

## **LEARNING AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

### **1. Learning:**

Contemporary studies of learning distinguish between formal learning (whether in educational establishments or outside such contexts, i.e. non-formal learning) and informal learning, all that everyday unconscious learning which everyone does through social interaction and experience. The primary distinction is between *intentional* learning (planned, purposeful, conscious, with standardised and measurable knowledge and skills) and *unintentional* learning which results in tacit funds of knowledge and banks of skills of which we are not aware but which we use to negotiate life and exercise livelihoods. The importance of informal learning lies in the fact that it creates hidden but usable knowledge and skills, knowledge and skills which the learner, being unconscious of them, may even deny.

It is important also to distinguish between the intention of the 'provider' or 'sponsor' of learning and the intention of the learner. There are many forms of learning which are intentional on the part of the provider but not the learner - advertisements, health campaigns are two examples of such forms of learning.

However, formal and informal, intentional and unintentional learning are not to be seen as discrete entities but as elements within any learning event. They may be viewed as the opposite ends of a continuum, with most learning falling between these extreme points as hybrid forms of learning. All forms of formal and non-formal learning contain within them some informal (unconscious) elements, while most forms of informal learning contain some formal elements such as scaffolding and can result in some conscious or semi-conscious knowledge and new skills. The distinction, while useful as a way of analysing learning, must not hide the nature of what might be called 'the chaos of learning'.

This is particularly true of indigenous learning - or learning among indigenous peoples - for here the integration of formal elements and informal elements appear most fully. We are here speaking of what might be called 'indigenous forms of learning', distinguishable from the formal schooling which has been introduced into most indigenous communities in relatively recent years.

### **2. Three routes to learning in indigenous communities**

I am here concerned not so much with what is learned in indigenous learning - for this will vary from people to people - the diversity of indigenous learning must not be hidden while considering some common elements in the processes of indigenous learning.

I would wish to distinguish between what I would call three routes to learning in indigenous communities - learning through

- a) indigenous learning systems
- b) experiential learning
- c) peer learning

a) *Indigenous learning systems*: all indigenous peoples have over the years developed shared systems by which common knowledge and practices are passed from one generation to another. While there may be common elements, these are always unique to that community.

Indigenous learning is always *social*; although the learner learns individually, it is always within a social context, and through social interactions, whether structured or unstructured.

Such systems are almost always *oral* - they consist of instruction, stories, games, riddles and proverbs, songs, all regularly repeated time and again until absorbed into the identity of the learner; their focus is on 'this is the people we are'. Moses, when instructing his people to pass on the rules and customs of the people he was creating from disparate tribes, told them: "*You shall teach these things repeatedly to your children, speaking to them when you sit at home and when you travel on the way, when you lie down and when you rise*". The very language used, the discourses and genres employed are all vehicles of learning from one generation to another.

But the modes of learning extend beyond the oral. Indigenous learning is also *visual*, *tactile* and *kinaesthetic*. Many indigenous groups use symbols and pictures (Australian aboriginals; the San people), and dress is an instrument of learning. Most use some form of dance. Learning too is embodied in *artefacts*: as Joshua commanded his people as they crossed the river Jordan into their Promised Land:

"Take you hence out of the midst of Jordan ... twelve stones, and ye shall carry them over with you and leave them in the lodging place where ye shall lodge this night ... That this may be a sign among you, that when your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, What mean ye by these stones? Then ye shall answer them, ..."

Meanings are created by discussion among the group of these artefacts and social practices. Ritual meals and regular celebrations serve the same purpose - to pass on knowledge of identities. Scaffolding is used to embed the learning into the semi-consciousness of the learner.

Indigenous learning is *embodied* learning - it involves the whole person, the senses and the mind. It is not solely cognitive. Unlike Western rationalism, the emotions play a large part in indigenous learning. Indeed in many cases, the body itself is marked as a tool of learning - for example, hair forms or bodily marking, including circumcision and female genital mutilation. These markings are social, common to a group, with shared meanings, rather than personal to each learner.

It is *tactile* - the learner learns with her or his whole body. Learning traditional forms of herding, for example, will involve the sight and the smell and the touch of the animals.

Indigenous learning is also *locational* - the learner knows (almost instinctively but it is learned instinct) where she or he is. Subtle changes in noise or scents carry meanings which have been learned; even silence, whatever is unusual, implies something significant.

It is almost always deeply *spiritual* - an acceptance of unknown and unknowable forces at work on the common shared life.

In addition to such shared 'learning systems' which have been built up over many generations, somewhat more formal approaches to learning form part of many indigenous learning systems, especially *apprenticeships* - learning contexts in which the learner practices under sympathetic supervision. Most skills are learned either in the family context or through apprenticeships.

#### *The limitations of indigenous learning systems*

On the whole, indigenous learning tends to be resistant to change - it emphasises 'the right way(s)' [i.e. the traditional way(s)] of doing something. Change, if it occurs at all, is very slow. ILSs do not usually promote what is called in other contexts 'critical reflection', experimentation, trial and error: for these elements of learning, however, there is the second route to learning.

#### *b) Unintended learning from experience*

Many would call the kinds of learning involved in indigenous learning systems 'experiential', in that it creates intentionally experience for the learner through which learning comes about. It is learning by doing. This is intentional learning on the part of the 'teacher' and much (but not all) is intentional on the part of the learner.

But in all indigenous communities, there is much unintentional learning from experience. And that experience is of course situated, socio-culturally constructed, localised - it is not universalised. But it is not static - indigenous learning systems have always been changing, even if in most cases very slowly.

For every context is changing. We all inhabit a world of change, a universe where both chaos and order exist in multiple combinations. And indigenous peoples are much more aware of their changing environments than most other peoples.

Drought, floods, earthquakes are among the changes which call inevitably for adaptations to indigenous learning systems. Conflict, on a small or large scale, too imposes the need for change, for revisions of meanings as well as practices. Epidemics, both large scale such as HIV/AIDS and e-bola, and small-scale, both human and animal, will create new routes to learning, even without outside interventions.

Contact with non-indigenous peoples and practices also bring with it much learning. All indigenous peoples now have contact with 'the outside world', and especially the global media, leading to new aspirations. The way in which most indigenous peoples have adopted some modern technologies such as the mobile phone is an example of non-traditional learning. The different mixtures of adoption and resistance all form part of indigenous learning.

Modern studies of experiential learning are challenging the view that learning follows experience through critical reflection; they are exploring ways in which learning is

embodied in the experience itself. In looking at what indigenous peoples bring to our understandings of 'learning', this would seem to be a more comprehensive analysis of indigenous learning.

### **3. Peer learning**

It would seem that in most, if not all, indigenous peoples, there is a third route to learning. In most indigenous communities, young people always seem to gather together, to exchange experiences and views, to play games, to explore new roles, and to create for themselves a new group identity in relation to their older relations. Inter-generational rivalries (to put it no higher) will on occasion call for new learning among both younger and older people.

In many indigenous peoples, the younger generation are learning quickly to adapt to outside influences such as social media - and distancing themselves from both the older generations and from the traditional knowledges which they represent; but also (as several examples show) some of the younger generations are using their more modern ways of learning to defend their indigenous identities and cultures.

### **Conclusion**

Indigenous learning - among both men and women - is a combination of both non-formal and informal learning; it is both in part intentional and conscious and in part unintentional and unconscious. Helping indigenous peoples to uncover what is tacit, both what is learned and how it has been learned, may create new opportunities for learning, not only to help cope with change but to empower indigenous peoples (both communally and individually) to take more control over their own development.

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29 December 2016  
1500 words