The Freirean “Andragogy” and Orality in Indigenous African Education: a Framework for Comparative Education

ABSTRACT: Almost all learning, critical theories, and process models that embrace the humanistic perspective in adult education are connected by their emphasis on dialogue. Dialogue in education, and especially adult education, is a platform that allows the learner’s experiences to be important factors in the process of knowledge creation. All of Paulo Freire’s ideas and practices are couched in the dialogue that establishes learners as co-investigators and co-creators of knowledge. Freire establishes dialogue as the best platform for “helping adults to learn.” In traditional African education, dialogue is a non-negotiable component of lifelong learning. Dialogue within its traditional usage includes interaction with the ancestors, the entire community, and the natural environment. The unwritten nature of lifelong learning in traditional Africa makes dialogue the center of life and learning in every community. Dialogue as the literary element in indigenous African education is summed in the concept, Orality. This paper establishes Freire’s philosophy as andragogic and dialogic and compares it with Orality in indigenous African education. The paper uses the analysis of the comparison to argue for a more integrated approach to comparative adult education. The paper concludes by offering the analysis as a possible cross-cultural framework for comparative education that recognizes and is responsive to indigenous pedagogies.

Keywords: Africa, Andragogy, Freire, indigenous, Orality, comparative education

Introduction

In recent years, I have tried to slant some of my research and writing towards lifelong learning in indigenous Africa. As I try to present ideas and perspectives from the traditional worldview, I have always faced the problem of connecting the circular and holistic indigenous worldview to the dominant and more documented linear thought pattern. Any individual that attempts such a task of crisscrossing ideas between two distinct and contrary (sometimes contradictory) worldviews must be prepared for the possibility of losing substance in translation. Anyanwu (1983) argues that whereas the linear and scientific notion of causality is interested in the how question, the African mindset is interested in the “why aspect of everything.” He borrows the “Principle of Synchronicity” to explain causality within the holistic framework. Citing another source, he defines the principle of synchronicity as “a mental attitude which took full
account of that peculiar interdependence of objective events among themselves as well with the objective (psychic) state of the observer or observers” (p. 68).

The nature of most indigenous societies is such that life and living provide a revolving but coherent connection between all fibers of society. In such a setting, life, as day and night, is repetition. Repetition, within the holistic worldview, gives meaning to existence and all other things that make life meaningful. The belief in reincarnation for instance, is a repetition of life and death. The African name Babatunde is a good example. Babatunde is the name given to a male child born after the death of a male elder in a family and it simply means “our father has return.” The father returning is indicative of the fact that there is a constant link between the ancestors, the unborn, and the living. The traditional African mode of knowing combines the spiritual and the physical because both are perceived as “a unitary world of aesthetic continuum” (p. 105). In spite of the divides between the holistic and the linear worldviews, it is possible to draw on their similarities and even differences to create a platform for intercultural comparative adult education. It is not possible for me to present a comprehensive and full paper on this proposal but I hope that the sketch presented in this piece will form the basis for a full paper and dialogue on the subject at a later date.

The Risks of Intercultural Comparative Adult Education

My approach in this paper is to call the definition and understanding of comparative adult education into question. My call does not go anywhere close to what Newman (2012) did with his piece that presented “some mutinous thoughts” (p. 36) on transformative learning. My argument in this paper is to invite the experts on comparative adult education to consider definitions that will make comparative adult education in the 21st century such that it is, in line with the Belém Framework for Action (2010), “responsive to indigenous people, rural populations and migrants” (p. 22). I was reminded by one of the reviewers of my abstract that “comparison means to explicitly identify and analyze similarities and differences in two or more countries and includes the attempt to understand why differences and similarities occur and what they tell us about adult education in these countries (emphasis mine)” Another comment from the reviewer(s) is “indigenous and Orality are the two main concepts in his (mine) chapter published in ISCAE second volume…”

