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Learner Diversity and Learning: A Perspective from South Africa

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Abstract

This paper argues that we need to explore the notion of the lifeworld, particularly the African lifeworld in order to develop a deeper understanding of these concerns. Focusing on blacks in general or African learners and students in particular, I posit that the above concerns fail to acknowledge the cultural dimension of learning, and I draw on Rasmussen (1998) who argues that, for a variety of reasons, learning should be studied as a cultural phenomenon. Finally, I argue for transformative learning as a means to address concerns related to a perceived lack of learning.

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Keywords: Learner diversity; Learning; (higher) education; African lifeworld; Transformative learning; South Africa.

1. Introduction

In my experience as an academic at a former white university, learner diversity is very challenging, and I recall one incident. I was puzzled when I marked the examination script of an English-speaking, African female student who answered the questions in Afrikaans and failed. What was puzzling was the fact that I never heard her speaking in Afrikaans, and approached her to find out why she did not write in English. I was shocked when she explained that she answered in Afrikaans (her third language) because she was struggling to fit into a predominantly Afrikaans environment. I advised her to take the supplementary examination in English; which she did and passed. This incident alerted me to the challenges some learners have, and led me to try and understand her life world.

Democratic South Africa inherited and have to deal with large inequalities between black and white schooling (and higher education) in terms of materials and human resources; the quality of education in black schools was largely inferior to that in white schools, at least as expressed in that most public of indicators, the matriculation results at the end of high school (Grade 12); black parents, teachers and learners were long alienated from decision-making in education under a previous authoritarian regime; and the duplication of apartheid education provision through nineteen different racial and ethnic departments of education was highly inefficient, divisive and ineffective (Jansen 2007). Schools were organised along racial lines, and separate schools for Coloureds, Africans, Indians and Whites became fully integrated since 1994. This desegregation of schools about a migration of black learners from township schools to so-called Coloured and former white schools, and an influx of blacks to former white universities. A primary reason for this migration is the perception that these institutions provide a better quality of education. As a result, many schools (except those in African townships) have become more diverse in their learner

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profiles, and former white universities mirror this change in their student profiles. However, despite the ever-increasing learner diversity, there has also been a continuing lack of diversity amongst teaching staff.

To give an indication of diversity in relation to some indicators, I refer to official statistics of the Department of Education (DOE) for the year 2008 as published in 2010. In 2008, there were 25 875 ordinary schools in South Africa, with 12 239 363 learners in these schools in the country as a whole, and there were 400 953 educators (teachers) in total. Females and males were almost equally represented in ordinary schools in South Africa (females 49.8% and males 50.2%), and the overall national pass rate in the National Senior Certificate examination for full-time candidates with seven or more subjects was 62.2%. Notably, the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination of 2008 was the first that was based on the New Curriculum Statement (NCS), which requires all learners in Grades 10 to 12 to take seven subjects. Two of these subjects must be South African languages, one of which must be the language of teaching and learning. To obtain an NSC a candidate must, depending on the minimum requirements, achieve either 40% or 30% in six subjects. As far as higher education is concerned, 799 387 students were enrolled in public higher education (HE) institutions. Of these, 310 259 were enrolled in distance education programmes. Of the total number of students 77.4% were Black (Black African, Coloured and Indian/Asian), while 56.4% were female. In the light of these indicators, the question arises: how is diversity understood and how is teaching and learning organised accordingly?

This paper addresses concerns about drop-outs, matric pass rates and through-put rates in the South African education system, and these concerns relate to learner diversity. When these concerns are raised there is an almost silent assumption that affected learners and students fail to learn. This paper argues that we need to explore the notion of the lifeworld, particularly the African lifeworld in order to develop a deeper understanding of these concerns. In doing so, we can develop a deeper understanding of why there is this unacceptable level of learning. Increased learner diversity since 1994, as a result of sharp increases of black school learners and increase of black students in higher education, makes an exploration of an African lifeworld so much more important. Next follows a literature review.

2. Review of Literature

My review of the literature relates to how learning is conceptualised, the concept of the lifeworld and the relationship between the African lifeworld and learning.

