

Learning through rediscovery and reclaiming local/indigenous knowledge and skills

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... learning is welcome when it affirms a continuing sense of self ... (Bateson 1994:79)

ABSTRACT

In this article the authors explain some of the attempts they make to “indigenise” the training of students in social work, paying special attention to community work to assist the students in discovering the richness of their own knowledge base and in integrating and symbolising the theories so that they learn from within – to grow their own horns because, as they say in Northern Sotho “Naka tša go rwešwa ga di gomarele hlogo” (“One cannot stick the horns of one cow on another. The horns have to grow from within”).

1 INTRODUCTION

According to Duhl (1983:3), life takes place in a context. There is no one among us, she says, who could grow up of English-speaking parents and invent Chinese. We cannot teach students English and expect them to speak Chinese. Similarly, we cannot train top-down and deposit knowledge if we expect students to facilitate participatory processes that value and respect indigenous values, knowledge and skills – processes that learn from the people and build on what they have. In training, students should experience learning that also comes from within, where “foreign” material is connected to familiar values,



knowledge and skills (cf Burkey1993). Bateson (1994:213) says learning takes place when it comes home. “The process of learning can turn a strange context into a familiar one, and finally into a habitation of mind and hearts.”

For most of Africa, the formalised, people-centred and participatory practices of working with communities in development and social work are exotic and relatively new approaches to meeting human needs (Hutton & Mwansa 1996:3). The approaches and practices reflect European and North American cultures which are different from African cultures. A consequence of this is that in spite of good intentions, many efforts have been unsuccessful and the need for indigenisation is advocated (Cohen 1992; Mupedziswa 1992; Hutton & Mwansa 1996; Mamphiswana & Noyoo 2000).

In view of the above assumptions about learning and the exotic nature of community work, the challenge is to find ways of facilitating indigenised, people-centred participatory practices.

2 AIM OF THE ARTICLE

In this article we will share attempts made in the Department of Social Work at the University of South Africa (Unisa) to take up the above challenge. We will therefore describe

- how we try to facilitate the learning of people-centred participatory practices in a people-centred manner by means of distance teaching.
- how we use indigenous knowledge and skills to facilitate “learning from within”. Through (re)discovery of the students’ own and others’ ideas and practices we try to facilitate the process of symbolisation (bringing home) of the study material (knowledge/experiences) – to turn the foreign into the familiar.

The content of this article is a result of the question we have been asking ourselves: how can we assist students in dealing with the (unfamiliar) study material in such a way that learning will be welcomed and grow from within?

3 THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

As explained in the articles by Louw and Ox and O’Neil (in this issue), the training of, and in, community work is also based on the person-centred ap-



proach (PCA). It follows the same thinking and values about people and their behaviour, the same approach to sustainable change as being a change of the person's sense of self, and a process that comes from within and that is never imposed or deposited (proposition 11). The role of the change agent and trainer is primarily that of facilitator of the development and learning process.

Rogers's propositions are in line with Bateson's (1994:79) assumption that learning takes place if it affirms a continuing sense of self. "What is learned then becomes a part of that system of self definition that filters all future perceptions and possibilities of future learning."

These assumptions emphasise the importance of presenting the information and learning material to students in such a way that they can symbolise it and bring it into some relationship with their self-structure.

We therefore believe that if we facilitate the process of indigenisation of knowledge and experiences, students will symbolise their experiences and bring these experiences in relation to the self.

4 THE CONCEPT "INDIGENISATION"

In social work terms, *indigenous* is described as change or learning which originates from the individual and has its basis in the culture and traditions of the community, and it is appropriate to ecological realities. It is therefore a people-based process. If we want our training to be indigenous (familiar) we need to consider theoretical constructs and paradigms that are people-based and take into account the cultural and contextual realities of the students (cf Cohen 1992). In order to indigenise the experiences of students, we plan our courses in such a manner that the students can (re)discover and reclaim their own knowledge, ways of doing, cultures and their selves, facilitating their ability to relate knowledge and experiences to their selves.

