Original Research

Developing an Inclusive African Theory of Academic Literacy

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Abstract: South Africa has enjoyed post-apartheid democratic freedom for thirty years. However, three decades after apartheid's legal end, institutions of higher learning still grapple with a significant crisis of student attrition. Approximately 25% of South African students drop out annually without completing their degree or academic year. According to the current article, this high dropout rate is partly attributed to a lack of a coherent theory of academic literacy, which could mitigate the feelings of alienation experienced by African students. This article argues that the dependence of African universities on Global North constructs of academic literacy limits students' experiences of inclusion and belonging to specialized disciplinary domains. To address the crisis of student attrition, as well as experiences of cultural alienation in universities where African students are enrolled, this article proposes developing an African Theory of Academic Literacy (ATAL). The objective of this theory is to empower academic literacy educators to ground their teaching, learning, and assessment practices in an Afrocentric paradigm, thereby fostering a stronger sense of inclusion among novice scholars within their disciplines.

Introduction

Academic literacy practitioners, like all disciplinary members, base their teaching, learning, and assessment practices on specific theoretical frameworks. Grounding pedagogic principles in robust theory is a quality assurance measure integral to higher education practice. Ngubane and Makua (2021) argue that a connection based on indigenous, Ubuntu principles between theory and practice emerges when African teachers' and learners' cultural backgrounds and values are incorporated into the curriculum. They assert that when students locate their cultures within the curriculum, their sense of inclusion and belonging within disciplines is enhanced.

The ancient Ubuntu philosophy primarily emphasizes the interdependence of African communities and individuals for survival (Etieyibo 2017). Waghid et al. (2023) expand this construct into the notion of contemporary Ubuntu universities, where the core principles include valuing local knowledge, social justice, transformation, and decoloniality. Within this conceptual framework, it can be argued that an Ubuntu perspective on the relationship between academic literacy theory and practice recognizes and values Africa's knowledge

systems and diverse cultures. For example, multilingual pedagogies that incorporate African students' languages facilitate the integration of their cultures into the curriculum.

African scholars increasingly revisit Ubuntu philosophy as a pertinent pedagogical paradigm to address the challenges and the evolution of postcolonial universities. For instance, in Ghana, Akpey-Mensah and Muchie (2020) argue that Ubuntu-associated values (such as love, unity, compassion, and cooperation) inspire some Sunyani Technical University staff in their teaching and research practices. Akpey-Mensah and Muchie's (2020) focus on these values underscores the continued relevance of Ubuntu for contemporary academic literacy facilitators who are addressing students' difficulties in adapting to institutional cultures. In their study, Ubuntu principles were found to enhance a sense of community, increase loyalty, and improve job motivation and performance among staff (Akpey-Mensah and Muchie 2020).

In contrast to the ethos of Ubuntu, numerous publications also highlight African students' experiences of epistemological and cultural alienation within disciplinary spaces. Hlatshwayo (2020) and Kumalo (2023) argue that African scholars continuously struggle to achieve epistemic belonging in universities. Addressing concerns about epistemological belonging and alienation is crucial for scholars aiming to develop an inclusive African Theory of Academic Literacy (ATAL). This focus is vital because academic literacies permeate all faculties, schools, and disciplines. If students are unable to master these practices, their ability to demonstrate proficiency in disciplinary epistemologies is profoundly hindered. Bassett and Macnaught's (2024) analysis confirms that scholars who do not develop academic literacies exhibit lower course completion rates.

The issue of student attrition in South African higher education has persisted for decades, rooted in historical academic practices shaped by the colonial and apartheid periods. Before 1948, during the era preceding apartheid, indigenous African people were systemically excluded from enrolling in institutions of higher learning. Some of South Africa's oldest institutions, such as the University of Cape Town (1829), Stellenbosch University (1918), the University of the Free State (1950), the University of Natal (1910), and the University of Pretoria (1908), were established before apartheid was legally instituted in 1948 (Bunting 2006). Consequently, African people were marginalized while these institutions developed academic cultures modeled after their Global North counterparts.

Historically, Global North epistemologies have emphasized atomistic approaches to knowledge construction, characterized by breaking down knowledge and its teaching into isolated components (Eybers 2019). The neutral skills literacy model mirrors this atomistic view, treating literacies as separate, decontextualized entities lacking cultural and contextual dimensions (see Weideman 2021). Such a method aligns with the values of individualism and capitalism that are dominant in the Global North. In contrast, indigenous and precolonial African epistemologies favor communal, synthesized, and multidisciplinary approaches integrating the contributions of specialists, community members, and youth into a holistic framework.

The continued dominance of atomistic approaches to structuring and teaching knowledge, rooted in the colonial and apartheid eras, carries notable implications for academic literacy developers. These approaches often limit the incorporation of African perspectives and restrict more holistic, contextually relevant educational practices. For scholars seeking to articulate their own ATAL, it is crucial to incorporate the histories, aspirations, knowledge systems, and post-apartheid visions of diverse communities into their framework. As Asante (1988a) argues, schools mirror the cultural systems that shape their operation. Within this context, given the ongoing marginalization of African knowledge systems in the teaching, learning, and assessment of academic literacies in some African universities, it is vital for educators to develop new, culturally relevant constructs.