2.1 Conceptualising learning

Learning is central to this paper, and I now explore the concept. By learning we commonly mean the acquisition of a form of knowledge through the use of experience, and for learning to take place experience is used in some way so that the result is knowledge, or somehow dependent on knowledge (Honderich, in von Wright 2005). The concept of learning is often associated with institutional education or schooling, but Rasmussen (1998) conceptualises learning in a much broader sense: the process by which the individual develops understanding and/or behaviour through an acquirement of the ideational, socioeconomic and technological pattern of culture. He asserts that transfer of values, knowledge and abilities is practiced in all societies but the relative priority given to implicit and explicit ways of learning varies according to the particular culture defined as a pattern of interpretations and interactions in a given historical context. In order to conceptualise learning as a cultural process he defines a learning culture as relationships between the context in which learning takes place, and the already developed dispositions of the individuals in question guiding their selective acquirement of values, knowledge and abilities. Importantly, Rasmussen draws a clear link between learning and culture.

Studies in Sweden highlights five different conceptions of learning (See Säljö in Makoe, Richardson and Price, 2008): (1) learning as the increase of knowledge; (2) learning as memorizing; (3) learning as the acquisition of facts or procedures; (4) learning as the abstraction of meaning and (5) learning as an interpretative process aimed at the understanding of reality. Tynjälä (1997) (in Makoe *et al.*, 2008) identified seven different conceptions of learning in Finland: (i) learning as an extremely determined event/process; (ii) learning as a developmental process; (iii) learning as a student activity; (iv) learning as strategies/styles/approaches; (v) learning as information processing; (vi) learning as an interactive process and (vii) learning as a creative process. The observation was that these conceptions did not define a clear hierarchy and many of the students described more than one conception, both at the beginning of the course and at the end. For instance, most students espoused conceptions (iii) and (iv); at the end they espoused other conceptions, apparently on the basis of what they have learned.

In South Africa, Cliff (Makoe *et al*, 2008) found that most conceptions of learning appeared to fit the categories described in European research, but some students expressed the notion of learning as a moral obligation (to God, an authority figure, or a community). Also, some students expressed more than one conception of learning. Boulton-Lewis, Marton, Lewis, and Wilss (Makoe *et al*, 2008) interviewed 22 first-year students who were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders (i.e. descended from the pre-colonial inhabitants of Australia), and they found five conceptions: (a) increasing one's knowledge; (b) using knowledge; (c) understanding and acquisition; (d) use and (e) personal growth. These are broadly similar to the conceptions of learning found in Western students, but importantly the researchers conclude that the students had, of course, been exposed to a Western system of education.

According to Rasmussen (1998), learning can also be viewed as a process between assimilation and transformation. Here assimilation refers to a development process in the course of which the learner adjusts to fit into the existing patterns of culture, and transformation is the process by which the learner, as part of learning, changes the existing patterns of culture. Rasmussen observes that every culture contains oppositions which may generate experimentation with alternatives. New and old kinds of practices are confronted to each other and various options and alternatives are considered. Parts of the existing institutions may be questioned, but precisely because this happens the more fundamental part of the institution may be able to survive. Rasmussen (1998:135) further observes that the paradox seems to be that institutions must change in order to continue to be unique aspects of culture.

I conclude that learning, within the South African context, may fit in with research conducted elsewhere. In other words, when we talk about learning in the South African context, one or more of these conceptions of learning may be present. Concerns about drop-outs, matric pass rates and low through-put rates in our context may thus be addressed by an exploration of what constitutes learning, and to explore what is taking place in our context.

2.2 *The concept of the lifeworld*

This paper argues that we need to explore the notion of the lifeworld, particularly the African lifeworld, in order to develop a deeper understanding of the unacceptable level of matric passes, drop-outs and through-put rates in South Africa. Given increased learner diversity, I question how educational institutions respond to this challenge, and this leads me to explore the lifeworld.

The literature indicates that the concept of the lifeworld incorporates individual skills, socially acquired practices, underlying convictions, (intuitive) knowledge, structures of communicative action (reaching understanding, action-coordination and socialisation), culture, society, personality structures and language. For Habermas (1998) the lifeworld characterises social life as a network of symbolically structured interactions among social actors and there are three dimensions of the lifeworld: culture, society and person. Culture provides us with knowledge, beliefs and norms systems from which we derive significance. Habermas calls culture the stock of knowledge from which the participants in communication, in reaching understanding with one another with regard to something and supply themselves with interpretations. Society lets us know that we are connected to others and are part of a social group that is valuable and thus we ourselves are valuable. This is a kind of solidarity that ensures that our individual life histories are in harmony with collective forms of life. Person refers to the individual competencies we develop, that lead us to reach an understanding of our personal lifeworlds and that help us in our search for individual identity, meaning and significance.

