

Which farmers first?

Power and resilience in learning for agriculture and development

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Introduction

This brief essay is intended to stimulate our discussion at the workshop, and has not been thoroughly researched, referenced or reviewed as an article. Please consider it a rough think-piece for discussion. My question is whether and how alternative, change-oriented approaches to education for people working in agriculture and development have succeeded in shifting asymmetrical relations of power and knowledge. How can learning be facilitated in such a way that it contributes to enduring changes in power relations from the individual, household and community levels to wider institutions and societies? Are learners being equipped to engage critically with dominant forms of knowledge, and to participate in discovering and communicating their own meanings? Are the connections between knowledge and power explored in ways that allow educators and learners to shift their own values and behaviours over time?

While there have been many successes with alternative learning programmes, there is also a tendency toward “resilience” or “bouncing back”. Many innovative pedagogical efforts - based on principles of experiential, cyclical and reflective learning - have tended to revert over time to more conventional, content-driven and top-down forms of education. Learners too have often bounced back to familiar ways of being before their educational experience. Here, rather than focusing on barriers in the external environment – e.g. market forces, institutional conventions or prevailing ideologies - I wonder whether we need to look within progressive pedagogies themselves for gaps which may have left these approaches unable to challenge power differences and have left those involved susceptible to re-conformity.

I write from the position of working in a UK-based research and teaching institution, where I do collaborative research on participation and power, facilitate workshops and learning processes, design curriculum, and teach students at the post-graduate level. The students come from around the world and work with NGOs, social movements and government agencies, mostly in the global South and also with Northern development organisations. Some (but not the majority) work in agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and natural resources, but the points raised here are based more broadly on my experiences facilitating learning with activists and professionals working across many sectors and disciplines. It has been seven years since I worked more directly in the milieu of agricultural education and learning with World Neighbors.

Alternative learning approaches

To begin on a positive note, enormous innovations in agricultural and development-related education have occurred in the last two to three decades. Even if these changes have been gradual, have not percolated fully through the system, and have faced institutional resistance, there is an awareness among many educators and trainers of the need for alternatives to conventional, content-driven and “TOT” forms of teaching and learning. As a result of this recognition and shifts in practice, many changes have taken place in the ways in which agricultural scientists, extension workers, rural development workers and farmers are taught or supported to learn what they need to know – be it scientific concepts, process and communication skills, technologies or agricultural methods. How learning is conceived has simply *had* to change in keeping with shifts in how agricultural and development knowledge are themselves understood - including how such knowledge is generated and validated, and how different very kinds of knowledge can be mutually recognised and integrated. The Farmer First workshops, related networks and initiatives have played a huge role in advancing these parallel innovations in both knowledge and learning.

Of course conventional forms of education and training have also persisted - and have often resisted these alternatives - but looking back over the years it is impossible to deny the impact of numerous efforts to innovate in the way learning and teaching is done, or to ignore the difference these initiatives continue to make in many places. A range of progressive educational traditions have contributed their conceptual and practical wares to these approaches, and the traditions have themselves evolved as

their methodologies have been applied to learning and teaching within agriculture and development. A very generalised and incomplete list of important sources and traditions, in no particular order, would have to include:

- adult education
- popular education
- learning process approaches
- reflective learning
- participatory methodologies
- action research and action learning
- experiential learning
- critical pedagogy
- transformational learning
- systems and complexity thinking

Within agriculture an abundance of innovations in learning methods can be found, for example in approaches to participatory technology development, farmer-led research and extension, farmer-to-farmer movements, farmer field schools, and experiments in alternative higher education in places like Wageningen, Hawkesbury, Cornell and many others. While there are important differences within and between these traditions and centres of innovation, most share certain key principles which challenge conventional educational norms. Three principles are particularly worth highlighting:

1. Experience - recognising learners' experiences (both past and potential) as a vital form of knowledge that can be integrated with taught content. Without taking personal experience and interests into account, particularly for adult learners, it is often argued that education will fail. Within agriculture there is particular interest in building on learners' own experiences and knowledge, especially forms of local or indigenous which can enhance or challenge scientific knowledge (although this binary distinction has been rightly questioned as too simplistic).
2. Cycles - facilitating cycles of action, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation. The way these cycles are conceived and practiced varies, but many educators share certain basic intentions to make links between practical and theoretical knowledge, usually through some kind of reflection. Within agricultural research, extension and education there are obvious benefits to encouraging such cycles of experimentation, and many field-based learning programs have been designed successfully around this principle.
3. Reflection - deepening processes of reflection to help learners uncover and interrogate their underlying values, assumptions, ideologies, worldviews, etc. and to become aware of the often hidden foundations of their own and others' perspectives and actions. While reflection and reflective practice take many forms, they are usually connected with an intent to facilitate some degree of personal (or group) consciousness or transformation that is seen as necessary to bring about wider social, political, institutional or systemic change.

These are the building blocks of most alternative learning approaches. Of course many additional dimensions can be found within certain traditions - some shared and some unique to particular approaches. The pedagogical orientation will vary depending upon which theories of change are adhered to, and whether the key leverage points are seen as being primarily ideological, psychological, cultural, systemic, institutional, structural, discursive, rational, technical, spiritual, emotional, etc. (or some combination of these). The attention given to knowledge and power relations also varies, and informs the choice of learning methods. Nonetheless, it's fair to say that many alternative educators and initiatives, regardless of their particular bent, have sought to combine these three key principles in one way or another for progressive change. It's also worth celebrating the fact that much *has* changed for the better in agricultural and development education as a result.

Bouncing back?

