Intellectual Colonialism or Liberatory Education? An Exploration of Adult Education in an International Context

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Abstract: We examine colonialism through pedagogy, method, curriculum and knowledge and conclude by identifying potential for developing and developed countries to collaborate in knowledge creation. As a case study, we draw on the Commonwealth Youth Programme's Diploma in Youth in Development. Does it deliver liberatory education or intellectual colonialism?

This paper examines aspects of the 5-year pilot phase of the Diploma in Youth in Development (DYD); a supported, distance education course for adult learners in a youth and community context available across the majority of countries within the Commonwealth. It analyses how ostensibly liberatory educational methods were received by adults from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Pacific. Over 2700 learners have completed this innovative and unique programme, with its academic and vocational aspects, which was delivered in partnership with universities from both developing and developed nations.

The aim was the provision of an international course and qualification of which everyone had ownership and in which everyone had equal investment and influence. However, did the DYD provide a liberatory educational experience or a form of intellectual colonialism? Jarvis (1993) observed that distance education provides 'a means by which the first world can assist the third' but, commenting on aspects of the DYD, Cornwell described the African experience, 'where most states have been subjected to decades of negative critique by outsiders, delivered in a paternalistic manner, and where concerns about intellectual colonialism and continued intellectual dependency are not unfounded' (Cornwell 2002). Could there be an equitable relationship within such a diverse academic community or would the 'first world' inevitably see its role as attempting to enhance global equity even whilst avoiding paternalism?

Perspective

The Commonwealth Youth Programme's (CYP) vision of youth work is founded on an ethos of enabling, ensuring and empowering (Notley, 1997). These three functions both reflect the ethos of the youth work profession (see, for example, Banks 1999) and are rooted in the ethos of the Commonwealth Secretariat whose role is as 'a force for peace, democracy, equality and good governance; a catalyst for global consensus building; and a source of assistance for sustainable development and poverty eradication (Commonwealth Secretariat 2003). Throughout the research, the focus was on the extent to which these functions, together with the stated values and principles of the Commonwealth: democracy, liberty, justice and equity, were both enshrined within the design and operation of the DYD and produced as an outcome. The context in which the Commonwealth is situated sees increased political and communications-facilitated globalisation. Whether a voluntary association of geographically disbursed nations which brings together 53 arguably disparate states is appropriately identified as contributing to globalisation is debatable. Nonetheless, the increasing access to information and communications technology (ICT) is facilitating operational pan-Commonwealth contacts.

Methodology

The research centred on the feasibility of designing and implementing a common curriculum and pedagogical methodology, and the demands of assuring parity of standards and quality, across countries as diverse as Australia and Zambia, Bangladesh and Barbados, as

different as Sri Lanka, St Lucia and Sierra Leone. Research questions included the capacity of a distance learning programme to enhance practice, the effectiveness of distance learning for fostering vocational as well as academic education, the feasibility of developing consistency of standards within an international qualification and of ensuring parity where resources and experiences of learning are not equal. Research aimed to identify whether a supported distance education programme in very different social-cultural contexts could not only enshrine but also promote the values of democracy, liberty, justice and equity.

Researchers engaged with the inherent pluralism of the endeavour, locating their work within the epistemological context described by McLennan (1995: 3) as characterised by, 'a suitably humble and relativistic acceptance that there is a range of cultural values; opposition to all forms of cultural imperialism … endorsement of different ways of knowing and being … enshrinement of the principle 'equal but different''. In practical terms, throughout the pilot phase, qualitative and quantitative data were gathered by partner universities, a team of nine external regional moderators (ERMs), external consultants and the CYP through four regional centres. Learners, tutors and other stakeholders participated in the collection and generation of qualitative data using standard proformas, allowing triangulation. In addition, ERMs visited partner universities and produced reports following their visits, also using a standard format. Towards the end of the pilot phase, an external consultant was employed in each region to evaluate the DYD's impact. These findings were collated and a report was produced by Jones and Harris (2003).

The findings showed that, although support for the DYD was strong, tensions lay within the framework of academic credibility and status. On the one hand, universities valued the prestige associated with involvement in a Commonwealth enterprise. On the other hand, the involvement of an external body compromised their academic independence and integrity. It was also evident that the Commonwealth itself echoes the paradox which lies within youth work. Espousing tolerance and respect for different cultures and religions, challenging oppression and working to ensure equality of opportunity on grounds including sexuality, youth work requires adherence to a form of relativism which is incompatible both political extremism and religious fundamentalism. Within academia, the contradiction between studying in a context where freedom of speech and thought are valued and developing specific vocationally-relevant skills, values and knowledge provides a further dichotomy.

Colonialism through Pedagogy

The curriculum and pedagogy of the DYD were designed to reflect the ethos of the Commonwealth and to nurture independent learners, by fostering the development of reflexivity and participatory practice (Knowles, 1975; Mezirow, 1991 and Schön, 1991). For example, learners were required to complete Learning Contracts and encouraged to identify their own learning needs, negotiating, through discussion with tutors, how these would be met. Based on the work of Freire (1970) and Kolb (1984), tutors aimed to be facilitators of learning rather than transmitters of received knowledge.

