

**An Essay in Culture, Society,  
Education  
&  
Vocational Training**

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**Abstract:**

In many developing countries it is apparent that there are multifarious impediments associated with, and acting upon, educational development and the complexity of diverse socio-cultural landscapes. Indeed, numerous perspectives tend to be overlooked or possibly not even taken under consideration when it comes to the transmission of salient knowledge.

While national governments clearly need to rationalize and readapt their education systems in many critical areas, it is crucial that they pay particular attention to that of skills training as it is now more than ever coming to the forefront as a essential requirement for any progress in addressing the impacts of economic globalization.

International organizations working in different fields of development can play a significant role in this transition through implementing high quality training courses, workshops, presentations and other essential educational components.

However, when exploring some of the approaches applied in educating nationals as utilized and implemented by developmental organizations it is not difficult to notice why they often fail to disseminate knowledge in its variety of forms. These issues need to be studied in greater detail with a view to improving what can only be described as fairly inadequate attempts to enlighten populations.

What follows highlights an example of a typical instructional approach which is common place in developmental education and one that evidentially fails to deliver its intended outcomes. This inquiry also shows that there is little attention paid to socio-cultural dimensions, not only from a transmission point of view, but also from what would appear to be predetermined attitudes intrinsic to this form of methodology.

Further considerations are given to the fact that there are dissimilarities between cultures and how they recognize and interpret the world they live in. Knowing that this factor is often challenging to transcend, this study offers possible deliberations related to human similarities and temperaments that may help to blend and balance the differences for the benefit of educational development. These deliberations take into account that all human beings have traits that go beyond socio-cultural barriers and also propose that there can be assimilations between these characteristics.

Additionally, it highlights the fact that many agencies are offering skills trainings that are attempting to create improved working conditions for the most vulnerable members of these developing societies but are falling short of reaching their intended goals either by failing to identify key factors in the relationship or not fully understanding the rudimentary conditions inherent within specific areas of trade expertise relative to educationally underdeveloped participants. Furthermore, it is difficult to see how this situation can progress even if the skills are imparted if there are no provisions for business creation built into the training or after support for those trainees who have identified outlets for their specific skill.

## **A Typical Model:**

**Whilst studying teaching and training methodologies under diverse conditions in developing countries there is always cause to consider, what is actually occurring from a teacher/trainer, and audience perspective. Under examination, it is not surprising that many of the national spectators seem to be bewildered by the array of facts, figures and other knowledge, and how it is being communicated for their intellectual consumption. When interviewed from an objective stand point, many participants willingly point out that they have not understood either part, or most of it.**

**The following reasons for this condition were highlighted by participants on numerous occasions.**

- **There has been an assumption that people would instantly understand.**
- **Starting at the wrong level of audience comprehension.**
- **Critical parts not described properly. What is an Aim? What is an Objective? (Presumed to already know)**
- **Key words (What is a key word?)**
- **Communications problems. (Can't hear, can't see, can't take part)**
- **Language difficulties. (Picking up some words but when put together have a completely different meaning)**
- **Understanding the words but not the context.**
- **Understanding the context but not the words.**
- **Translator embellishing or under-stating.**
- **Translators not understanding but making it up as they go along.**
- **Translations totally different from what was stated.**
- **Translation of words. (Other interpretations of what the word means)**
- **The delivery style extremely lackluster.**

**Other interesting factors observed were;**

- **Reams of black fonts passing by on a white screen that disappear never to be seen again. (Usually not translated)**
- **Handouts that say the same but a little more permanent. (Meaningless, if participants do not understand the content and context in the first place.)**
- **There would also seem to be confusion between plain English and "political correctness" as this is best understood from a developed and historically imbedded perspective! (Confusing the audience)**
- **Knowledge is often surrounded by other forms of information and if this is not known then how can people possibly comprehend. (An Egyptian Pyramid is a triangular shaped construct until other knowledge regarding its existence is transferred)**
- **Lack of interactivity between educator and audience.**
- **Teaching environment not conducive with learning requirements.**

**The aforementioned is a rather simplified critical scrutiny of a widely used presentation technique - teacher/trainer/projector/audience - applied by organizations working in developing countries and is questionable for the list of reasons already highlighted. However, the most important features are two that have not been mentioned directly and these are the attitudinal**

and preconceived notions that are woven into the construction and teaching methodology. Predetermined opinions and mind-set are major causes for the failure to transmit knowledge and therefore this would also infer that receiving the same would also be particularly debatable. These factors also permeate a majority of the other educational techniques used by developmental organizations.