Language is an integral part of the lifeworld and Habermas (1998) asserts knowledge of the lifeworld is contained in language and human beings communicate through language in the trusted surroundings of the lifeworld. Components of the lifeworld consist of the following processes that operate by way of communicative action: reaching understanding, action co-ordination and socialisation (Habermas, 1998:247). Following Habermas, I conclude that knowledge is constructed through language. Despite 11 official languages in South Africa, and moves towards mother tongue instruction in the early years of schooling, there are only two dominant languages of instruction: English and Afrikaans; the challenges for learning are obvious.

Sergiovanni (2000), drawing on Habermas, contrasts the lifeworld with the 'systemsworld'. The lifeworld provides the foundation for the development of social, intellectual and other forms of human capital. The systemsworld, by contrast, is a world of instrumentalities usually experienced in schools as management systems which is supposed to help schools effectively and efficiently achieve their goals and objectives. When things are working the way they should in a school the lifeworld and systemsworld engage in a symbiotic relationship. But when the systemsworld drives the lifeworld, Sergiovanni argues, organizational character erodes. In schools, this results in many dysfunctions including high student disengagement and low student performance. Sergiovanni

makes a very valuable point and he provides an explanation for the concerns of this paper: low student performance can be ascribed to high student disengagement which results from an erosion of the organizational character of schools.

There are schools in South Africa which are described as dysfunctional, and in some of these schools matric pass rates are very low. What requires further attention is that such dysfunction leads to student disengagement and hence to their low performance. Thus, there seems to be a need for what Sefa Dei (2002) describes as the affirmation of diverse forms of knowledge, as a way to transform education at the school site into learning experiences that are interconnected with the individual and collective reality or realities of the learner in a locality.

2.3 *The African lifeworld and learning*

Having concluded that there are various elements that constitute the lifeworld, I want to explore how these elements of an African lifeworld relate to learning. In other words: how do Africans learn or construct knowledge? What do Africans mean and understand when they say that they know something? I assume that some (Western) conceptions of learning identified earlier are also part of the African learning experience, as a result of Africans' exposure to a Western system of education. So, what are further ways that can lead to a deeper understanding of how Africans learn?

According to Anyanwu (1984:94), the African maintains that there can be no knowledge of reality if an individual detaches himself from it. Knowledge, therefore, comes from the co-operation of all human faculties and experiences. He sees, feels, imagines, reasons or thinks and intuitively all at the same time. So the method through which an African arrives at the trustworthy knowledge of reality is intuitive and personal experience. While personal experience should not be confused with an individualistic experience, there is also a collective and shared experience; this makes the existence of a community of people possible. Anyanwu (1984) further explains that the African makes use of concepts by inspection, imagination and intuition, but all these have aesthetic qualities. The meanings of these concepts are derived from personal and immediate experience from the social and historical experience of the people. He asserts that Africans do not only think about such concepts but live and feel their realities. He posits that the West has these kinds of concepts but the strains of rationalism and scientific objectivity do not allow it to attribute knowledge value and truth to them. For the West such concepts are vague, not clear, subjective nor objective.

An African perspective on thinking (important to learning), therefore, suggests that an African sees, feels, imagines, reasons or thinks and intuitively all at the same time. Moreover, Anyanwu asserts that Africans do not only think about such concepts; they live and feel their realities. An African perspective on thinking has to be viewed within the context of African culture, in which personal and intuitive experience is complemented by collective and shared experience. On this note Teffo (2000:108) argues that there is a way of thinking, of knowing and of acting that is peculiar to the African. For Africans, what they know is inseparable from how they know it in the lived experience of their African culture. This sense of Africanity is, in other words, born out of a deep socio-ethical sense of cultural unity that provides the African identity with its distinctiveness.