Given the concerns surrounding the absence of a defined ATAL and the persistent reliance on technical, neutral skills literacy models, this article undertakes a systematic review of existing scholarship to develop an alternative framework for academic literacy analysis. An ATAL is crucial in South Africa's universities for several reasons. Each year, universities lose roughly 25% of their students prematurely (Mabunda 2023). This high attrition rate has severe consequences for students' families, the development of marginalized communities, and efforts to alleviate poverty and unemployment in South Africa. In response to this issue, which is partly driven by epistemological alienation, this article proposes an ATAL to enhance students' sense of disciplinary belonging and promote the principles of Ubuntu.

Research Problem

The absence of a defined ATAL, coupled with the continuous academic exclusion of African scholars is exacerbated by the dominance of neutral skills literacy frameworks that insufficiently acknowledge and validate indigenous knowledge systems and experiences, contributing to student alienation.

Research Question

How does the absence of a defined ATAL, alongside the continuous dominance of neutral skills literacy frameworks, contribute to student alienation in South African higher education by marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems and experiences?

Research Objective

The aim of the study is to investigate how a defined ATAL may contribute to student senses of inclusion and belonging in South African higher education by acknowledging and validating indigenous knowledge systems and experiences.

Methodology

The researchers used a qualitative approach to address the study's problem, research question, and objective. This paradigm was chosen because it enabled access to and interpretation of

the diverse meanings that global and African scholars attribute to the practice of academic literacy. As Adams (2014) argues, qualitative research allows for the exploration of relationships among educators, researchers, communities, students, and institutions, facilitating an accurate description of the contemporary academic literacy field.

To achieve its objective of presenting an ATAL, this article employs conceptual framing and theoretical analysis, both of which are qualitative research methods. Conceptual framing involves developing abstract ideas by drawing on empirical data (Klag and Langley 2013). Through utilizing empirical research related to academic literacy, inclusive pedagogy, and student alienation in higher education, this article constructs its ATAL.

A systematic literature review was conducted to access empirical and theoretical insights on academic literacy, students' sense of epistemic inclusion, and alienation in higher education. The primary methodological purpose of systematic reviews is to understand and interpret scientific evidence (Stern et al. 2021). By synthesizing evidence from previous studies on academic literacy, African epistemologies, Afrocentricity, student alienation, and inclusion, this study constructs its ATAL.

Literature Review

Social and Academic Background

South Africa's current social and economic realities make it imperative for universities to identify an ATAL to improve students' success rates. Empirical evidence supporting this need can be found both on- and off-campus. Off-campus, despite South Africa's transition to a constitutional democracy thirty years ago, the country faces one of the highest youth unemployment rates, with approximately 65% of young people unemployed (Khan et al. 2023).

As anticipated, the high rate of youth unemployment has led to various other social issues. Mazorodze (2020) identifies a causal relationship between youth unemployment and murder crimes in South Africa's KwaZulu Natal province. Evidently, poverty and joblessness are leading some African youth to violent crime. Consequently, an ATAL is essential for universities to produce skilled graduates who can access expert knowledge, secure employment, and contribute to addressing broader societal dysfunctions.

The crisis of student attrition in higher education underscores the need for an ATAL that incorporates indigenous knowledge systems. For example, students leave universities for varying reasons, including social, financial, and academic challenges. Critically, the continued dominance of technical, neutral skills literacy frameworks marginalize students' social and cultural backgrounds, impeding their integration into disciplines. Students' social and cultural backgrounds play a crucial role in their ability to integrate into disciplines (Mabunda 2023). As a result, the absence of an African-centered theory of academic literacy contributes to the problem of student alienation and hinders their ability to master disciplinary literacies.

In South Africa, many students come from homes, communities, and cultural backgrounds that diverge from the dominant Global North norms and language traditions prevalent in universities. This dissonance contributes to senses of marginalization among students and aligns with the broader research problem concerning the lack of a defined ATAL. Mokhothu and Callaghan (2018) note that motivation, cultural intelligence, and social adaptation are crucial for students' academic success. Therefore, a cogent ATAL must incorporate students' motivation, cultural intelligence, disciplinary success, and future employability with indigenous epistemologies, languages, and community needs into its framework to counteract alienation and strengthen belonging.

The concepts of motivation, cultural intelligence, and social adaptation also emerge in the analysis by Hunter et al. (2019). They highlight that Black scholars often authenticate their blackness to experience a sense of belonging in universities (Hunter et al. 2019). This need for disciplinary authentication underscores the broader research question: How do dominant neutral skills frameworks, as advocated by Weideman (2021), contribute to academic attrition by marginalizing indigenous knowledge and student experiences? Alternatively, solidarity within their cultural groups enables Black scholars to navigate alienating institutional structures. Hunter et al.'s (2019) study implies that cultural affiliation is essential for developing students' literacies in disciplines.