In interviews with teachers/trainers they will often say that they don't understand why their audience has forgotten most of what they had been told. There is a presumption here that suggests that they understood in the first place! It should be noted that many of these teachers and trainers have very little background in delivering knowledge as most of them are usually program managers of one category or another. There is also an implied contention that because people hold university degrees, they are also purveyors and distributors of knowledge. This is an extremely questionable assumption.

Nonetheless, and for whatever reason, there is a great deal of time and energy being wasted on information that just falls through the cracks and evaporates into the ether. The foremost negative impact being upon those who desire learning experiences but are having difficulties as there are far too many barriers impeding their route to knowledge or they lack the required skills to take the information on board in the form presented. It should also be stated that many of the deliverers are also extremely disappointed with the unconstructive results while others are convinced they have done a good job! If this is the situation for the more educated in developing societies then any attempt to target those with limited or no education needs to be given a great deal of contemplation.

### **Culture, Society and Preconceptions**

Examining the situation a little closer, it is easy to see some of the primary reasons for this circumstance. Obviously, there has been insufficient or no consideration related to the diversity of the socio-cultural landscape or the innate constraints. Furthermore, it would also appear as if there has been no forethought or understanding as to how different individuals and cultures attain knowledge and assimilate it in all of its diverse forms.

Why this situation is perceived to exist appears to come from an underlying dogmatism, inherent within some international organizations suggesting that; they have preset assumptions regarding levels of education, consider they know better, and presume to be more informed as to what is best for those that they are developing without taking into account the complexity of the issues involved.

There is also an impression that selective acceptance by individuals, groups and agencies play an important role. This suggests that there are perceptions related to traditions and socio-cultural markers in some national features but not in others. Perhaps there may even be some confusion caused by the fact that the aforementioned see various technological artifacts (mobile phones, computers etc) and popular culture (music, dance, art etc) being transferred and taken on board, adapted and readapted with relative ease by various sections within developing nations.

**Nonetheless, this should not be taken as a signal that every echelon or sector appropriate to development is necessarily the same.**

**Culture, Society and the Individual.**

**From a hypothetical perspective there is one fundamental but extremely significant question that must be considered before communicating effectively to a culturally divergent and developing audience.**

**And that is; "Who are individuals"? Especially when considered from a socio-cultural and national perspective.**

**The ramifications of this very straightforward query - if only it were asked in the first place - could possibly have very far reaching consequences for those with preconceived ideas about other cultures and societies.**

**If individuals or national collectives do not really know why they think and act the way they do - how can they possibly presume to know how other cultures and societies think and act the way they do? And if this is so, how can they make judgments on the behalf of others. This is particularly important when it comes to the transmission of knowledge as was highlighted previously.**

**So, "who are these individuals"? - Why do individuals think and act the way they do? And what colored their reasoning and other socio-cultural aspects that have made them what they are?**

**In short, individuals are the result of all of the influences that have fashioned their existence from birth up to their present time. This state of being is a very sophisticated and complex entity. Culture, sub-culture, individual identity and social being have systemic relationships with other members of the nationally recognized characteristics. For the most part, they have passed through similar and established civilizing systems prescribed and approved in one way or another by socio-cultural and historical casting. Family, the rituals of birth, marriage, death, governmental institutions and educational systems, political affiliations, individual/s that have made an impression and so forth, have all played a part in the expression of "who" they are.**

**Given that this is the rationale, then it should be understood that other cultures and societies reason and conduct themselves differently because they too have been molded by national and communal ways of thinking and acting that have constructed their outlook and the way they perceive the world in concordance with their own particular socio-cultural and historical mindset. These are expression of "who" they are.**

**Ways of looking at and understanding the world manifests itself not only through obvious forms like attitudes, mannerisms, traditional arts and crafts, but also at more subtle levels. To explain this, at least in part, the following example will show that although cultures are to some extent proceeding or having to proceed in the same general direction as dictated by globalization and other significant factors we have different perspectives on how we might actually get there.**

While in one particular country, when foreigners solicit directions from the local population regarding a location where they want to get to. The locals generally see the perspective from the place the enquirer wants to be and working backwards. Not from where the enquirer is actually standing. It is therefore not surprising that many can end up in the wrong place most of the time.