5 THE PROCESS OF INDIGENISATION OF KNOWLEDGE

5.1 The person-centred approach and African philosophies

The first questions we ask ourselves are: is the PCA appropriate for the South African context? Is there a relationship between the PCA and African thought, since the PCA is a Western/foreign theory? Carl Rogers, an American psychologist formulated the approach around the individual.



We looked at certain “African” ways of thinking about people to determine if there is any relationship between how Rogers and Freire (the Brazilian pedagogue) and some of the African thinkers view people.

Omogrebe (1997:5) points out that reflections of past African thinkers were transmitted orally, through the telling of myths, stories, wise sayings, proverbs and religious rituals. African traditional philosophy is described as “community thought”. Part of our training is to use proverbs and idioms to facilitate the process of symbolisation.

Our research revealed a surprising resemblance to Rogers’s propositions. Some of the similarities are the following:

- Wiredu (1992) says that truth is an opinion, there is no objective truth. Rogers in propositions 1, 2 and 7 also refers to truth and reality that are personal and each person can only be understood from his or her own frame of reference.
- According to Gyeke (1997:59), the Akan of Ghana believe that the person is a soul and a body. The soul (*okra*) is that which constitutes the innermost self, the essence of the individual person. What happens to the soul takes effect or reflects on the conditions of the body. (This can be compared to Rogers’s proposition 3 on wholeness of the person). Similarly, they view a person’s actual body or physical behaviour as linked to the conditions of the soul. Thus, if a man’s behaviour suggests that he is happy, the Akan would say that “his soul is happy”. The conditions of the soul and the body are interdependent.
- The human being, according to the Akan, is not an assemblage of flesh and bone, “he or she is a complex being who cannot completely be explained by the same laws of physics used to explain inanimate things, and . . . our work cannot simply be reduced to physics” (Gyeke 1997:65). Rogers also confirms that people cannot be reduced to objects. They have experiences, perceptions and realities of their own (propositions 1, 2 and 7).

Omogrebe (1997:3) further states the following:

- Human beings have a natural yearning for continued existence and people’s strongest instinct is the instinct of self-preservation. *Muntu* or the person, says Temple (1997:432), signifies a vital force endowed with intelligence and will. Compare this with Rogers’s proposition 4 that people are always growing and trying to self-actualise.



Ghadesin (1991:27) refers to the perception of the person held by the Yoruba of Nigeria

- He refers to the view expressed in the saying “I am because we are; I exist because the community exists.” However, he observes that this does not mean that the individual is not recognised. Individuals are valued as potential contributors to communal survival. Emphasis is placed on the usefulness of this view for both the *self* and the *community*. Therefore, uniqueness is indeed recognised. (Propositions 1 and 2 confirm the uniqueness of each individual.) Anderson (1989:298), a PCA theorist and practitioner, also cites Keen and Fox; “Every person is plural. There is no *I* without *we*.” The interdependence between *I* and *we* is regarded as important (see propositions 9 and 10).

Broodryk (1997) made a study of the *Ubuntu* philosophy. The outcome indicated that all activities of *Ubuntu* focus on humanity or humanness. Rogers’s approach is regarded as a humanist approach to psychology. Broodryk proposes that:

- *Ubuntu* is a world view shaped by a value system based on humanness.
- The human being is the priority in all conduct. Dignity and respect for a human being come first and foremost (proposition 17).
- *Ubuntu* is apparently a derivative of the proverbial expression that each individual’s humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others. It implies that the act of human existence is characterised by interdependence and co-operation among people for their own survival. No one can live alone. Your idea about yourself and that of the community is also formed in relation to others (propositions 9, 10 and 3).

These few ideas from different African philosophies confirmed to us that Rogers’s theory is not inconsistent or an unfamiliar way of thinking, and it can be related to ideas familiar to students and become part of their sense of self.

