The Digital Abyss in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Just as refugees fleeing to escape Zimbabwe have struggled to cross the crocodile-hungry waters of the Limpopo, so are Zimbabweans battling to find ways to traverse the abyss of a digital divide affecting their country. In 2008-09, Zimbabwe was rated third worst in the world for its national information communications technology (ICT) capability by the World Economic Forum, being ranked at 132/134 nations on the global ICT ‘networked readiness index’. Digital divide issues, including severe deficits in access to new technologies facing this small Sub-Saharan country, are therefore acute. In terms of global power relations involving ICT capability, Zimbabwe has little influence in any world ranking of nations. A history of oppression, economic collapse, mismanagement, poverty, disease, corruption, discrimination, public sector breakdown and population loss has rendered the country almost powerless in ICT terms. Applying a critical social theory methodology and drawing on Freirean conceptions of critical pedagogy to promote emancipation through equal access to e-learning, this chapter is written in two parts. In the first place, it analyzes grim national statistics relating to education and to the digital divide in Zimbabwe, situating these in the wider context of Africa; in the second part, the chapter applies this information in a practical fictional setting to imagine life through the eyes of an average Zimbabwean male farm worker called Themba, recounting through narrative an example of the impact on one person’s life that could result from, firstly, a complete lack of educational and ICT resources for adults in a rural farming situation and, secondly, new opportunities as a migrant to become engaged with adult and higher education, including ICT training and facilities. Access to education, to book publications, to ICT facilities, in dialogue with others during a long process of conscientization, are seen to open up democratising and liberating opportunities for Themba in South Africa. The powerful transformation that takes place Themba’s life and propels him towards many achievements as an e-learning teacher is inspired by Freire’s critical pedagogy: it provides a message of hope in an otherwise exceptionally bleak educational and technological situation, given the current difficult socio-economic and political situation that has resulted in a digital abyss in Zimbabwe.

INTRODUCTION

The great snaking curves of the ‘grey-green greasy’ (Kipling, 1993) Limpopo river coil themselves around the southern border of Zimbabwe, marking a key geographical and political transition into South Africa. To the north, the Zambezi river flows furiously along the border with Zambia, tumbling rapidly down from Mosi-oa-Tunya (‘the smoke that thunders’) at Victoria Falls. For a landlocked country like Zimbabwe, these rivers have both a literal and representational importance, separating out its national identity from other countries and marking timeworn boundaries that have witnessed both turbulent and calm waters, in friendship and hostility, struggle and survival, freedom and change with and against other southern African nations. It is to the Limpopo that many refugees and economic migrants from Zimbabwe have fled in past decades, taking scanty belongings, often escaping at night, in a struggle to reach South Africa before being caught and possibly imprisoned by the
Zimbabwean African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) elements of government, and before cholera, HIV, poverty or old age have rendered them helpless.

More than three million people have left in similar ways: the Zimbabwean diaspora has grown exponentially, with around a quarter of the population now scattered across the world. In 2007 it was reported that more than 17,000 Zimbabweans a week were flooding through the Limpopo border into South Africa (Mel-drum, 2007). Often, these escapers have had little money, few resources, and no one to meet them in South Africa. Many times, they may have had little hope of reaching any satisfactory destination after a dangerous journey. The end of that long journey may also often have been characterized by brutal treatment from hostile South Africans angry about increasing competition from these generally well-educated, skilled (Nherera, 2000) and desperate Zimbabwean immigrants, hungry for scarce resources and jobs. Zimbabwean refugees and migrants often have faced a menial, deskillled life in their new country, beset by many hardships (Bloch, 2006). But still they have come, crossing the vast chasm of the Limpopo river valley, on their many hopeful journeys.

Just as the rivers north and south separate Zimbabwe from other nations, so technological and developmental divides mark out its difference in recent decades characterized worldwide by progress in globalization, increased communications and market expansion fuelled and supported by new technologies. Zimbabwe has been more or less left behind with regard to technology during this time of massive global technological development (Nherera, 2000). Although Africa as a whole is rated as ‘the least wired region in the world’ (ITU, 2007d), the situation affecting Zimbabwe is acute even within Africa. While a stark ‘digital divide’ in comparison with other continents affects the whole of Africa in both relative and absolute terms, even within this overall challenging situation for access to information and communications technology (ICT) across Africa, the situation in Zimbabwe is now one of desperate poverty combined with an extreme lack of access to advanced technologies, particularly in the rural areas, in which 70% of the country’s population lives (Matsika, 2007). In effect, Zimbabwe faces a digital divide of such magnitude that it forms an ever-deepening abyss separating this beleaguered country from more technologically advanced nations.

The struggle to cross this chasm of inequality in technological developmental terms is bound up with the desire for emancipation of the Zimbabwean people from the many political, economic and social difficulties with which they are faced. A long history of colonial and post-colonial political domination, oppression, mismanagement, economic collapse, corrupt politicians, electoral scandals, human rights abuses, impoverishment and disease in Zimbabwe has had traumatic effects on the population, rendering virtually powerless the educational and information and communications technology capabilities of the country, its economy and its industries (WOZA, 2009). The chasm between Zimbabwe’s current level of ICT capability and those nations that have achieved higher levels of ICT development has occurred as a result of a difficult national history arising from a number of complex factors, as this chapter will discuss, using an implicit critical social theory philosophical approach to examine the digital divide issues affecting Zimbabwe.

The key aspect of critical social theory informing the chapter is an imaginative fictional portrayal of a critical emancipatory pedagogic approach based on the work of Paulo Freire (1921–1997), as seen through the eyes of a farm worker in rural Zimbabwe who has had little access to education in his adult life and no access at all to ICT. Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), developed originally from adult education literacy work with rural peasants and villagers in Brazil, and deeply connected with the cultural and contextual understandings of rural adult workers suffering both poverty and oppression, is applicable to this Zimbabwean farming context. The fictional narrative in part two is informed by a consideration of the Freirean processes of ‘conscientization’ (the
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