Inclusion and Alienation in Higher Education

The issue of youth joblessness and high attrition rates in South African universities raises serious concerns about students' experiences of inclusion, belonging, and alienation both in universities and broader society. With a youth unemployment rate exceeding 60% (Khan et al. 2023), an ATAL must acknowledge that many students come from backgrounds marked by financial instability, economic exclusion, and mental health challenges linked to joblessness, and weakened community ties.

High attrition rates on campus (Mabunda 2023) indicate that numerous African students face demotivation, fail to leverage their cultural intelligences, and are consequently failing. These challenges suggest that students are struggling to master academic literacies, access disciplinary knowledge, and adapt to disciplinary cultures. Cornell et al. (2022) emphasize that, without a strong sense of inclusion, African university students are compelled to develop new strategies to navigate exclusionary disciplinary environments—a problem directly tied to the need for a defined ATAL development.

Understanding the functions of literacies in institutional and disciplinary cultures is essential for scholars aiming to develop an ATAL. Novice scholars' success in navigating on-campus cultures hinges on their ability to acquire a range of literacies. Kalantzis and Cope (2004) argue that students must adapt to increasingly diverse cultural, social, and technological developments on campus, which necessitates proficiency in multiple modes of

communication, such as visual, digital, and oral forms. Cornell et al. (2022) demonstrate that photo literacy is one such mode that enables students to navigate disciplines and understand their cultures. This capability allows scholars to share learning experiences, demonstrate content mastery, and gain disciplinary affirmation among peers (Cornell et al. 2022).

Academic Literacy as a Conduit of Culture

For educators aiming to design learning experiences that foster students' sense of inclusion in higher education, leveraging the cultural dimensions of academic literacy is essential. In this context, curriculum design involves developing specific knowledge and capabilities (Cope and Kalantzis 2009). On top of that, students must acquire the epistemologies, or the knowledge systems, specific to their disciplines. However, this article argues that, due to the legacies of colonialism and apartheid in Africa, precolonial epistemologies that have shaped and continue to influence Africans' literacies are often overlooked in certain academic disciplines. This practice contributes to disciplinary alienation.

Asante (2002) describes epistemic exclusion as the dislocation African scholars experience in universities. Similarly, Sibanda (2021) contends that the dominance of Global North epistemologies in Africa's higher education systems leads to the dismembering of African cultures. In this context, Global North epistemologies, especially as introduced in Africa, are characterized by capitalist, individualist, and dualistic worldviews. This ontological dualism contrasts sharply with the indigenous African emphasis on communalism and a unified cosmology. Developing an ATAL, therefore, necessitates that educators and researchers recenter ancestral knowledge, ontologies, modes of social organization, and varied disciplinary perspectives within practical contexts.

This article argues that the colonial era, which legitimized Global North knowledge systems and languages over Africa's indigenous knowledge systems, continues to influence the development of academic literacy today. Western and colonial pedagogies traditionally approached knowledge cultivation as homogenous, discipline-specific endeavors, whereas in Africa, knowledge cultivation was inherently transdisciplinary, extending beyond institutional boundaries (Chilisa 2017). An indication of the resilience of Global North ideologies in Africa, contrasting sharply with precolonial transdisciplinary pedagogies, is the continued reliance on generic academic literacy models that are deliberately kept separate from disciplinary contexts.

This separation of academic literacy development from disciplines has perpetuated the invisibility of indigenous, transdisciplinary African approaches to knowledge development within many universities. Epistemic invisibility—defined as the exclusion of certain knowledge from academic discourse due to conscious or unconscious marginalization (Klöter 2022)—hinders authentic African teaching methods. Gudhlanga and Makaudze (2012) reason that African scholars must actively resist the marginalization of indigenous

languages to safeguard their African knowledge systems. In this view, an ATAL should prioritize the integration of indigenous languages and epistemologies in its framework to counteract systemic exclusion.

Most academic literacy courses in South African universities are delivered through neutral skills models, primarily in English and Afrikaans (Yafele 2021). Although languages are not the sole carriers of knowledge and culture, this linguistic dominance in academic literacy development has severe consequences for African knowledge systems. Exclusive reliance on English and Afrikaans in academic literacy instruction contributes to the erosion of students' ancestral heritages within disciplines (Harrison 2007). Therefore, Gudhlanga and Makaudze's (2012) concern about the disintegration of indigenous knowledge systems in academia is an urgent issue for educators seeking to address epistemic dislocation. Consequently, developers of an ATAL must prioritize the preservation of African languages and the integration of indigenous epistemologies within disciplinary frameworks to bridge these gaps.

When disciplines restrict access to indigenous knowledge embedded in African languages, they impede students' ability to engage critically and participate fully (Akinwale 2011). This bias toward Western epistemology among some academic literacy developers results in a disconnect between students' acquisition of disciplinary expertise and the needs of their home communities. Bangeni and Kapp (2005) highlight that some African students experience campus disciplines and their community epistemologies as distinct homes and separate worlds. The unique features of African students' home epistemologies—rooted in African cosmologies, interactions with Ancestors, and the preservation of traditions— underscore the need for an ATAL. Such an approach would safeguard and validate the knowledge students bring to campus, facilitating their integration into disciplines.