As an example, we add the comment from one of our students that the PCA indeed could be familiarised and symbolised:

Theories such as PCA are embodied in the philosophy that is the backbone of most African cultures that value respect, understanding and belief in people’s potential. As students we need to start utilising our hidden ex-



pressions to communicate our understanding of theories that are used to explain human behaviours (Semenya 2001).

5.2 Idioms and proverbs

Proverbs and idioms in a language are like indexes to the culturally embedded experiences, meanings, values, local knowledge and wisdom of language users. They express deep-seated feelings, reflect values, attitudes toward life and the world the people live in (Chindongo 1997:134). They allude to an underlying philosophy and history (Alagoa 1997:84). The terms *idioms* and *proverbs* are often used interchangeably, but can be differentiated.

Idioms are a group of words (brief metaphors) that allude to a disguised subject in the description of another subject. Literally, the words state something obvious, but the disguised meaning is important and can be applied to different contexts. Idioms are attempts by people to understand themselves and explain the world around them.

Proverbs are brief sayings which emerge from experience expressed in a pithy, fixed and metaphorical language that conveys a truth, or bit of useful wisdom. Kuzwayo (1998:17) writes that there are three types and functions of proverbs: those that express a fact, those that express caution and reprimand, and those that are loaded with messages of guidance about duties (expected behaviour). Proverbs teach or hand down experiential wisdom, advice, encourage co-operation, console, encourage and approve socially acceptable behaviour. For this reason, it has been suggested that proverb teaching should be included in education curricula (Kuzwayo 1998:20; Mieder 1997:25).

5.2.1 Using idioms and proverbs to learn from theory: a student's experience

Examples in this article show how proverbs and idioms are recreated when indigenising social work knowledge and practice to build a bridge in teaching and learning for students and teachers of social work and assist in symbolising the theoretical concepts from the PCA and other participatory practices.

What follows is the experience of one of the students:

During my studies at Unisa we were encouraged to make use of our own cultural proverbs and idioms to express our understanding of the concepts



used in the PCA and community development. Through this experience I developed an awareness and knowledge of the Northern Sotho proverbs and how they could be used to increase my understanding and work with people. By encouraging students to use their own cultural proverbs while learning community development *allowed us to be ourselves*.

Until then, my social work education had been mostly English-bound and as students we had been inclined to communicate feelings, experiences and thoughts in English. We gave English proverbs preference over other languages. This tendency incapacitates students and practitioners. For example, many social workers could hardly pronounce and explain with ease concepts such as *empathy*, *congruence* in African languages. That does not mean that these ideas do not exist among us and in African languages. It was as if that knowledge and their expression in words existed somewhere out there, not in us. We discovered that they were there and needed to be recognised, respected and nurtured (Semenya 2001).

This endorsed what Kleynmeyer in Chindongo (1997:133) wrote: “Nothing motivates people quite like cultural expression; it unlocks creative forces that otherwise remain dormant or go unrecognised.”

Semenya continues:

The following are some of the Northern Sotho proverbs linked to PCA that I have become aware of after being encouraged to use my mother tongue.

‘Khudu ya marega e tsebja ke mong wa yona’: only the one who places the winter tortoise knows its whereabouts. A person can only be known and understood from his own frame of reference (propositions 1, 2 and 7).

‘Motho ke motho ka ba bangwe’: a person is a person through other people. This refers to how the person’s identity exists in his or her interaction with other people (propositions 9 and 10).

‘Nama kgapeletšwa e phuma pitšša’: by implication this can be used to express the anxiety that arises in people due to their being incongruent (proposition 16).

From my own experience I know that community workers often have difficulty communicating effectively with the people they want to serve, that is the poor, illiterate and socially isolated. The idea of using one’s own proverbs



promotes and facilitates communication between the developer and the people they serve bridging the elite bias.

My experience has been that by using idioms and proverbs I have been provided with a language that helps to bridge the barriers between the educated elite and the poor. The poor feel understood and accepted and start becoming interested. The following proverbs describe the more participatory language in working with communities.

