’ and ‘legitimate’ knowledge, higher education institutes are implicit participants in reinforcing this domination and persistent disenfranchisement of the subaltern.

Rahman (1991: 14) posits that the elites dominate the masses by the polarisation of control over the means of material and knowledge production and that ‘these two gaps should be attacked simultaneously wherever feasible’. Knowledge creation is a process of co-creation. In this process the distinction between knowledge producers and knowledge consumers is broken down. Hence, there is a shift in discourse from partnership and mutuality to reciprocity. Universities are called as a partner to ‘demonstrate social responsibility’ and their ‘commitment to common good by making available expertise and infrastructure for community service programmes (cf. Department of Education 1997: 10). This is taken one step further in the White Paper of Higher Education and Training (2013: 39) which recognizes the universities position with community engagement as ‘socially responsive research, partnerships with civil society organizations, formal learning programmes that engage students’. Universities are encouraged to engage the community in a direct relationship that impacts research and teaching and learning (ibid.). However, the critical question relates to how universities

engage the subaltern to give legitimacy to ‘bottom-up knowledge’ production, within a framework that is supposed to alter the politics of power relations in knowledge production.

In this regard, Hoppers (2013: 100) urges universities to ‘develop mutually and reciprocally determined demand in problem identification and resolution’ in its engagement with the subaltern. Participation in knowledge creation is to be increased to a level of mutuality and reciprocity in order to democratize the knowledge process. This involves legitimizing ‘bottom-up’ knowledge processes, which are normally not considered valid (cf. de Roux 1991: 38; and Fals-Borda 1991). Real participation requires a ‘co-generative dialogue’ (cf. Fear & Edwards 1995). The social and knowledge outcomes of such a dialogue are very important with regard to this perception. It can be recognized as enhancing egalitarian relationships (Shotter 2008); construction of new meanings (Grundin 1996); and a concurrent understanding of a new position (Ramsay 2008). In such a transformative dialogue, researcher knowledge which draws and abstracts from multiple contexts, is combined with insider knowledge in a co-creative project of knowledge creation and shared action.

Participatory research is described by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005: 560) as an ‘alternative philosophy of social research’, which is frequently associated with social transformation in the Third World. Its roots can be found in liberation theology, neo-Marxist approaches to community development, and human rights activism. One of its attributes is shared ownership of the ‘engagement’. It is committed to social, economic and political development that is responsive to the needs of the subaltern, in contrast to the political project of conventional social research, which normally serves the ideological function of protecting and advancing the interests of the powerful.

The notion that research should actively involve communities affected by it has been promoted in popular education movements (cf. Freire 1993). Theoretically, participatory research therefore offers one solution to how universities could engage empowering the subaltern through knowledge production. It is within this context that we will explore Gramsci’s philosophy and praxis of knowledge production.

Despite the availability of this theoretical premise for knowledge production, and despite the fact that participatory research has gained some traction in many institutions, this methodology is not embraced as an



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instrument for knowledge production across disciplines<sup>2</sup>. Specialisation and technocracy places certain kinds of expertise and certain kinds of knowledge above others. The natural sciences and law, amongst others, use positivistic methods of research to make a case or to prove of a hypothesis. Knowledge developed through traditional scientific paradigms such as experiments or the use of technologies is frequently considered more legitimate than local knowledge or experiential knowledge. Scientists in the natural science or positivist disciplines lack an epistemological foundation to make sense of its practice. In such disciplines, the dominant epistemology of the academy runs counter to the social change agenda.

Although many social and humanity scientists are familiar with participation as a broader social change strategy, they might still choose to control the research process and knowledge production believing that theoretical knowledge holds the upper hand. Knowledge is undeniably socially and politically constituted. Knowledge systems and constructs in South Africa are adopted from a colonial history and 'apartheid' past. Categorisations and presuppositions must be subjected to continual revision to deconstruct inequalities of the past<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> In participatory research those restricted as research participants, also participate throughout the research process identifying the problem and the solution. This research process is designed to increasingly shift the power and control of decision making into the hands of the community. By turning the power structures on its head the social structure of the knowledge process is changed. Maquire (2006) posits that the benefits of this research process can be more equitably distributed where research subjects are involved as partners in the entire research process. Participatory research is about people producing knowledge that is normally hidden, and to develop their own consciousness and further their social change struggles.