The Need for an African Theory of Academic Literacy

Given the link between the disciplinary alienation experienced by some African students and their high attrition rates in South African universities, developing an ATAL that aligns with their cultural intelligences is imperative. Without such a framework, the epistemic invisibility of African scholars will persist. Furthermore, student alienation and dropout rates contribute to increased societal unemployment and instability. The high dropout rates underscore the urgent need for an Afrocentric approach to academic literacy that challenges epistemologies and pedagogical practices that have marginalized African students' post-apartheid aspirations by excluding their cultural identities in the classroom.

As outlined in Asante's (1988a) theory, Afrocentricity emphasizes a dialogical point where African history, culture, concepts, and theories are emphasized. Therefore, incorporating African peoples' agency and epistemologies is essential in all aspects of designing teaching, learning, and assessments for academic literacies. Asante (1988a) argues that Afrocentricity requires scholars and communities to identify knowledge where their experiences, ideals, and

values—such as African codes, paradigms, and symbols—guide the development of academic literacy. Thus, an African theoretical framework for literacy development should prioritize the disciplinary needs of local communities and students to help mitigate student dropouts and, consequently, the high youth unemployment rates within broader society.

Attributes of an ATAL

Extracting key concerns, concepts, and theories from the aforementioned literature suggests that a coherent ATAL should aim to achieve the following pedagogic outcomes: decolonizing academic literacy discourses, developing a culturally relevant curriculum, leveraging African students' multilingual competencies, fostering transdisciplinary approaches, and strengthening connections with local communities. These attributes of an ATAL will now be analyzed (see Figure 1).
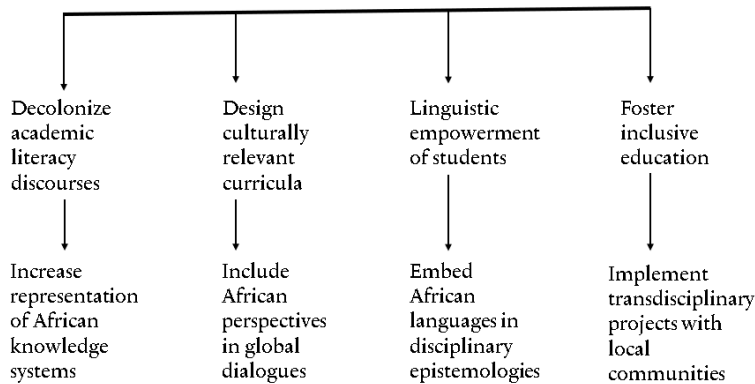

Figure 1: Attributes of an African Theory of Academic Literacy

Decolonizing discourses around academic literacy is essential for developing an ATAL. In this context, Discourses, which Gee (2015) distinguishes with a capital D, are more than just textual phenomena. Decolonized Discourses must encompass African identities, cultures, languages, and various literacies historically marginalized within disciplinary domains. For example, visual art was integral to the elaboration of knowledge in both literate and oral precolonial societies (Abdi 2007). Reintegrating these indigenous modes into a postcolonial African theory of literacy can facilitate cultural elaboration, moving beyond their aesthetic value.

Decolonial academic literacy discourses are essential for fostering teaching and learning experiences that promote students' sense of disciplinary inclusion. Disciplinary inclusion is achieved when students feel their cultural backgrounds, interactions with peers and lecturers, and their gender identities act as meaningful contributors to their integration within academic fields (Nicholes 2022). Conversely, Atelhe et al. (2023) argue that some Global North modes of

knowledge production alienate disciplines from the real-life challenges faced by ordinary African people. This reference highlights atomistic epistemes, a preference for individual advancement, and Eurocentric historical perspectives. When African universities rely solely on Global North frameworks for academic literacy, they risk marginalizing and dislocating the epistemologies rooted in the communities of African scholars. This disjuncture can lead to students feeling excluded within their fields of study and community underdevelopment.

Given the historical marginalization of some African students and indigenous knowledge systems within some South African academic literacy departments, it is evident that educators need an ATAL. Theories are essential as they shape pedagogical approaches. In this context, Lea and Street's (2006) article, "The 'Academic Literacies' Model: Theory and Applications," highlights that literacy facilitators' practices are influenced by their interpretations of student learning. For instance, atomistic, neutral, and technical skills theories suggest that students' literacies develop by mastering decontextualized competencies, such as grammar and sentence-level rules (Lea and Street 2006). In contrast, the academic literacies model views literacy practices as being validated by contextual factors, such as power, authority, and disciplinary norms (Lea and Street 2006).