'Makhura a kgoši ke batho', suggests that a leader will only enjoy his/her follower's recognition if (s)he treats them with respect. This illustrates the importance of a non-paternalistic approach to working with people.

'Maithuti ga se makgona ke maboeletsa'. This confers with Korten's idea of embracing error so that we learn from our mistakes, and that community development is a learning process.

'Nonyana e sa itsheleng e bola sekhwejana': people who are dependant and not eager to work for themselves and only rely on others will starve once help is withdrawn. This describes the principle of self-reliance and independence in development.

The use of our cultural languages increases self-awareness and understanding as student developers (Semenya 2001).

Chindongo (1997:126–134) also supports this process. Chindongo worked for World Vision in Malawi and wrote about how Chichewa proverbs were used to enhance facilitation in the participatory development process. Getting to know local proverbs and idioms helped workers in the community to get to know the paradigm of the community, their values and local wisdom. Proverbs helped them to reach out to people to motivate or encourage them to discuss issues affecting their lives. This increased people's participation, because they experienced that they could reflect on issues affecting them in language, ideas and perceptions with which they were at home. Chindongo also relates how development facilitators who were facilitating an evaluation workshop shared the Chichewa proverbs used in their work. He concludes that using proverbs shows respect for the community's culture, appreciation for their local wisdom and knowledge, for their uniqueness, contributes to more culturally appropriate practice and facilitates people's participation (Chindongo 1997:126–134).



5.2.2 Using proverbs and idioms in learning about PCA

We have found that in spite of a resemblance between *Ubuntu*, PCA and a participatory approach to working with communities, it is nevertheless initially difficult for students to grasp PCA concepts. Somehow, the resemblance between *Ubuntu* and PCA, as already indicated, seems unexpected. Students expect “learning” to be different and unfamiliar, and it is as if the familiarity breeds contempt. The resemblance is also too close for the distinction and recognition that are necessary for learning. It is here where idioms or proverbs reflect *Ubuntu* and have helped us to bridge the gap.

The PCA idea that a person’s identity or self, is informed by interaction with significant others is reflected in the ubiquitous African proverb *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*: “a person is a person through other people”. Each individual’s humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others and, in turn, individuality is truly expressed (propositions 9 and 10). *Ubuntu* is concretised in humane treatment of others, a sensitivity towards the needs, wants and frame of reference of others (propositions 7 and 17), actions of respect, understanding, participation, generosity, mutual caring and sharing for the preservation of the group one is related to, however remotely (Prinsloo in Coetzee *et al.* 1998:41–2). *Vhana vha munna vha thutukana thoho ya nzie*: “the children of one father share even the head of a locust”.

PCA is also based on respect for the person’s uniqueness and diversity (propositions 1 and 2) and a belief in people’s self-determination and personal power (respect for abilities and potential of people) (proposition 4). A Zulu idiom *Abantu abayi nganxanye bengamanzi* explains this concept. It means people do not take the same direction like water, therefore, recognising the diversity and self-determination of people. This means working *with* not *for* people, engaging them in active and full participation, respecting and utilising their diversity, as advocated by Mamphiswa and Noyoo (2000:21–32).

In PCA, the quality of the helping relationship is regarded as vital (proposition 17). The relationship is the context for growth and change. PCA implies that because every person experiences his/her world uniquely, one can only understand that which another person experiences from his or her frame of reference (proposition 7). That is to say, if that person shares his or her experience. The Tshivenda idiom: *Tibu ndi khali, tsha mbiluni ya munwe a tshi tibulwi*, literally means: “the lid of a cooking pot can be lifted to see what is inside, but what is in a person’s heart can only be uncovered by that person”



(van Warmelo 1937:260). “Only the individual who has experienced a particular situation knows what it is like” *Mollo o fisa baori* (Setswana)/*Ndilo ohisa batsami* (Xitsonga): “only the person exposed to the fire can tell how hot it is”.