There seems to be a tension between Western and African forms of knowledge. To this end Okolie (2003:244) suggests several aims of higher education with regard to knowledge. He states that, by having contributed to the marginalisation, inferiorisation and exclusion of traditional knowledges and ways of knowing in the discourse and practice of African development, higher education can contribute to a reversal of this approach and towards true improvement in Africa's rural communities. Okolie suggests that higher education ought to examine the source of the knowledge that informs what is imposed on or prescribed for Africa, and how scholars are implicated in the universalisation of the European experience. It should ask which ways of knowing scholars validate and promote and which ones they ignore, invalidate and why. In short, this can help to construct new development knowledges that will be African-centred. Okolie (2003:245) a view of knowledge can help to address concerns central to this paper. He asserts that the value of postmodernist, post-structuralist, post-colonial and deconstructionist perspectives lies not in the rejection of ideas or knowledges because they are Western in origin or privilege discourse over reality. Rather, it lies in the location of the social basis of dominant ideas, knowledges and ways of knowing; the acknowledgement of the power of words/concepts/definitions and how they can be constructed and used for the purposes of domination (or liberation); the affirmation and promotion of other ideas, knowledges and ways of knowing that are nonhegemonic and may be anti-systemic; the acknowledgement of the validity of a people's lived experiences and that these experiences vary from group to group and from time to time even within the same society, although these are connected to one another.

One can argue that while physical access to schools and higher education institutions improved since 1994, there was not a concomitant improvement with regards to ‘epistemological access’ – this accounts for lack of, or poor learning. There is thus a need for epistemological access, and one of the difficulties around epistemological access is the task of enabling students to become participants in and users of a shared disciplinary practice that is initially beyond their reach (Bak, 1998:207). The challenge is that students need to acquire the language (the grammar, images, rules and logic) of the specialist practice. (Physical) Access to an institution will be more meaningful if the issue of epistemological access is addressed, which will eliminate the unacceptable high failure rates by students from previously disadvantaged communities.

My contention is that perhaps a failure in access policies is that it has not been linked to equity. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2000:10) posits that equity should mean more than access into higher education; it must incorporate equity of opportunity – environments in which learners through academic support, excellent teaching and mentoring and other initiatives genuinely have every chance of success. Equity, to be meaningful, is also ensuring that learners have access to quality education and graduate with the relevant knowledge, competencies, skills and attributes that are required for any occupation and profession (CHE, 2000:10). The CHE thus explores both physical (access as a student to an institution) and epistemological access (skills to understand and to interpret academic work). Equity also involves value judgements and differing understandings of what is normal and inevitable, according to Farrell (1999) (in Poon and Wong, 2008). To understand the disparity in value judgements, one needs to probe into the conditions leading from educational inequity which vary from individual to individual and from country to country. Furthermore, there are both macro conditions (e.g. political and economic conditions of a country and education policy) and micro conditions (e.g. socio-economic status, racial affiliation and religious belief of an individual).

Unacceptable pass and throughput rates also relates to ‘equality’. In his model of educational equality/inequality Farrell (1999) distinguishes four types of equality/inequality throughput during a student’s schooling stage to adult life stage i.e. equality of access, equality of survival, equality of output and equality of outcome. *Equality of access* refers to the probabilities of children from social groupings getting into the educational system. Equality of access is secured by education policies in South Africa and access to education cannot be denied. *Equality of survival* refers to the probabilities of children from different social groups staying in the school system. Drop-out rates in schools and universities indicate that there is not yet equality of survival in our system; I therefore conclude that this aspect has not been sufficiently addressed in South Africa. *Equality of output* refers to the probabilities that children from different social groupings will learn the same things on the same levels at a defined point in the schooling system. Clearly, there is no equality of output in our education system and despite moves to streamline curricula, there are still many factors that work against equality of output. *Equality of outcome* refers to the probabilities that children from different social groupings will live relatively similar lives subsequent to and as a result of schooling (have equal incomes, have jobs of roughly the same status, have equal access to sites of political power, etc.). For me, skewed unemployment rates, unequal incomes and unequal access to sites of political power in South Africa makes equality of outcome a distant reality.