The architects of the DYD envisaged pedagogy as operating within a Freirean framework: a binary construct of education as liberation or domestication. Hooks (1994: 46) identifies Freire as, 'a challenging teacher whose work furthered my own struggle against the colonising process - the colonising mindset'; the DYD was designed to enhance participants' own struggle and to provide them with the intellectual and conceptual tools to foster empowerment. Hofstede, however, draws our attention to the different paradigm of small and large power distance societies. In the former, the minimisation of inequalities is a key goal: there

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is interdependence between people with less and more power and the ideal manager is 'a resourceful democrat'. The teacher may be an 'expert' who 'transfers impersonal truths' but s/he also will expect initiatives from students (1991: 37). There is scope for liberatory models of education, which enshrine the struggle against colonisation, in small power distance societies. However, in large power distance societies, teachers are neither facilitators of learning nor transmitters of received knowledge but rather 'gurus who transfer personal wisdom' (Hofstede 1991: 37) and who are treated with the respect befitting this. In this context, the involvement of the learner in creating knowledge through dialogue is unthinkable. The DYD casts the tutor as facilitator, 'who constantly needs to make decisions about whether to intervene or not' (Notley et al 1999: 42) as lively debates take place between students whose experience is valued as the basis of knowledge creation. Where learners' knowledge and understanding are located within an alternative cultural paradigm, tutors' attempts to facilitate debates may not be comprehended. This presents the DYD as enshrining an inherent contradiction: an ostensibly liberatory model is imposed on societies where this presents an entirely unthinkable approach: rather than nurturing learners' growth along a continuum, it signifies imposition of a culturally inappropriate liberation.

The lively debate, valued within adult education, also typifies cultures identified by Hofstede as 'I' cultures. In terms of precise relevance to the DYD, he describes 'individualist cultures' where 'speaking one's mind is a virtue. Telling the truth about how one feels is the characteristic of a sincere and honest person… adult individuals should have learned to take direct feedback constructively' (Hofstede 1991: 58). The CYP's Quality Assurance team regularly reports back on the importance of tutor feedback on students' work (Jones and Harris 2003: 29) and originality in assignments is praised. Within 'we' or 'collectivist cultures', individual opinions may be seen as undesirable and even deviant. The repetition of established opinions or understandings is appropriate and valued and concerns around plagiarism, grounded in individualist cultures' emphasis on originality, are not grasped fully.

The difficulties surrounding the implementation of the Learning Contract serve to illustrate the pedagogical assumptions made. In the Diploma's Tutor Handbook, Notley et al explained that contracts 'create independent, assertive learners who are seeking out learning opportunities which enable students to demonstrate academic and professional progression and development' (1999: 47). Writing in the UK context, Atherton (2001) explored some of the difficulties involved in using contracts: 'There may be considerable student resistance to learning contracts: they are not part of the rule of the education game as they are familiar with it. The common cry is, "Just tell me what to do!".' Whilst Atherton's conclusions are positive, it is apparent that the use of such agreements needs to be underpinned by supportive, developmental dialogue between tutors and learners. Atherton did not write in the wider context in which the DYD sought to introduce the concept to students for whom it presented a conceptual barrier. One researcher found confusion around a concept which 'had not been encountered before' (Irvine, 2002: 3.2.2) and was 'difficult to implement' (2002: 3.4.2). In a second region, the researcher observed, 'some students and tutors felt that the concept of a 'learning contract' was inappropriate in oriental culture' (Christian 2001: 13.5). The use of the term 'contract' engendered concern in learners and tutors who were reluctant to enter what was interpreted as being a legally binding agreement. Throughout the Commonwealth, students attested to the problems presented by the learning contract but the significance of power distances in society and the differences between individual and collectivist cultures helps to explain the nature of the difficulties. Some students expect a banking rather than liberatory model, based on previous experience; they want

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to be told what to do because they are not ready to accept responsibility for their own learning. For others, however, the desire to be told what to do is an aspect of their cultural expectations of learning from an inspirational guide.

Colonialism through Method and Curriculum

Traditionally distance learning is characterised by separation between teacher and learner; the assumption of some degree of individual autonomy in the learning process and, in some cases, the use of technology. Rossman, however, points out the complexity underlying this: 'No longer can distance education simply be referred to as education that takes place when there is a distance between the learner and instructor. In this definition the distance being referred to is geographic, but distance might just as well be cultural; or emotional, with quite different pedagogical implications' (1995: 3-4). Within the DYD, distance learning accommodates all of these 'distances'. Yet common principles and values are inherent within the DYD. It is taught and assessed in English regardless of the 'distance' that this might represent socially, culturally, linguistically and emotionally for learners. In most cases, it does not depend upon ICT for its delivery. Although ICT might be global, access to it is not. Therefore, a paper-based model of distance learning is the one most commonly employed since it is deemed to be more appropriate to the diverse contexts, some of which are very isolated, in which the DYD is delivered.