The reviewer(s) comments above take us back to my earlier clarification on the difference between the linear and holistic frameworks. The definition of comparison along countries tends to ignore the peculiarities of multi-ethnic and multi-lingual countries with indigenous populations. The dangers of continuing along this definition, especially in the age of globalization, include annihilating what Giroux (1985) ascribes to Freire as the “cultural powers” of indigenous populations in such countries (p. xxi). He further presents cultural powers in Freirean terms as the foundation for the “social and historical particularities, the problems, sufferings, visions, and acts of resistance, that constitute the cultural forms of subordinate groups” (p. xxi). I adopt this understanding of cultural powers and argue that it presents some beacon of hope for indigenous people to have a sense of belonging to the global community and to harvest some of the dividends of adult education. For comparative adult education to insist on “comparison” along national boundaries is to commit existential fallacy that draws particular conclusions from universal premises. In this case, using the universal instances of linear understandings to draw particular conclusions even for indigenous people with holistic mindsets is pure existential fallacy. Furthermore, to insist on the universal umbrella of comparison is to impose what Bron (2008) calls “pitfalls…ignorant assumptions…” He uses the excellent example of when a research is “not aware of or ignores the fact that an American high school does not whatsoever equate to a German Hochschule, or a Swedish högskola, or a Polish szkoła wyższa” (p. 66). To insist that ideas from indigenous frameworks must be compared on the “countries” basis is to impose “self-inflicted misinterpretations” (p. 66) on comparative adult education in the 21st century.

Indigenous and Orality were prominent in my comparison of lifelong learning in traditional African and Native American indigenous education. These same concepts are prominent in my other publications that touch on the “cultural powers” of traditional African people without repeating or diluting the quality of the contributions to dialogue. Orality was developed as a concept to capture the unwritten body of knowledge that exists within indigenous societies and it is the equivalent of “literary” in the western worldview. Within this understanding, I can present a “book” on proverbs from the oral literature of indigenous African pedagogy. In addition, the circular nature of the indigenous society compels meaningful repetitions that say and use old things in new ways to make useable new meanings.

Intercultural comparative adult education has its risks in spite of which it can draw on similarities and differences and use the analysis of such differences and similarities to create new meanings. It is in this sense that “comparing the incomparables” is worth the risks. I present a sketchy summary of the paper below and I hope to develop all the arguments in a full paper later.

Orality and Freire’s Andragogy

In this section I offer a sketch of my line of argument in establishing a basis for comparative analysis of Paulo Freire’s ideas and Orality in indigenous African education. First, I establish Freire’s dialogic process that culminates in conscientization as being Andragogic. Second, I argue that Orality, as the absolute medium of education in indigenous Africa, and indeed in all indigenous societies, is sustained by horizontal dialogue across all areas of human activity.
in any community.

Paulo Freire’s works have possibly been interpreted in millions of ways across the globe by those who subscribe to his ideas and their effectiveness as well as by his detractors. Either way, it is an incontrovertible fact that Freire’s work and influence have implications beyond many borders of human existence and contexts including cultural, social, and geo-spaces of education.

The core of Freire’s pedagogy is the process of conscientization which is the objective of his liberating education. His process is one where each individual unearths the reality of her/his world in dialogue with others with the world as a mediating factor.

Freire’s philosophy underlines horizontal dialogue as a sine qua non for liberating education and establishes empowerment as both its means and ends. Freire’s presentation of the learner, educator, the context, content, process, and the outcome makes his process a celebration of the learner. Andragogy, from its etymology through its coinage and popularity in adult education by Malcolm Knowles, is a celebration of the learner as the principal investigator and creator of knowledge. Dialogue is at the center of his process. Mayo (2007) affirms that dialogue and “the pedagogy of question” are the areas of emphasis in Freire’s process of problematizing knowledge (p. 107). It is within these understandings of the centrality of dialogue and the imperative of the learners’ context and experience that Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed is indeed, andragogical, hence the reference to the Freirean Andragogy. I intend to analyze the symmetrical relationship between conscientization and Andragogy in detail with the full paper.

I am always compelled to clarify the fact that traditional Africa simply refers to Africa prior to colonialism and related foreign intrusion. I must also clarify that I use the concepts indigenous and traditional synonymously. In addition, I use them as common threads in making universal pronouncements in spite of the enormous diversity of traditional and contemporary Africa. Finally, that Orality, or the power of the spoken word, is at the core of traditional African education and it presents the learner, context, content, and educator as participants in a lifelong dialogue with the physical and spiritual worlds. Orality emphasizes dialogic power as a guarantee of praxis and individual empowerment through education. It establishes participation, imitation, observation, and other forms of engagement as forms of dialogue with the physical and spiritual communities that form the context of indigenous education. Whereas the spoken word is established as an imperative of this process, it is by no means the equivalent of the total package of Orality. However, it is within the framework of the imperative of the spoken word and its significance to dialogue in liberating learning that Freire’s Andragogy and Orality are used to advance the argument for intercultural comparison in comparative adult education.