What can be learned from this discussion? It seems that an African lifeworld is characterised by knowledge of reality in which an individual cannot be detached; the latter can lead to student disengagement. There is also a collective and shared experience which complements personal and intuitive experience. The challenge is how curricula can be adapted to make the African lifeworld part of the learning experience? Further, learning relates to issues of equity and while more blacks now enjoy access to education, there remains huge challenges with regard to epistemological access (otherwise we would not have had such unacceptable failure and drop-out rates). Farrell’s exposition of equality finds resonance with the South African context and I have pointed out some shortcomings.

3. Methodology

My inquiry is conceptual in nature, and for the purpose of this inquiry I shall use critical hermeneutics as a methodological tool to assist me to understand, interpret and critically reflect on the concerns of this paper. A critical hermeneutical approach creates an awareness of forms of domination and manipulation that may exist and how these ‘might be overcome in this context and time to obtain greater liberation for more people’ (Luke 1991).

4. Results and Discussion

To overcome unacceptable drop-out pass and through-put rates in the South African education system, I now argue that we move towards a transformative learning culture which provides further impetus for the national transformation in education in particular and society in general. Transformative learning entails giving up some of the old perceptions and comfortable assumptions and draw into question the past approaches, habits and mindsets of individuals and groups. As Rasmussen (1998) suggests, such a process can only be facilitated in a learning culture that supports difference, openness and tolerance of failure. A transformative learning culture incorporates features from tradition-based (characterised by informal and nonformal learning, children learning the customs and skills and acquire their emotional set and esoteric knowledge by sharing what elders are doing, and there is not a specially assigned area or building within which learning occurs) as well as bureaucratic learning cultures (where learning is institutionalised and highly formalised in a hierarchically structured education system and the mode of learning is one of assimilation of explicitly stated rules through written or oral means of instruction).

In a transformative learning culture formal, informal and nonformal education supplement each other dependent on the particular subject in question. Here the objective of learning is one of assimilation and through transformation of rules through observation, participation and written and oral instruction. The curriculum is pre-described but not totally fixed as a uniform set of indisputable rules. It may be developed and changed by the teacher or the learner during the learning process, because the development of abilities to reflect existing rules and to create new ones, are important parts of the transformative learning perspective. The communication between the teacher and the learner may be relatively low-contexted in the beginning, but gradually the learner may learn to ‘switch’ between relatively low-contexted and relatively high-contexted communication dependent on the particular situations in question. The relationship between the teacher and the learner is personal in the sense that the teacher treats the learners as individuals, not as members of the same family or kinship. The ideal key-feature of the learner is an ability to combine selfhood and conditioned discipline in difference to the unconditioned devotion of the tradition-based learning culture or the unconditioned discipline in the bureaucratic learning culture (Rasmussen, 1998). Rasmussen (1998) further suggests that there may be defences of various kinds against transformative learning, and overcoming such defences is a very high-context related problem and should be treated as such. Nevertheless, I think we need new and innovative ways of teaching and learning to address learner diversity and learning.

5. Conclusion

I agree with Hemson (2006) that addressing issues of diversity effectively must involve critical examination of the purposes of education, methods of teaching, forms of knowledge that are privileged, and the role of the educator. Education in South African seems to ignore culture aspects of learning and follow a one size fit all approach and the introduction of a national matriculation examination in 2008 is an example of this approach. This examination took place in an unequal system, and should ideally only be in place when the education system achieves equality in terms of access, survival, output and outcomes. Diversity has become a feature of education in South Africa since 1994 and certainly we must find appropriate ways of accommodating diversity and learning. We must also find ways to ensure the most effective learning (I suggest transformative learning) of all learners and students.

Transformative learning may help to counteract drop-outs and poor throughput rates in our education system. Transformative learning presupposes a change of the organizational structure as well as the conventional conception of what learning means and suggests a transformation of practice. As such, transformative learning implies a deeper going process than for example learning of prescribed rules. We cannot accept race-based explanations for poor learning (meaning that blacks or Africans do not have the intellectual abilities to succeed academically). Bourdieu’s (see Poon and Wong, 2007) notion of cultural capital points toward a deeper understanding of poor learning. Bourdieu’s argument is very strong as it assists in developing an understanding for the uneven academic performances of students and learners in the South African education system. This paper suggests that such performances necessitate an exploration of learning as a cultural phenomenon. To that end I focused on the (African) lifeworld in order to develop a deeper understanding of how to address various concerns.

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