In order to conceptualize how to get to the desired destination the enquirer would have had to think about everything in reverse. North was south - south was north - west was east - east was west - left was right and right was left. Here we have one very simple example that can lead to total confusion and misunderstanding so it is well worth considering how this unfolds at differing levels in the cultural landscape and then reflect on all of the other societies in relation to their ways of thinking- including the developed as perceived through developing eyes!

This is not to say that the mind set is wrong and needs to be readapted in line with what most people would assume, but merely to state that it is different. Additionally, what makes this even more confusing is the fact that some are already readapting their view and do see the same perspective and this implies that there are two possibilities as to which is right or right - not wrong.

#### **Institutional Perceptions and the Applications of Predetermined Models:**

There can be no doubt that the socio-cultural systems within different nations are developing at various rates with some key institutions being more developed than others. While this condition has its own inherent problems the impact that developmental models has upon a countries institution or population will very much depend on;

- the model being transferred,
- who is transferring it,
- institutional interpretations of the transferring country that are subject to socio-cultural perceptions,
- institutional interpretations of the recipient country that are also subject to socio-cultural perceptions,
- how they are actually put into practice,
- and by whom.

Can you simply take a system from one culture and deposit it upon another? Not without due consideration for all the socio-cultural dimensions that it will impact upon or have to respond to.

What has this got to do with education and training? Evidently, it has quite a lot to do with knowledge transfer especially in particular areas of interest like Vocational Education and Training. Take for instance, a standard model for educational development transferred to an evolving country was based solely upon a purely behaviorist model. Then the transfer would almost certainly be wholly academic in its dissemination. If the said developing country applies this same approach to a vocationally based education (constructivist) then it is out of synchronization with learning by

involvement. Again, if a developing country utilizes this method of learning in schools that are specifically assigned for integrating vocational education then there are bound to be disparities in the learning processes, especially when students have diverse learning styles.

Furthermore, there are many instances of this situation existing in developing countries. Teachers, and to some extent trainers, are using academic methods to inform students with very little or limited constructivist techniques being employed, and if there are, they are for the most part being passively applied. It is therefore not surprising that there is a shortage of skilled youths entering the workforce as it is impossible to become skilled in many facets of VET if the learners have had very limited opportunities to acquire hands-on training for one reason or another.

**What is the way forward?**

To begin with it should already be known that differing cultures have various ways of seeing and understanding the world they live within. However, if these same cultures and societies have to bend to the forces that are changing the shape of their perspectives, from a globalization point of view, then this implies that there must be a blending and balancing of key conceptual models that can make this transition process attainable and sustainable

In relation to Vocational Education and Training there are two key elements that need to be considered from a socio-cultural point of view;

1. Preconceived opinions, ideas and the models that are used to transfer knowledge between societies and cultures need to be examined more closely with a view to either improving them or in some cases changing them altogether.
2. How the responding societies and cultures, or part thereof, are able to take this knowledge on board and assimilate it for their benefit.

The first element has already been dealt with, albeit not at any great length, and moreover, it is essentially up to the many organizations that are now working in the field of development to give this situation serious thought. This in itself would perhaps create a more enlightened viewpoint if it was made a conditional part of their workforces training so that it acts as an informative medium for positive change. Personal and collective understanding as to the influences that has created diverse ways of thinking and acting are fundamental to comprehending other socio-cultural landscapes and visa versa.

The second element will be dealt with in a little more detail but it should be noted that this is purely from an observational perspective and is wide open to conjecture as there has not been sufficient collaborative research completed in this particular field. Nonetheless, what follows makes some very interesting points.

Having raised this line of reasoning; that societies and cultures have very many differences and are much more complex than some might suppose it suggests that individuals and organizations must utilize those similarities

that are inherent within all cultures as a medium for the transmission of knowledge. Here is possibly where the constructivist methodology has the upper-hand on behaviorist techniques. In the words of an old Chinese saying;

Tell me - I forget.

Show me - I remember.

Involve me - I understand.