The PCA assumption that people want to, and have, the potential to change is based on the PCA principle that an organism has a basic tendency and striving to actualise, maintain and enhance itself comes to life with the Northern Sotho idiom *Kodumela moepathutse ga go lehumo le le tšwago kgauswi*. This literally means that people dig for what they want, irrespective of how hard the ground is (propositions 4, 5 and 6).

In teaching the Rogerian concept of *empathy*, we find many African students initially saying that it is incompatible with their culture, that responsive listening is not effective. They find it difficult to translate the messages that contain verbal skill into the African languages. Very few words feature in those languages, and yet, African languages are rich in idioms and metaphors that can be used to convey understanding, for example: A woman from a rural village complained to the worker that her husband drank home brew over weekends. He spent all his money and now they had no money for food and there were five children to care for. He had chased her and the child out of the house. The woman, under difficult circumstances, assumed total responsibility for taking care of children. An effective response was *Mmangwana o tshwara thipa ka bogaleng*: “you are holding the knife by the blade” (Wildervanck 1989).

5.3 Teaching and learning about the principles and process of participatory development

Most of the principles for development that people (like Swanepoel 1997) outline can be illustrated with the following idioms:

- *Human orientation or people-centredness*. The principle that development is primarily about people can be better understood with “*Feta kgomo o tshware motho*” (Northern Sotho): pass the cow and embrace the person; not the object or product. The person is most important.
- *Collective action and participation*. In communal life, co-operation and mutuality are central to *Ubuntu*. There are many idioms which explain this fundamental principle of participatory development, such as:

Izandla ziyagezana (isiZulu): “helping one another”.



Kgetse ya tsie e kgonwa ka go tshwaraganelwa a Setswana idiom, translates as: “a bag of locusts is more easily carried by more than one person”. The embedded meaning is that collective effort is more likely to yield better results.

Sedikwa ke ntšwa-pedi ga se thata, a Setswana idiom says: “that which is attacked by two dogs is rendered powerless”. A problem can be easily resolved if tackled collectively.

Tau tša hloka seboka di šitwa ke nare e hlotša: “Lions acting collectively will not feed on an injured buffalo” (Northern Sotho).

- *Empowerment through collective action*. The idiom: *Nwana hu ̣a a lilaho* (Tshivenda) suggests that it is the child who cries that is given food to eat. A different translation is “the child who does not cry, is not given food to eat and dies on the back of his mother”, means that everyone should have the opportunity to voice their need.

Umntwana ongakhali ufela embelekweni, (isiZulu) provides understanding of the power of having voice and being heard.

- *Ownership*. *Gert erf; Gert swerf* (Afrikaans) literally means that inheritance is easily squandered. This encourages participation which translates into responsible ownership and added value, and “*Monono ke mohudi, ke mouwane*” (Southern Sotho) illustrates that what we get easily dissipates with ease because of lack of ownership and responsibility.

Naka tsa go rweswa ga dikgomarele hlogo: “you cannot stick horns of one cow on another” (Northern Sotho), also illustrates that ownership cannot be handed over but must develop from within.

- *Learning*. *Maithuti ga se makgona makgona ke maboeletša*. This is consistent with Korten’s idea of embracing error so that we learn from our mistakes.
- *Self-reliance*. *Mphe, mphe, e ya lapisa, motho o kgonwa ke sa gagwe*, (Setswana) advises that begging is a bother, it is better to be self-reliant.

Nonyana e sa itsheleng e bola sekhwejana: people who are dependent and not eager to work for themselves and only rely on others will starve once the help is withdrawn. This also illustrates the futility of the top-down approach as opposed to a participatory one.



We know there are many more idioms waiting to be uncovered which will increase the understanding of other concepts such as adaptiveness, release not relief, and sustainability.

5.4 Stories from the community: discovering knowledge and wisdom in the community

The students were asked to identify a woman from their community who makes a difference in her community. This assignment encouraged the students to learn about and appreciate people within their communities. To stress concepts such as people are knowledgeable, capable, strive for actualisation, and are self determined, an assignment was set to bring ideas home.