The extent and impact of the DYD are unique. Other distance courses have been implemented nationally and internationally, but these have tended to rely upon reified programmatic approaches to the curriculum in order to establish consistency and standards. However, while DYD content is closely specified, it enshrines a conceptualisation of distance learning as a model for the enhancement of student-centred learning, beyond a local or even regional context, and, therefore, while it is not always able to exploit global technology, conceptually the DYD does introduce a pedagogy and curriculum which might be deemed relational constructivist (Gergen, 1995, Wittgenstein, 1953). If, from a relational constructivist paradigm, knowledge and understanding are treated as the ongoing process of relating text to context (Dachler and Hosking, 1995), then this is what the learners do throughout their engagement with the DYD. They take the international text and relate it to their national and regional context. Central to this relationist constructivist paradigm is the notion that what we recognise as real emerges from ongoing relationships. It is these relationships which control the process of learning and introduce within distance delivery, despite its individuality and apparent isolation, a concept of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The notion of community, indeed of family, is central to the Commonwealth, is as the concept of a community of learning, which enshrines Commonwealth values and embraces equity and worth in the way in which it attempts to reinterpret the power differential between learners and tutors. DYD learners are literally the experts in the field and can provide current practical experience not easily accessed by tutors in the academic environment.

Colonialism through Knowledge

The DYD takes the form a series of modules, each comprising a series of units. Each module has its own self-contained file of background reading, student activities and self-help questions. The content was well-received throughout the Commonwealth. Irvine quoted tutors and students who described it as 'excellent' (2002: 4.3.1) and Christian reported that students found it 'stimulating'. However, he expressed surprise that there was 'no mention of the philosophers / reformers from the south' (2001: 13.4.1). The curriculum was devised by practitioners and academics from across the Commonwealth but the published materials available to them tended to emanate from the developed world. Foucault observed, 'power and

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knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor that any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power' (1979: 27-28). Currently, the knowledge disseminated is partial: it represents only part(s) of the Commonwealth. Yet, within an institution valuing equity, potential exists for collaborative knowledge creation and the diffusion of the knowledge-power construct.

As learners progress through the modules at their own pace, they are given a degree of control which would not necessarily be the case in the traditional classroom. The issue that then emerges for the DYD is the extent to which the community of practice which forms the DYD can be shared and developed as a knowledge community (Brufee, 1997). The interpretation of community and ownership of knowledge are critical. Freire (1970) shows how much education is about accommodation and domestication. He employs a subject/ object model to identify how tutors undertake active, 'banking' roles, leaving students little option but to undertake passive ones. If knowledge is perceived as a commodity to be delivered, instead of shared or negotiated, then the interpretation of a community of practice will be a limited one, focussing on a traditional model where students pursue a similar course of study and tutors act as purveyors and sources of learning. However, acceptance of the notion that that learning might be assimilated from wide ranging communities of practice, all of which contribute to an individual's knowledge and understanding, moves us beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom to a model of distance learning which celebrates the context in which learners find themselves. Especially in a vocational course, the real communities of practice will provide critical analytical environments which interrogate concepts and issues, probing their relevance and how they apply to genuine situations. The notion of situated learning therefore becomes the reality of the learner in both contextual and relational terms. It also becomes an ongoing, potentially lifelong, relationship of construction rather than just an opportunity to acquire decontextualised knowledge while on a course. This redefines the process of learning, shifting from an instructional paradigm to a learner centred one, not despite but because of the distance learning context.

The Commonwealth is both an organisation and a value system within which states have equal worth and value. States are suspended when they exhibit practices which conflict with the stated values and principles. However, the Commonwealth has its roots in colonial history. Shedding that colonialism within educational practice is problematic, not because particular nations are dominant, but because the academic community and Commonwealth values embrace a model of democracy and social justice which has emerged from western society. Foucault (1972) allows us to explore the notion of reversal i.e. when tradition gives us a particular version of events, Foucault's strategy is to work out the opposite: the 'what if' scenario. It emphasises the other side of things and, in doing so, allows negative activity of discourse whereas traditionally there has been preoccupation with the positive. Reversal can operate just as effectively within the context of values and, while the Commonwealth values are not negotiable in that they underpin the work that the diploma stands for, reversal might allow space for consideration of the alternative and accommodation of cultural difference within a postcolonial context.

Conclusion

The DYD's current curriculum and pedagogical approach can be criticised on the grounds of intellectual colonialism. Adherence to a single model of democracy, liberty or equality denies the range of perspectives. However, the DYD's organisational delivery framework which has been created offers scope for the generation and evolution of knowledge

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which enshrines intellectual inclusivity, grounded in pan-Commonwealth collaboration and a holistic partnership approach to knowledge-creation. This vision transcends Jarvis's notion of distance education as assistance and Cornwell's identification of intellectual dependency since knowledge creation and construction become genuinely collaborative and reciprocal.

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