<sup>3</sup> All researchers are called upon to reflect critically upon and question historical discourses and allow the community member to be a legitimate participant on the dialogue. Should the academic however understand categorisations of discourses as simply 'mirroring' what the subject 'is' 'objectively', he/she would simply invite the subject to understand themselves in accordance with this supposedly incontrovertible identify, and the subject will be abolished from any possible dialogue (Foucault 1991: 382).

Another reason for participatory research not enjoying the preferred traction in higher education institutions might relate to the fact that this methodology is consigned to the domain of community engagement. Despite community engagement being one of the three founding principles (together with research and teaching and learning) of the post-apartheid reconstruction of the higher education system and despite it being recognised as a ‘strategy in the transformation of higher education in relation to community development priorities’ (cf. Council for Higher Education 2004: 130), it does not enjoy the same status and recognition as teaching and learning and pure research (as opposed to applied research)<sup>4</sup>.

### **Producing Knowledge in the Humanities Today**

Much like the rest of the world, South Africa’s focus on education has progressively shifted from issues of massification to more sophisticated concerns with standards of education; albeit, at a comparatively slower pace. This is largely due to the legacy of separatists policies that intentionally excluded particular population sectors. Boughey (2003) offers an apt summation of this progression and confirms a shift toward providing ‘epistemological access’ in terms of developing methods of teaching that allow students to become capable participants in global knowledge production. The humanities have played a particularly important role within the eradication of ‘disadvantage’ both in terms of leading conversations about equity in education but also through their promotion of progressive discourse about the contribution that education makes to wider socio-economic concerns (cf. Scott 2001). Furthermore, the humanities has been responsible for generating important questions about the nature of knowledge. For example, the emergence of debates about the appropriateness of Western

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<sup>4</sup> In tenure and promotion processes community engagement is inadequately weighted and poorly clarified. To the contrary, academics spending time on applied research projects often risk their careers. The old mantra of ‘publishing’ or ‘perishing’ also applies negatively in this instance. Participatory knowledge production happens through continuous negotiation at many levels with different groups/individuals over time and in place. It calls for an investment in time, money and people to build trusting relationships that can facilitate problem identification and solution.

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forms of knowledge as a currency of education in Africa can be traced back to the humanities. This has in turn given rise to the view that indigenous knowledge systems deserve to be given more priority within higher education (cf. Chamberlin 2003). Beyond that, questions about social relevance of education have put forward the contention that academia has the potential to make more meaningful contribution to society if its production is negotiated between academics and recipient communities. This shift in the discourse about knowledge production is increasingly challenging the humanities to become more responsive and relevant to societal needs, especially in the face of global economic and social problems (cf. Waghid 2002).

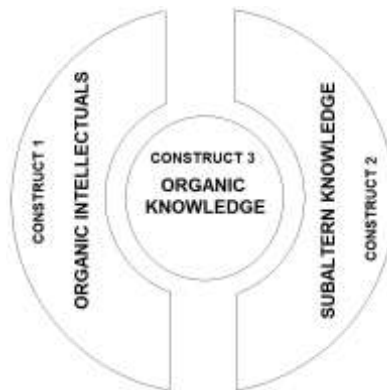
It is against this background that anyone interested in knowledge production in the humanities today, seeks to answer the critical question of what is the role of the academic in the twenty first century humanities. For Aldama (2008:110) the central thesis on the role of the academic is the production of knowledge, which may translate to forms of power, in particular 'political power' and this power has an impact in all spheres of society. Hence, to understand the dominant paradigms such as patriarchy, capitalism, neo-colonialism, etc. one needs to understand the relationships of power to the discursive structures of knowledge. For Denning (2004: 233-234) the role of the academic in the humanities is to identify 'new forms of struggle and solidarity in places we never thought to look'. For Bérubé (1995: 40) the role of the academic in the humanities is to dissect the 'power relations that shape the most intimate and/ or quotidian details of our lives'. All these positions posit a rethinking of what we teach and how we position 'knowledge' we construct within the humanities.

To this end, the critical intersection between 'knowledge' and 'power' that we now turn to Gramsci's epistemology of knowledge production to further analyse the role of the academe.