The following extract demonstrates some of the discoveries made by the students. This story was told by one of the students.

Her name is Mrs M. She is 46 years old. She lives at Malukazi squatter camp. Her highest standard of education is Grade 6.

Mrs M is a domestic worker. Her husband died ten years ago. She has four children, three daughters and a son. She originally came from the rural areas of KwaDumisa in the southern part of KwaZulu-Natal.

When Mrs M started working she used to have many problems concerning the use of the English language. Every afternoon, after work, she used to go to the children nearby who were schooling to borrow English books to read. The books that helped her a lot were those from Grade 2 and 3.

Another problem that she faced was poor housing conditions. Most of the houses in the squatter camp were made of mud and others were made of cardboard. One summer when it rained the house next to hers fell down. Two children were killed instantly and the others were in a serious condition in the hospital.

The incident served as a wake-up call to Mrs M. She could not sleep at night thinking about what she could do to prevent this. She came to the conclusion that the only way to prevent this was to build brick houses.

She decided to raise this topic when they gathered at the end of the month to pay their *stokvel* money. Mrs M suggested that they all contribute an extra five rand each month. This money could be used to buy material for making



bricks. They decided to tell their husbands about their plans before they started as they regarded their husbands as the head of the families.

At the following month-end meeting, almost all the women gave positive feedback about the matter. They then planned a meeting where both men and women would be present. The women told the men about what they had planned and asked if they could contribute any ideas. It became evident that most of the men who were not employed had brick-making skills. The working men decided to contribute a further ten rand each.

They realised that the money that they were collecting at the end of every month would not be enough to buy the tools needed for making the bricks. Most of the families had ordinary tools such as spades. They had to buy a brick/block maker which was very expensive. Mrs M was very disappointed.

One day when she was cleaning up the garage at her workplace, she came across this tool and she said to herself. "Is this really what I think it is?". Before she mentioned this to her employer, his wife asked her to clean the garage because she was buying a new car. She told her to take the contents home or throw them away.

In Zulu, when a person does not know what to say because of shock they say, "*Ubindwe yisidwa*". She stood there, where she was washing dishes, with a plate in her hand, shivering.

That afternoon she went straight home. When she got there she went to the owner of a nearby *spaza* shop and asked if he could help her bring some of the things to her home.

A special meeting was called where she told the women the good news. They took the money they had collected and bought cement. They did not have to worry about the sand, they collected it from the nearby river.

Fifteen families joined the project. Some community members looked down on this group and said, "They think they can do what government had failed to do."

Three thousand blocks were made and were divided among the 15 families to build two-roomed houses. The families have strong houses and they no longer get anxious during rainy days. More members have participated in the programme after seeing the progress they had made.



The money that they now collect with their *stokvel* helps them to buy uniforms for their children and to pay school fees.

The feedback of a few of the students capture their experiences of interviewing these outstanding initiatives they discovered in their communities' women.

One's hope in humanity is restored. I felt privileged to have interviewed Mrs S. I have experienced growth and learnt so much about others and myself (Scott-Miller).

To talk to someone who has committed her life to serving the community was challenging and empowering (Maseko).

It enabled me to understand the extent to which unemployed people can contribute to society, you do not have to have money to contribute to the community (Mabena).

6 CONCLUSION

Perhaps the process of indigenisation needs to be seen as the interaction between the exotic and the indigenous. Perhaps it starts by becoming aware of that which is our own. Indigenisation will be fostered if trainers were to approach students with an appreciation of how much the students already know, and with their (the trainer's theories and knowledge) help the students to structure their informal knowledge into awareness or symbolisation. Catherine Bateson (1994:205) writes that such recognition of existing knowledge feels like a glorious game or profound validation, as Semanya (2001) indicated:

Our experience in teaching has been enriching. Learning from those who have come to be taught has been profitable in many ways. Through using idioms, knowledge and information are symbolised and internalised, and theory owned. Students experience affirmation and recognition, become animated and extremely involved. They connect in a new way as they re-collect and remember.

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