These are particularly poignant words especially in relation to VET as they make the point that understanding follows on from seeing and doing. We can also conclude that similarities like the senses and emotions are not unique to any one particular civilization. The five classical senses being; sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch whilst there are very many human emotions. They are in fact the key essential traits that cross the multicultural divide and are utilized for many purposes by all of humanity.

As a truism and there is no reason to suppose that it is not, then these same senses and emotions can be/are key components in facilitating the progress and quality of knowledge transfer in Vocational Education and Training to culturally diverse nations.

While it is stating the obvious when saying that the aforementioned human attributes are the foundation stones of learning it is therefore possible to assert that particular traits or combinations are used to varying degrees across many diverse skills sectors. Indeed, and quite clearly, some are much more dominant than others depending on the skills requirement.

- Mechanics: sound, smell, vision and touch.
- Welding: vision, hand-eye coordination.
- Bakers: vision, smell and touch.

The point here is that when teaching any skills there should be much more use made of these factors. In the case of the mechanic; smell, touch and color of different oils - color of exhaust gases - smell of brakes and clutch burning - touching brake drums for over-heating - listening to the engine and other parts - can all add to their overall knowledge of the trade and is particularly useful in fault analysis.

It also reasonable to suppose; that these should also be combined and weighted with other human qualities relating to how individuals learn.

**Learning Styles:**

According to some theoretical models knowledge is assimilated in different ways by individuals and although they are not precise these archetypes do have some merit in identifying learning styles. By targeting these styles that are relative to identifiable sense requirements for individual skills it may/will be possible to refine the selection process, which will better recognize individual qualities in accordance with different skill prerequisites.



Without going into any meticulous detail regarding various representations dealing with learning styles, the Honey & Mumford model will suffice in highlighting this specific line of thought. The model contents that there are four identifiable learning styles and these are; Activist, Reflector, Pragmatists and Theorists. If these learning styles, senses and emotions can be shown to be interrelated with explicit skills, at least in part, then individuals will have a better idea as to which direction they should or want to go.

The following three examples will help to highlight this conjecture.

#### **Welding & Fabrication:**

- Dominant Learning styles: Activist, Pragmatist. (Combination)
- Dominant senses; hand eye coordination and concentration. (others in this group could include; plastering, painting & decorating but to a lesser extent)
- Activists; like to get into doing hands-on work and learn better through practical application.
- Needs a lot of practice to become proficient.
- Requires re-practicing if not used for a long time.
- Requires multiple techniques, multiple settings, multi-positional and has many variations.
- Knowledge can be either fairly straight forward or extremely complex and technical.
- Pragmatist; like to see how to put things into practice in the real world.
- Fabrication requires visualization of the finished product.
- Materials are many and still being developed.
- Moving forward in some areas but static in others.

#### **Motor Mechanics:**

- Dominant learning styles: Reflector, Activist. (Combination)
- Dominant Senses: Sight, sound and smell.
- Reflectors; like to think about what happened.
- Activists; like to get into doing hands-on work and learn better through practical application.
- Knowledge.
- Systems and fault analysis
- Unit changing.
- Still developing more complex systems. (computerized management systems)
- Moving forward but slower than computers.

#### **Computers:**

- Dominant learning styles: Theorist.
- Dominant senses: Visual and emotional.
- Theorists; need to know the background theory and prefer to work with models and facts.
- Knowledge.
- Logical systems
- Systems and fault analysis.
- Problem solving.

- Still developing more complex systems.
- Moving forward at a very fast pace.

While sense, emotions, learning styles may add further dimensions to the educational experience there are still major obstacles to overcome that are associated with individual knowledge and abilities prior to undertaking any skills based training program.

#### **Educational Limitations and Underdevelopment.**

From observations in VET institutions in developing countries it is clear that very many students are underdeveloped in key areas. Reading, writing, arithmetic, problem solving, lateral thinking, form and function, speed, time, and distance and so on. If this is not dealt with beyond the formal learning experience in any skills training program developed for youth and adults with limited education it will act as a huge barrier to any perceived outcomes that might have been envisaged in the first instance. There is no doubt that institutionally, organizations can't step backwards at this late stage but it is/may be possible to try and deal with the most critical requirements in specific skills areas.