### **Towards an Organic Knowledge Production Approach**

In current praxis the researched subject is often marginalized in the knowledge production process by the dominant group (i.e. the intellectuals: academics and universities who often assume the roles of bastions of knowledge). In the context of this paper, we employ Green's (2002: 3) definition of the subaltern as a social group, class, individual who are subject to the initiatives of the dominant group. Hence, amidst this marginalization in

the process of knowledge extraction, the researched subject (i.e. the subaltern) continues its struggle for agency, power and social mobility. It is within this context that Gramsci's theorizing of 'organic' knowledge comes to the fore challenging the notions that the subaltern cannot participate in the co-creation of knowledge. By employing the term 'organic' knowledge in this paper, we imply knowledge co-created by the organic intellectual and subaltern, which reflects the realities of the subaltern's lived experiences (cf. Sandler 2009: 429). By accentuating a type of 'organic' knowledge, Gramsci puts forward a re-envisioning of the subaltern as possessing rich social and intellectual resources. In the context of the broader participatory research framework, Gramsci's philosophy of praxis inspires an alternative approach for teaching and learning within the humanities –i.e. a critical pedagogy embedded in relational knowledge. By positioning Gramsci's praxis, we honour the role of the subaltern's thoughts, ideas and actions in creating knowledge, which through reflection by researchers reaches the wider communities of interest. Thereby, articulating how knowledge is socially created and used in the 'lived-experiences' of the subaltern via the 'bottom-up' approach. In order to provide a further explication of Gramsci's epistemology, we explore the following constructs: Construct 1: Organic Intellectuals; Construct 2: Subaltern Knowledge; and Construct 3: Co-Producing Organic Knowledge (see figure 1 below).



**Figure 1: Organic Intellectuals - Subaltern Knowledge - Organic Knowledge**

***(1) Construct 1: Organic Intellectuals***

Gramsci's epistemology articulates an association between those who possess knowledge, its social creation and how it is used (cf. Karabel 2002: 23 and Zanoni 2008: 12). In Gramsci's epistemology we find a strong connection in the interaction between the intellectuals, the subaltern and their shared thoughts and feelings. Ideally for Gramsci, the subaltern should be self-emancipating, but they lack the theoretical consciousness that would enable them to be aware of the contradictions in their own lives. Thus, Gramsci attributes an important role to the intellectuals in conceptualizing the ideas and thoughts of the subaltern. Gramsci (1971: 334) argues that 'there is no organization without intellectuals that is without organizers and leaders, in other words, without the theoretical aspect of the theory-practice nexus being distinguished concretely by the existence of a group of people 'specialised' in conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas'. However, Gramsci goes further to argue that having a cohort of intellectuals with the ability to 'intellectualize' the ideas of the subaltern and not 'feel' for the subaltern renders a sense of 'detachment' and 'autonomy' from the masses:

The popular element 'feels' but does not understand or know. The intellectual element 'knows' but does not understand and, above all does not feel... The error of the intellectual consists in believing that one can know without understanding and, above all, without feeling, or being impassioned: in other words, that the intellectual can be an intellectual if he [she] is distinct and detached from the people (Gramsci 1971: 418).

For Gramsci, the abilities to 'understand' and 'feel' are interlinked. For an intellectual who is not an insider of the group, he/she must be prepared to experience the feelings of the subaltern in order to co-create knowledge with them (cf. Fontana 2000: 306). If the intellectual fails to 'understand' and 'feel' then the relationship becomes 'bureaucratic and formal' and can lead to the establishment of an intellectual 'caste' (cf. Gramsci 1971: 418). Thus, in Gramsci's epistemology, an intellectual who is not from within the subaltern group can only assume some degree of 'organic' status when he/she understands the 'passions' that motivates the actions of the subaltern. It is within this context that we see Gramsci begin to distinguish between two types of intellectuals, vis-à-vis 'traditional intellectuals' and 'organic

intellectuals'. For Gramsci, 'traditional intellectuals' are often the product of the current dominating regime, - i.e. historically constituted. They attain some degree of autonomy and possess a 'caste-like' position in society<sup>5</sup>. They function to maintain the status quo within the current economic, social and political strata. For Gramsci, what really distinguishes the traditional intellectuals from the organic intellectuals is their 'negative position' to the subaltern group, whose self-proclaimed autonomy stands in direct opposition to the aspirations of the subaltern (cf. Gramsci 1971: 236).

Hence, it is the second category of intellectuals i.e. the 'organic intellectuals', which emerge as an integral element of transformation for Gramsci. Heskin (1991) offers a description of Gramsci's 'organic intellectuals' as those situated in the popular movement, aligned to the grassroot participants, functioning to articulate the values and commitments that bind the group together. They are defined by the functions attributed to them by the social group they represent. For Boggs (1993: 179) organic intellectuals share with the larger membership the same language (framework of communication), culture and lifestyle. Born from within the group, they act back on the group, critiquing their ideas to transform it into collective action. In Heskin's view (1991), the organic intellectuals possess the capacity to imagine an alternative future, to generate a counter-hegemony in the interest of the group they represent. Furthermore, they are able to articulate the steps forward to attain that goal within a real world of praxis.