Lea and Street's (2006) academic literacies model is particularly relevant to educators aiming to develop an ATAL, as it acknowledges that academic literacy is not generic or culturally neutral but instead is embedded in the epistemologies of educators and disciplines. Kessi et al. (2020) reinforce this by advocating for the reintegration of indigenous knowledge systems into African higher education as a means to challenge and unlearn exclusionary theories and practices. Deconstructing such theories aligns with the principles of disciplinarity, which challenge the notion that culturally neutral literacy models are universally applicable in educational contexts (Eybers 2023). Instead, disciplinary literacies embody the contextual and cultural characteristics of the environments in which they are practiced. Therefore, an emerging ATAL aims to integrate indigenous and disciplinary epistemes within its framework.

Alternatives to Neutral Skills Ideologies in an ATAL

Developing alternatives to conceptual frameworks that marginalize African epistemologies necessitates identifying hegemonic norms (Turner 2003) and assessing their impact on contemporary pedagogic approaches. Kessi et al. (2020) argue that certain Global North paradigms undermine the knowledge construction traditions of African communities. In practice, multiple choice literacy tests often restrict multimodal and cultural expression, while academic literacy pedagogies that disregard African students' epistemologies replicate colonial-era strategies designed to marginalize African agency within academic disciplines.

Adhering to a neutral skills construct of academic literacy, which frames scholarly communication as culturally void (see Weideman 2021), reinforces the epistemic and cultural

marginalization of African scholars. This approach disproportionally favors the academic development of students whose families acculturated under or who accept South Africa's apartheid norms, as evidenced by attrition rates (Mabunda 2023), while undermining the academic progress of others.

Designing academic literacy modules that value indigenous knowledge systems, African students' languages, and financial empowerment is just as crucial as supporting the academic development of students whose families have historically benefited from neutral skills literacy models that overlooked African languages and epistemologies. Reflecting this priority, in 1995, the then Minister of Education in South Africa, Professor Bengu, stated: "Education and training are central activities of our society. They are of vital interest to every family and to the health and prosperity of our national economy" (Department of Education, Republic of South Africa 1995, 2). Therefore, inclusive education that leverages the diverse knowledge systems and literacies of local communities is essential for developing African scholars' disciplinary capabilities.

Identifying Afrocentric concepts is essential for developing an ATAL. In South Africa, Eurocentric and ostensibly neutral skills-based literacy constructs, as noted by Weideman (2021), frequently overlook the contextual elements of academic literacies, including African cultures, languages, and knowledge systems. In contrast, an Afrocentric approach seeks to center these variables and epistemes in students' learning. To reassert, academic literacy encompasses more than just textual practices, such as reading and writing; it also involves contextual aspects of knowledge development, including culture and disciplinary agency (see Mpofu and Maphalala 2020). Further elaboration is needed on how incorporating textual and contextual features into an ATAL can counteract students' senses of disciplinary exclusion (see Table 1).

Table 1: Contextual and Textual Features of Academic Literacy

Contextual Features	Textual Features
African culture	African scholarship
Real-life African challenges	African languages
African history	African oral and embodied traditions

Academic literacy practitioners typically adopt one of two models: the autonomous model or the ideological model. The autonomous model treats academic literacy as a set of neutral, culturally-sterile skills, focusing primarily on textual features (Street 2003). In contrast, the ideological model acknowledges the contextual aspects of knowledge generation (Street 2003). These models are relevant to an ATAL because, as Street (2009) contends, autonomous literacy constructs often reinforce deficit-based perceptions of African students' intellectual capacities. This deficit labeling arises when multilingually gifted scholars are

denied access to their cultural and epistemological systems, forcing them to navigate monolingual academic literacy courses that overlook their cultural identities.

This article argues that to reduce high student attrition in South African universities (Mabunda 2023), educators must move away from autonomous models and adopt an ATAL. Autonomous constructs of academic literacy, which prioritize standardized, textual assessments over authentic disciplinary genres embedded in the cultures of knowledge fields, are ineffective in reducing African students' attrition. The current dropout rates in South Africa have persisted for decades. Neutral, autonomous literacy models stifle students' cultural intelligences and agency (Larson et al. 2021). In contrast, an ATAL values students' evolving identities and their need to master disciplinary genres to succeed. Furthermore, an ATAL that integrates students' cultures and African epistemologies can inspire new assessment methods, enabling students to demonstrate mastery across disciplinary vocabularies.

Evidence of the ATAL in Practice

This section of the article examines academic literacy praxis that aligns with the concepts affiliated to the ATAL (see Figure 1). This discussion aims to deepen the reader's understanding of the ATAL by examining educators' efforts to Africanize education broadly, and academic literacies in particular. Notably, the researchers found a lack of peer-reviewed journal articles from Africa that specifically address the integration of academic literacy and indigenous knowledge systems. Globally, the closest match was a study by Rose et al. (2008) titled, "Scaffolding Academic Literacy with Indigenous Health Sciences Students: An Evaluative Study." However, the focus of Rose et al.'s (2008) investigation was not on the efficacy of pedagogical scaffolding for integrating indigenous knowledge systems into the curriculum, but rather on inducting students into dominant discourses.