Similarities and Differences

In this section I try to draw attention to a few of the lines of convergence and difference in Freire’s Andragogy and Orality in indigenous African education. The first point of convergence is the fact that the world is a mediating factor in both. For the traditional African, Orality implies constant interaction with the world in a holistic way. Freire (2004) too insists that problem-posing education involves “naming of the world” (p. 89). He re-echoes the same views in the last interview he granted 15 days before his death. Torres (2007) quotes generously from that interview for her article entitled A million Paulo Freires. Her quote further affirms Freire’s position that “knowledge is… a process resulting from the continual interaction between human beings and their surroundings” (p. 65) and affirms the imperative of the world as the mediating factor in knowledge creation and usage.

Learning is also problematized through Orality in indigenous African education. The use of problems in indigenous pedagogy is a way of problematizing learning though encoding and decoding complex patterns of words. This same pattern is implied in Freire’s contention that learning is problematized through praxis. Other areas of similarity between the two include the fact that both fall within the humanistic perspective in adult education and learning. Furthermore, both are applicable in formal, non-formal, and informal learning environments. In addition and more importantly, both establish the centrality of the learner as Homo sapiens – rational thinking beings – in the process of knowing. Finally Orality, in spite of its nature is about application just as Freire’s Andragogy emphasizes applied education.

There are several areas of dis-similarity between the two. Freire’s Andragogy was influenced by the political climate and the perceived poor state of education in his context; Orality dates back to the ancestors. In a similar vein, Freire’s Andragogy is copy-righted/authored by him; everyone has the copy right to Orality because the ancestors passed it down to all and anything that belongs to the ancestors belongs to the entire community. Another point of difference is the fact that Freire uses individuals as teachers and oppressors; the other uses the entire community as teachers with no room for oppression as analyzed by Freire because of the fear of the wrath of the ancestors. Whereas Orality by definition and nature is unwritten, Freire’s Andragogy is written and has been subjected to scientific research and critique. A further point of departure for both is that there is a dearth of literature related to Orality while Freire’s Andragogy occupies extensive space in academic literature. There are several other points of difference that will be part of a full paper.

Conclusion

I have tried to argue that comparative education, in definition and practice, has
to update its methodology in the 21st century to be inclusive of indigenous populations that are often sub-summed in comparisons based on the current definitions of comparative education. Another justification for my argument is the need to accommodate comparisons between linear and holistic concepts as frameworks for comparative education in a globalized world where the learning community is a contested concept. I have established Freire’s ideas as being Andragogic and I have used that argument to compare it with Orality in traditional African education and learning. Similarities and differences were used to establish the fact that there is a viable basis for intercultural comparison using Freire’s Andragogy and Orality in indigenous African lifelong learning.

References


Work in progress. Comments are welcome; quoting not (yet)

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Non-formal learning - similar settings, divergent cultures

Comparison of Polish and Swedish ENGOs

1. Introduction

Non-formal learning of adults is in focus of this paper. Its characteristic features are: it is organized outside the formal school system, is voluntary, usually short-term, the presence of a teacher (trainer, coach, instructor) is not necessary (cf. Schugurensky 2007:164f). What is important: Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner’s perspective (COM(2001) 678 final).

Adults whose non-formal learning were studied are staff of WWF and Greenpeace - two world-wide environmental organisations (ENGOs). They work in two countries - Poland and Sweden. The empirical material of this study consists of interviews with the staff of WWF and Greenpeace. My questions concerned mainly capacity building of the organization, its educational needs and training/learning activities that has been organized or attended. Language of interviews was English, Polish and Swedish.

I was interested to determine how learning in these two ENGOs was organized?; who did what? But also to learn where did training competences come from? Were there any significant differences in how non-formal learning processes are run in two ENGOs in two countries? Some of these questions are focusing on a phenomenon called social movement learning (SML) - a term that is discussed later.

Polish and Swedish WWF and Greenpeace share with their mother-organisations missions, goals and ways of working and acting. Thus, a starting hypothesis for this paper was that similar organisational settings are present in both country organisations.

My working hypothesis was the following:

Despite many similarities how a given ENGO work is organized, its staff and members do act and learn differently. One possible explanation is a political culture of a society they are living in.

A broad definition of political culture was formulated by Kavanagh (1972) according to which it is a set of values within which a political system operates. Individuals are socialised into a country’s political culture. The underlying assumption is that norms, rules, habits, traditions and belief systems shape the behaviour of citizens. If they have trust in public authorities, there will be a closer relationship between state and society (Askvik et al 2011).