The process of creating or birthing organic intellectuals that are inherent and understand and feel the subaltern is the ideal. However, Gramsci (1971: 334) notes that this process of creating intellectuals is 'long, difficult, full of contradiction, advances and retreats, dispersal and regroupings, in which loyalty of the masses is sorely tried'. It is in this context that both Karabel (2002) and Zanoni (2008) contend that intellectuals not birthed from within the group can show their organic relation to the masses by directly experiencing and knowing their feelings, passions, aspirations and ideas. Boggs (1993) thesis adds to this by developing the argument for a reconstituted definition of the organic intellectuals that are not seen within

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<sup>5</sup> Burke (2005) lists the clergy, philosopher and professors as an example. Although they consider themselves as independent of ruling groups, for Burke (2005) this is usually a myth and an illusion. They are essentially conservative allied to and assisting the ruling group in society.

the confines of class, social identity or social location. Hence, for Boggs (1993) this new form of organic intellectuals creates the prospects for critical intellectuals within the academe to engage with the subaltern for change. The redefined organic intellectual then offers the subaltern recursive reflection based on recognition of ‘compassion’, ‘consequence’ and ‘experience’ (cf. critical attributes identified by Gramsci 1971: 5-6).

## ***(2) Construct 2: Subaltern Knowledge***

A critique of ‘subaltern knowledge’ raises a critical question about whose knowledge matters. It further probes the discourses of what constitutes ‘legitimate’ knowledge. A debate that has dominated the academe for decades where specialized intellectuals served as the ‘gatekeepers’ of knowledge and the common individual’s (i.e. the subaltern’s) ‘reasoning’ or ‘understanding’ in order to establish meaning of the human world was seen as meaningless (cf. Patnaik 1988: 2). In the context of this paper we employ Casas-Cortés, Osterweil and Powell’s (2008: 27) definition of ‘subaltern knowledge’ as the experiences; narratives; ideologies and claims to various forms of expertise that define how the subaltern comes to know and inhabit the world.

Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis centres on the thesis that all men and women are intellectuals. While cognizant of the category of ‘specialized’ intellectuals (as articulated in our discussions above), Gramsci posits that, ‘all men [and women] are potentially intellectuals, in the sense of having intellect and using it’ (cf. Gramsci 1971: 3). It is within this context that Gramsci (1971: 421) argues that the subaltern possesses a type of ‘spontaneous philosophy’. A type of knowledge that stands in contrast to knowledge produced by systematic educational activity, but rather a type of knowledge produced through the everyday experience in the world – i.e. ‘common sense’, a traditional conception of the world (i.e. a localized, native knowledge) formulated through historical acquisition (cf. Gramsci 1971: 199). For Gramsci, while common sense dominates the mental life of the subaltern social group, it is not ‘unchanging’ (ibid.)<sup>6</sup>. Thus Gramsci (1971:

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<sup>6</sup> Common sense is established by a process of consent to the dominant group’s attitudes and interests, which are accepted by the subaltern as being its own general interests.

419) contends that since ‘common sense’ is situated in ‘time’ and ‘space’ it remains at variance with one another taking on differing forms at different moments.

Due to the above variants, common sense can also be seen as a category of ‘original thought’ that is produced by the subaltern. This is illustrated by Patnaik (1988: 7) in the following:

One of the most crucial dimensions of subaltern common sense is its originality. It is a creative thought-process of the subaltern groups. Some rationalisations of their subordination might have been constructed by themselves. Some dissent, discontent, and counterpoints might have been offered by the subalterns themselves.

It is within this context that we now find it imperative to understand how the knowledge of the subaltern is constituted. As noted earlier however, that one of the critical challenges is the lack of theoretical consciousness of the subaltern to critique the very system in which their knowledge is produced. This lack of ability renders the subaltern unconscious to the fact that their worldviews (i.e. common sense) may very much be the product of a predetermined ‘act’ articulated by the dominant group. Thus, for Gramsci (1971: 422) it is within this context that the organic intellectual emerges with the critical function to critique the composition of common sense. By critiquing this composition, the organic intellectual will be able to deconstruct and reconstruct a new common sense with the ability to articulate an alternative worldview.

This implies that the construction of a particular conception of the world must be critiqued with focus on the level of consciousness of the subaltern and its social function. This calls for a critique on the origin of knowledge, and the social dialogue that results in the value, use and development of this knowledge into something projected within the subaltern social group (cf. Zanoni 2008: 18).