In Botswana, however, Ukwuoma's (2016) investigation into students' perspectives on African Indigenous Knowledge (AIK) offers valuable insights for an ATAL. Ukwuoma's (2016) study involved undergraduate students enrolled in education, engineering, and social sciences. The findings revealed that most students believe AIK should be central to their education. What is more, some participants reported a disconnect between what they learned in university, the realities of their environments, and Botswana's developmental needs (Ukwuoma 2016). These findings underscore the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge systems into education, as students value such knowledge and believe they should be reflected in their learning experiences. Yet, it is also important to note that some of the participants expressed concerns about indigenous knowledge, viewing it as a potential source of epistemological conflict in the classroom (Ukwuoma 2016).

In Semali's (1999) Tanzanian-based text, titled "Community as Classroom: Dilemmas of Valuing African Indigenous Literacy in Education," African knowledge is defined as the body of wisdom and practices that Africans have developed and maintained over millennia to sustain

communities. Semali (1999) argues that indigenous knowledge, including local history, botanical and zoological knowledge, and the application of ancient medicines to treat human and animal illnesses, constitutes critical literacies for survival (Semali 1999). Within Semali's (1999) framework of indigenous academic literacy, it is clear that a holistic ATAL must incorporate the knowledge systems of local communities. This includes not only the practical knowledge communities utilize to survive but also their insights into systemic struggles.

In line with Asante's (1988b) assertion, effectively leveraging indigenous knowledge systems for academic literacy development requires a consideration of history. Shockley and Frederick (2010) argue that Afrocentric education necessitates a reattachment to cultural roots on the part of African communities. From this perspective, an ATAL must incorporate the principle of codesigning knowledge with local communities by incorporating historical dialogues. To accomplish this, academic literacy models designed to counteract apartheid-era ideological influences on the education of indigenous African students must encourage transdisciplinary, critical, and meaningful engagements with local communities, cultures, and educational aspirations (Shockley and Frederick 2010).

Another study that exemplifies the ATAL in praxis is by Traoreé (2003) in the US. Traoreé (2003) addresses tensions between African migrants and American students of African descent, identifying issues such as stereotypes, physical violence, jealousy, and negative group work dynamics. The researcher recognized cultural misunderstanding was leading to these tensions. In response, Traoreé (2003) sought to enhance dialogic literacy between African and African American students, aiming to foster a shared sense of history, identity, and community.

This integration of oral, reading, and written literacies facilitated dialogues among the participants in Traoreé's (2003) study. The tensions between students partly stemmed from deep-rooted cultural, social, and historical misunderstanding. Drawing on Akbar (1998), Traoreé argues that increasing students' self-confidence through knowledge of their shared histories is essential to reducing such tensions. Academic literacies played a crucial role in this approach by serving as conduits of knowledge. By reading about African history, listening to each other's narratives, and writing about African identities, students gained new insights into their shared identities (Traoreé 2003). This synthesis of Afrocentric principles and academic literacy highlights that an ATAL relies on African history as a foundation for critical dialogue, textual production, and developing disciplinary identities.

Indigenous African Languages as Conduits of Knowledge

One of the most effective tools that educators can use to develop their personal ATAL is Africa's vast linguistic diversity (see Figure 1). Africa is arguably the most linguistically diverse continent, home to approximately one-third of humanity's languages (Mazrui 2003). This data has significant implications for academic literacy developers. From an ethnographic perspective, academic literacy facilitators and researchers developing their own theories have

access to a rich array of cultural epistemologies, as African languages are key conduits of indigenous knowledge systems. In alignment with this, Zeleza (2006, 14) notes that African languages and identities are "mutually constitutive existential and epistemic constructions."

Indigenous African languages, whether incorporated into continental or pan-African education systems, serve multiple Afrocentric functions. Within an ATAL, African languages facilitate the identification of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity in ways that are accessible to African people (Mazama 2018). Therefore, an ATAL should incorporate African indigenous languages to enable the interpretation of knowledge through interdisciplinary lens. Given that academic literacies are ubiquitous across all knowledge fields, they are inherently interdisciplinary. Interdisciplinarity, in an Afrocentric framework, involves integrating epistemes from multiple disciplines toward problem-solving, innovation, and the generation of new fields of knowledge (Mazama 2018).

Numerous studies have shown that incorporating indigenous African languages into the classroom enhances students' problem-solving abilities. In his 2011 analysis, Muthivhi (2011) explores the benefits of the South African Venda language as a pedagogic tool for enhancing problem-solving capabilities. His study, titled, "The Cultural Context of Development: Language as a Means for Thinking and Problem-Solving," aimed to determine how Venda culture influences students' critical thinking, mastering key concepts and problem-solving (Muthivhi 2011). His findings are significant to an ATAL. Muthivhi (2011) found that grade 3, 5, and 7 scholars benefited from embedding Venda into teaching and learning.

Some of the beneficial pedagogical outcomes identified by Muthivhi (2011) include the development of academic literacies, especially with Venda language support. Students' classification and generalization skills were improved (Muthivhi 2011). These multilingual findings warrant further exploration. Muthivhi (2011) distinguishes between formal and everyday knowledge generation, contending that scholars must integrate both aspects of their lived experiences to generate meaningful knowledge. By allowing students to weave their Venda dialects and epistemologies in the classroom, their formal problem-solving skills were nurtured.