For example;

- When training individuals to paint they will also need to know how to work out areas so that they can estimate their needs to do a particular job.
- A trainee in woodwork needs to know how to work out angles etc if he/she is asked to make a set of stairs.
- Welders and fabricators like woodworkers need to understand measurements for the same reasons.
- Bakers need to measure out quantities, temperature and time limits etc.
- Bricklayers need to know how to use a measuring tape, square, plumb line, trowel and spirit level.

Irrespective of the diversity of trade sectors there is a fundamental need for further knowledge that enhances expertise and if this is not imparted during trainings then it will act as an impediment for future personal growth. It is possible that; if some individuals are given the opportunity to enroll in training courses, participants will also be eager to learn beyond the time limits as set out in the formal part of the program. Tributary learning is one such method of achieving this and has already been successfully employed by highly respected institutions.

For any trade/skill there can be specific tributaries written to deal with pertinent areas that are critical for background knowledge and this should be implemented in a form that is more readily understood by trainees with limited education. Use of pictures instead of reams of words etc, which can be further reinforced through real life examples.

Tricks of the trade are another form of knowledge that should be imparted, for instance;

- hammering the point of a nail so that it will not split the wood,
- tapping a paint brush against the side of the paint pot to prevent paint from dripping from the brush,
- wrapping the earth wire around a pipe to avoid magnetic arc pull in electric welding,
- wetting hardboard before applying so that when it dries it tightens and has a flat finish.

There are many more specific to particular skills sectors.

#### **Employability and Business Creation:**

However, even if it is possible to get quality results through education and training there is very few employment opportunities for newly skilled trainees. This is why training programs must/should also introduce an entrepreneurial component albeit at a fairly primary level in the timeframes allocated. If there is deficiency of employment opportunities then it follows that it must be created. It is also obvious that institutions can not just give people training skills and expect them to take it from there. This is asking too much of the target groups in question.

Basic business acumen needs to be woven into the fabric of the course so that the relationships between commerce and training become abundantly clear to the participants. There is also a need for support mechanisms for trainees who have the astuteness to find possible business niches or create their own. From an organizational point of view this could be achieved by utilizing an enterprise workshop attached to the training centre, while it would also be judicious to set-up enterprise zones by local government to stimulate and nurture potential and local initiatives.

Established business, communities, local government ministries, educational establishments, trade unions, representatives of the target groups, and other entities need to be included in the overall scenario as their contribution will have very important consequences in relation to the inputs and outcomes from the training establishments. Organizations need to forge strong links with all of these bodies, not only ensure that they aware of the objectives but also to improve relations, knowledge, communications and the possibility of physical work related outputs and interactions between all the affiliates.

#### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, evidently there are numerous barriers that need to be overcome. Standard teaching and training models that are broadly utilized by many organizations should be revisited with a view to readapting both the style of delivery and appreciation of how various cultures view the world, absorb and assimilate knowledge.

Preconceptions and intransigence that is inherent in many aspects of development, not only on the part of the organizations and individuals transferring knowledge in whatever form, but also on behalf of the

recipients, needs to be addressed. These are serious barriers to any progress.

More attention needs to be paid to the societal aspects so that there is a better understanding of who people are and how they have reached this point in their own personal development. By understanding these factors it will give an improved and more flexible insight into other ethnic viewpoints, mannerisms, reasoning processes, belief systems and other salient characteristics that are embodied in diverse forms of socio-cultural realities.

Through highlighting the similarities between nations and the inhabitants thereof, it not only adds to understanding, but can also be integrated into learning models and experiences.

There is a tendency to apply behaviorist or adapted versions of this model in areas where it would be much more appropriate to use constructivist methodologies. Passive learning can not and does not work in many instances, especially when transferring skills, as there are many ways in which people learn and this needs serious consideration for the benefit of those that most need it.

Evidently, there needs to be a better appreciation of the target groups in question through gauging their pre-training limitations and adapting best practices given the known constraints. There is not a lot of point in creating training programs and modules that will leave the participants somewhere between becoming partially skilled and actually attaining long term benefits.

If the expectation is that individuals may eventually identify business opportunities then they will need much more knowledge than what seems to be on offer.

Knowledge does not infer that there is wisdom as this is gained through experience, which would suggest that organizations should try to infuse as many experiences as is possible in training courses to give participants any chance in succeeding.

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