### ***(3) Construct 3: Co-Producing ‘Organic’ Knowledge***

For Gramsci (1971: 350) every ‘hegemony’ as the domination of ideas is an educational one. Thus, educational systems are necessary to advance the



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existing relationships of production and reproduction of the dominant class<sup>7</sup>. Due to hegemony sustaining the relationships between the dominant and the subaltern, a struggle for control over educational institutions such as universities, where methods of producing knowledge are central activities become imperative (ibid.). Thus, the third construct in Gramsci's epistemology focuses on the ways in which educators think about or perform their work within educational institutions, even though they may be conscious that these educational institutions serve to reproduce the social arrangements they are seeking to change radically.

To modify the dominant conception of the world, intellectuals would have to be produced at all levels that propagate another conception of the reality and assume a hegemonic function deriving from their organic relations with the masses. In Gramsci's philosophy of praxis, an educational curriculum should be aiming to co-produce a new stratum of intellectuals with the critical skills to engage with transformation of the subaltern – change the conceptions of the world (cf. Gramsci 1971: 326). For Gramsci, as noted previously, the development of a socio-cultural opposition must begin from the 'common sense' of the masses. It is the aim of the organic intellectual to engage this common sense. Hence, two critical questions come to the fore in Gramsci's epistemology. Firstly, should educators try to change the education system by working within it, and secondly, in what ways can oppositions or alternatives to it be thought? (cf. Simpson 2002: 267). In order to provide a response to these critical questions, the authors in this paper contend that one needs to move beyond the common praxis of 'studying *the* subaltern' to 'studying *with* the subaltern'. For Mato (2000: 480) the emphasis of 'studying *the* subaltern' reflects the 'institutional' context and is reminiscent of the distance and disenfranchisement between the researchers and researched – i.e. a tradition that dominates current praxis within academe. Mato (2000: 481) further contends that, 'it is ethically, politically and epistemologically imperative that researchers find ways to promote the conscious incorporation of social groups that are usually targeted as subjects of study into jointly conceived research agendas'. This notion of 'jointly

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<sup>7</sup> For Gramsci (1971: 350-351) the theoretical and practical principles of hegemony possess epistemological significance in that it articulates an ideological terrain where methods of knowledge may be formed and reformed.

conceived research agendas' reemphasises Gramsci's critical position of organic intellectuals being a part of the masses and able to 'understand' and 'feel' the subaltern in order to produce contextually relevant knowledge. By strategically incorporating the subaltern into the research process, it brings about a shift in research praxis of constructing local communities as objects of study, hence, uttering the shift from studying '*the other*' to study '*with that other*'. This change in focus produces knowledge that is 'organic' capturing the thoughts, aspirations and ideas of the subaltern that reflects their lived realities.

This shift in praxis towards a co-produced knowledge implies reframing our interests to reflect the interests of the subaltern – i.e. what will the subaltern social groups gain from such knowledge production? Mato (2000: 487) offers a 'shift' in knowledge production within this redefined praxis. For Mato (2000) knowledge about the subaltern has always been produced (through publications, reports, and so forth) to provide the hegemonic agents (i.e. the dominant group) knowledge about the secrets of the subaltern. By understanding the subaltern's conception of the world, hegemonic agents were able to dominate and control the subaltern. However, by co-producing knowledge with the subaltern, organic intellectuals begin to reverse the order of things by providing the subaltern with knowledge of how their worldviews and so forth have been constructed and controlled through the hegemonic articulations of power. While this approach is now being purported as a transition within academe praxis, its existence within broader pedagogical discourses is not new. To substantiate this we turn to Freire's (1992: 30) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which he defines his pedagogical position, 'a pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (whether individuals or people) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come the necessary engagement in the struggle for liberation'.

### ***Framing Gramsci's Epistemology within the Humanities***

In this section we aim to briefly highlight some of our thoughts on how Gramsci's philosophy of praxis could be positioned within the humanities to bring about a contextually relevant epistemology in knowledge production

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for teaching and learning. Firstly, as a philosophy of praxis, Gramsci's epistemology can be aptly clustered with liberatory, emancipatory, empowering, transformative and transgressive approaches to education. The three constructs which form Gramsci's epistemology (as discussed above) serve to support the educational efforts of disenfranchised communities, and with efforts to create a more diverse and culturally inclusive learning environment within the humanities. For example by academics repositioning themselves within the subject's environment as 'organic intellectuals' with the ability to 'feel' and 'understand' the subaltern, while acknowledging them as sources of rich intellectual knowledge, academics within the humanities can now occupy a more critical role by facilitating a 'type' of learning that is contextually relevant and embedded with kinds of metaphors and analogies that reflect the worldviews of the learners they facilitate. Furthermore, by bringing in new content in the form of co-produced knowledge (via the 'bottom-up approach'), academics begin to alter the learning processes that have dominated the humanities, by challenging the status quo and power hierarchies that protect traditional domains of academic knowledge.