The importance of Muthivhi's (2011) insights for an ATAL lies in the emphasis on scholars' academic development through transdisciplinary knowledge. In this context, transdisciplinary knowledge involves leveraging local communities' epistemologies and languages by encouraging students to integrate them into the classroom (see Chinenye and Legg-Jack 2024). The benefits of utilizing transdisciplinary literacies for academic development are substantial. Licona and Russell (2013) argue that transdisciplinary literacies lead to holistic understanding, collaboration, and cocreation of knowledge with local communities. They foster community empowerment and agency. Consequently, praxis of an ATAL necessitates interactions between on- and off-campus knowledge systems to coproduce solutions that address real-life problems (Chilisa 2017).

Findings

All academic literacy facilitators need a conceptual framework to effectively facilitate teaching, learning, and assessment. Still, the pervasive influence of technical, neutral skills models, which construe academic literacies as decontextualized and devoid of cultural significance, while advancing capitalist, individualist, and exclusionary ideologies, has left academic literacy facilitators in African universities without clear and contextually relevant frameworks that incorporate indigenous knowledge systems. Additionally, educators, like students, are also vulnerable to epistemic dislocation due to the constraining effects of Eurocentric paradigms (Asante 2002).

Within the context of the need for culturally relevant educational models in Africa, the review of the literature reveals both opportunities and challenges in articulating an ATAL in universities. The opportunities include Africa's rich precolonial history, multiliteracies, and enduring knowledge systems. Challenges include incorporating indigenous African languages and fostering meaningful relationships with local communities within the university classroom. For this reason, Chiramba and Motala (2023) contend that developing decolonial theories, like ATAL, is crucial for promoting transformation that enables marginalized students' access to powerful disciplinary epistemologies.

Studies by Ukwuoama in Botswana, Semali in Tanzania, Traoreé in the US, and Muthivhi in South Africa all demonstrate how integrating African knowledge systems, histories, cultures, and languages can enhance scholars' acquisition of academic literacy. In Traoreé's (2003) study, students' engagement with African history through reading, writing, and dialogue proved effective in reducing conflict and reconciling Africans with African Americans. Thus, recognizing and incorporating global African cultural systems is essential for developing an ATAL.

Ukwuoma's (2016) study from Botswana reveals that African students are acutely aware of the disjuncture between what they are taught on campus and the realities in the world beyond it. From an Afrocentric perspective, students are alert to their epistemic dislocation in disciplinary contexts where instruction falls short in addressing local challenges, including communities' socioeconomic goals. By incorporating transdisciplinarity into the curriculum, an ATAL enables educators, scholars, and local communities to build stronger relationships. This approach allows real-life challenges to be addressed through dialogue, access to knowledge, and the development of problem-solving literacies.

A major barrier that prevents transdisciplinary interactions between on- and off-campus actors is language. However, in an ATAL, language need not be a constraint; instead, it is an enabler of critical literacies that harnesses African communities' diverse tongues. As noted earlier, Africa is home to a third of humanity's languages (Mazrui 2003), making its knowledge systems expansive and rich with philosophical insights. When African languages and their foundational epistemologies are brought into the classroom, they become powerful

conduits for bridging the on- and off-campus divide that hinders transdisciplinary interactions. Moreover, Africa's languages and indigenous literacies can generate valuable knowledge from diverse cultural communities to address real-life problems.

Muthivhi's (2011) project demonstrates how African languages enhance teaching and learning among Venda-speaking scholars. Specifically, Muthivhi (2011) shows that incorporating African cultures and languages into the curriculum enables learning ecologies where students' critical thinking and problem-solving literacies are developed through epistemically familiar modes. In doing so, indigenous languages help achieve the Afrocentric educational goal of relocating students' home, community, and linguistic identities from the margins to the center of the curriculum (Asante 1991). Within this aspect of an ATAL, disciplinarity is emphasized when African languages are utilized to establish new codes and discourses that draw on ancestral knowledge and identities from within Africa and across the broader pan-African spectrum (Mazama 2018).

From a macro perspective, an ATAL relies on transdisciplinarity. The key distinction between transdisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity is that transdisciplinarity requires the active agency of local communities in the codesign, implementation, and evaluation of teaching and learning approaches (see Thondhlana et al. 2021). In the African context, the development of academic literacies necessitates collaboration between on- and off-campus communities. This approach allows academic knowledge to merge with local expertise, contributing to resolution of social problems, such as poverty, unemployment, and the economic underdevelopment of African cultural communities.

Discussion

At the outset of this article, mention was made of the high attrition rate of South African students enrolled in higher education. To reiterate, approximately a quarter of students drop out of the system annually (Mabunda 2023). Compounding the challenges faced by academic literacy developers is South Africa's unemployment crisis, with over 60% of African youth unemployed (Khan et al. 2023). Clearly, an ATAL must incorporate concepts that address students' lived experiences of epistemic marginalization, attrition, poverty, and unemployment. By integrating these aspects, an ATAL becomes not just a theoretical framework but a practical tool for creating curricula and support systems that help to enhance student retention. Practically, entrepreneurial literacies, community-based assignments, and reflective narratives can foster the praxis of the ATAL. These methods equip students with culturally relevant skills, making them more adaptable to the job market and fostering social mobility. In this context, the ATAL is directly relevant to the experiences of African scholars and essential for developing educational systems that are both inclusive and transformative.