Secondly, Gramsci's epistemology serves to position the learner at the centre of the learning process thereby shifting the epistemological frame or knowledge acquisition. This postulates decentring of what is considered 'authentic' and 'legitimate' knowledge, and a repositioning of the learner's life-world within an experimental learning framework. This shift also posits a methodological repositioning in which teaching and learning takes place within the humanities. Through praxis which includes cultural practices, learners' narratives, learners' experiences, and so forth, academics within the humanities are placed in a critical position to offer a broader sociological critique of education as an institutional practice and also challenge the dominant power hierarchies of a nation or community.

Thirdly, Gramsci's epistemology articulates the critical role of dialogue and recognition of an intersubjective constitution of worldviews. This shift within the humanities positions the learning environment as not encompassing a 'set' body of knowledge to be delivered to students, but rather an acquisition or learning process in which students come to see the world from their own lived-experiences. It is within this context that the learners begin to see themselves not as mere 'individuals' in a learning process, but as part of a community of learners. The notion of a learning community prompts three critical questions for the humanities. (1) Who are

the learning subjects? (2) How is a community of subjects constituted through praxis? (3) How is knowledge claims validated?

Finally, the application of Gramsci's epistemology within the humanities begins to illustrate the need for multi-inter and trans-disciplinary approaches to teaching and learning. The ability to fully comprehend the 'common sense' (worldview) articulated by the subaltern cannot be achieved from the confines of a single discipline. Hence, the integration of a broader critique incorporating politics, sociology, religion, culture, language, psychology and so forth, will offer a more nuanced framework for engaging the subaltern.

## **Conclusion**

Higher education has long afforded itself the mantle of serving as the primary space for knowledge production but, with passing generational changes, questions have been raised about this asserted position. Firstly, the point of contestation arises from a growing acknowledgement of the fact that non-academic communities have much to bring in enriching the process of knowledge production and secondly, there is growing dismissal of the abstract-types of knowledge that are often associated with 'ivory tower' forms of knowledge production. The current discussion sought to present a contextually relevant epistemology of knowledge production for teaching and learning in the humanities. At the onset of this paper, the complex trajectory of this debate is acknowledged followed by a subsequent problematisation of some of the issues within the domain of knowledge production. In facilitating a broad-based discussion of current trends in knowledge production discourse, a review of current progressions in knowledge production applications within the higher education milieu, was offered. Additional contextualisation of knowledge production within the humanities today and an articulation the critical position of the humanities within the broader academe, was provided. It is against this background that the authors began to position a Gramscian epistemology to knowledge production. While acknowledging the many theories within the field that seek to dominate the discourse of knowledge production, Gramsci's understanding of organic knowledge production serves as the basis for discussion within the paper. The ensuing discussion focusses on unpacking three critical Gramscian

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constructs, namely (1) organic intellectuals; (2) subaltern knowledge; and (3) co-produced organic knowledge. Throughout the discussions of these three constructs, the authors illustrated how Gramsci's conceptualization of these constructs impact knowledge production within the education domain. The paper concluded with a critical framing of Gramsci's epistemology in the humanities and how it potentially challenges the current praxis and ethos that dominates teaching and learning.

In concluding this paper, we acknowledge that there is more work needed in this field. Hence, engaging with knowledge production in the humanities through these types of epistemologies offers much prospect for academics within the humanities to 'reinvent' themselves as intellectuals as well as the content they facilitate in their teaching and learning. We offer this paper as a work in progress, with further possibilities of exploring Gramsci's epistemology through contextually applied case studies as evidence of how knowledge can be produced with contextual relevance.

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Denzil Chetty  
Department of Religious Studies & Arabic  
College of Human Sciences  
University of South Africa  
Chettd@unisa.ac.za

Tennyson Mgutshini  
Office for Tuition and Learning Support  
College of Human Sciences  
University of South Africa  
Mgutst@unisa.ac.za

Sunette Pienaar  
Directorate Community Engagement and Outreach  
University of South Africa  
Pienas@unisa.ac.za