If academic literacy facilitators continue to prioritize Global North constructs of knowledge development, such as neutral, autonomous models of literacy, they inadvertently

exacerbate the crisis of Black youth attrition, poverty in broader society, and unemployment. These models restrict the applicability of academic literacies by limiting African students' sense of inclusion within disciplines and undervaluing the importance of indigenous cultures in the development of knowledge. This disconnection not only impedes but also reduces students' ability to apply education toward socioeconomic advancement. Asante (2002) emphasizes that such Global North constructs lead to epistemic dislocation among African students by separating their identities from disciplinary knowledge, highlighting the need for the ATAL as a relevant and practical solution to bridge this gap.

An ATAL that bridges students' socio-epistemic identities with disciplines enables more than just academic achievement; it fosters a sense of agency and belonging that can translate into long-term social and economic benefits (Demarest and Sugimoto 2015). By incorporating students' lived experiences and aspirations, universities can create learning environments that resonate with African scholars and empower them to apply their education effectively in their communities. Therefore, as Demarest and Sugimoto (2015, 1374) suggest, an ATAL designed to reduce youth attrition in universities, poverty, and unemployment should incorporate students' "socio-epistemic identities," which are shaped by both pre- and post-university cultures.

Highlighting the construct of socio-epistemic identities, Bangeni and Kapp's (2005) study illustrates how an academic literacy course can foster a sense of home both on- and off-campus. Their research shows that mastering academic literacies enhances students' senses of belonging within disciplinary spaces, creating a bridge between their personal and academic identities (Bangeni and Kapp 2005). This connection highlights the importance of culturally relevant literacies that resonate with students' backgrounds and professional, post-university aspirations.

Much like the approach taken during apartheid, which sought to disconnect indigenous African cultures from disciplines in higher education, technical, neutral skills models promoted by Weideman (2021) and others limit the exploration of students' academic challenges through culturally sensitive lenses. In contrast, Eybers (2023) highlights that incorporating indigenous knowledge systems into the curriculum can help bridge historical divides, enhancing interactions between academic literacy facilitators, mainstream disciplinary members, and local communities. This symbiosis not only addresses past exclusions but fosters a critical, common ground that supports collaborative, transdisciplinary learning and practical applications beneficial to both students and educators.

Conclusion

The study aimed to formulate an ATAL to address the persistent issues of student attrition and epistemic exclusion in South African universities. High dropout rates and the lack of inclusion experienced by many African students highlight the urgent need for a pedagogical framework that integrates indigenous knowledge systems and disciplinary literacies.

The findings suggest that models of academic literacy inherited from the Global North and the apartheid era, characterized by neutral and autonomous constructs, fail to sufficiently address the academic and socioeconomic needs of African students. A holistic Afrocentric approach that incorporates indigenous languages and cultural principles proves more effective. By integrating African languages and epistemologies, academic literacy developers can design more inclusive and empowering learning environments that align with students' lived experiences.

Case studies from Botswana, Tanzania, the US, and South Africa demonstrate the benefits of integrating African knowledge systems into academic literacy. For instance, Muthivhi's (2011) study on the Venda language highlighted significant improvements in students' problem-solving and critical thinking literacies. Similarly, Traoreé (2003) found that fostering dialogues between African and African American students through shared historical knowledge and ancestry reduced tensions and fostered a shared sense of community.

Future studies on developing an inclusive ATAL should continue exploring and refining Afrocentric teaching and learning methods to enhance scholars' academic literacy. For example, research is needed in South Africa to incorporate local cultural narratives into the curriculum. Additional studies on embedding translanguaging into pedagogy to acknowledge and leverage the multilingual and monolingual strengths of both instructors and students are essential.

Insights from academic and community codesign practices could play a pivotal role in fostering holistic learning. Key practical and necessary steps include training academic literacy facilitators in Afrocentric methodologies and promoting collaborations between universities and local communities to strengthen transdisciplinarity. Prioritizing these initiatives will empower researchers, scholars, and community members to dismantle a bourgeoisie educational paradigm, where African academic literacy developers unintentionally sustain oppressive models, such as technical, neutral skills constructs, inherited from apartheid.

In conclusion, developing an ATAL is crucial for fostering common ground among academics who were previously at odds with each other. This approach not only addresses student attrition and promotes retention but also emphasizes inclusivity as a critical aspect of disciplinarity. An ATAL supports cultural revitalization and normalizing indigenous knowledge systems in academic fields. Such teaching and research initiatives can generate broader social and economic benefits by producing skilled graduates and reinforcing transdisciplinary networks.

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Informed Consent

The authors declare that informed consent was not required as there were no human participants involved.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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