At the same time, there has been a tendency toward resilience or "bouncing back" to more conventional ways of learning, knowing and behaving within many programmes and institutions, among educators, and even among learners. Old habits die hard. One could (and probably should) take time here to point to the ways in which educational norms, historical trends, donor agendas,

market and employment pressures, corporate interests, intransigent bureaucracies, and various socially embedded relations of power and knowledge contribute to this *resistance* to progressive educational change. Undoubtedly many forces do come into play in preventing good ideas and practices from starting or from spreading more widely, and cause many worthwhile innovations to wither on the vine. However, I would like to focus here not so much on the “extra-curricular” institutional and ideological sources of resistance; instead, I’m wondering whether there are tendencies toward *resilience* within the alternative pedagogies themselves. What is it about the way that we conceive of and facilitate alternative learning that leaves us with the scope to “bounce back” to some degree to our habitual practices – whether as educators or as learners? Why is it so terribly difficult to shift relations of power and knowledge, even with the very best of pedagogies? Who is really benefiting from the learning, and why does the knowledge, power and interests of some always seem to prevail over others, despite best intentions?

One place to look carefully is the three key principles of experiential, cyclical and reflective learning. In practice, these principles seem to be at their most effective when developing the *cognitive* and *conceptual* abilities of learners to recognise and interrogate dominant models of knowledge – both their own and those of others. The principles provide powerful tools for questioning these models, taking them apart, re-constructing them, or trading them in for entirely new ones based on new values and assumptions. Methods of *conscientisation*, reflective practice, complexity and systems thinking, gender analysis and many other kinds of power analysis are used in this process. The commitment to building on experience and practice is also there, importantly, as a way to complete and renew cycles of learning, and in order to connect life experience with abstract concepts. In short, most alternative learning approaches are brilliant at enabling learners to *think critically* about different ways of seeing and being in the world, to gain fresh perspectives on established norms, and to imagine and practice new ways of thinking and being. But at a certain point they seem to fall short in bringing about deeper learning and enduring changes in relations of power and knowledge, and we all find ourselves “bouncing back” over time.

Beyond the cognitive and conceptual

An idea I would like to explore with others at the workshop is that many (but not all) of the alternative learning approaches used in agriculture and development, largely with adult learners, are still primarily aimed at facilitating *cognitive* and *conceptual* understandings. Many learning cycles, learning loops, transformative learning processes, hierarchies of different kinds of knowledge and intelligences, and other models of reflective and experiential learning, while celebrating diverse ways of learning and knowing, still seem to privilege cognitive and conceptual sense-making as the apex of learning. There are some good reasons for this emphasis, rooted perhaps in Western Enlightenment thinking. But in doing so, we pay insufficient attention to other ways of learning and knowing that may be more embodied, innate, emotional, creative or spiritual in nature. These are aspects of learning that tend to be played down in both conventional and alternative education - particularly in the natural and social sciences (but less so in the arts and humanities). Exceptions can be found in learning approaches like theatre for development, theatre of the oppressed, popular communication, community media, and the like. Many educators, psychologists, neurologists, creative artists, writers and others have also explored these dimensions and their roles in personal development and social change, and it is worth looking at what they may have to offer.

Briefly, and again without adequate research and referencing for now, I would characterise five forms of knowledge, intelligence or learning (here used rather too loosely and inter-changeably) that are worth exploring further. I don’t see these as *replacing* the cognitive and conceptual processes developed in alternative learning approaches, but rather balancing and enhancing them so that relations of power and knowledge can be examined and shifted at deeper, more enduring levels:

1. Embodied knowledge. Life experience and power relations that are internalised, held and expressed at the physiological or somatic level, which can shape our reactions, impulses, sense-making and behaviour, both “positively” and “negatively” depending on our socialised norms and expectations. Connected with our emotional and psychological state of being, and often not easily accessed or shifted through the intellect alone.
2. Innate forms of intelligence. The ability to see patterns, solutions, systems and relationships in an intrinsic manner, often without being able to explain in words what processes, formulae or

sequences of thinking were used. Often mathematical and logical, and sometimes interfered with or shut down when more linear, conceptual models of reasoning are expected of learners.

3. Emotional forms of intelligence. Our abilities to experience, process and handle emotions, to interpret and respond to the emotions of others, and to relate and communicate with other people. A lot of worthwhile work has been done in this area, and it is making its way into primary and secondary education, as well as psychotherapy, but is not present in many of the alternative learning models used in agriculture and development.
4. Creative forms of knowledge. Artistic, creative understanding and expression, that is often not rationalised, conceptualised or verbalised (unless more figuratively). Meanings that are received and communicated visually, through sound, music, movement, touch and other sensory and imaginal experience. Often the temptation is to impose links to conceptual interpretations of this creative knowledge, and its potential to stand alone and to effect changes in knowledge and power is not well recognised.
5. Spiritual knowledge. The ways in which we experience soul, spirit, divinity or other ways of understanding and connecting with life-forces that are beyond rational or scientific explanation. The role of faith-centred epistemologies and other cultural or indigenous imaginaries - and how they may differ from, enhance or contradict natural and social science epistemologies - are rarely addressed explicitly in alternative learning approaches, but could be.

These five areas are not altogether ignored in alternative learning approaches, and innovative examples can be found which do incorporate one or more of them to a degree, sometimes quite successfully, to shift relations of power and knowledge. Examples which come to mind are “theatre of the oppressed”, forms of participatory communication, storytelling and auto-ethnography (particularly from feminist research and pedagogy), methods of gender and power analysis, diverse forms of development communication, citizen and community media, and others. But in the larger scheme of things, there seems to be a contradiction implicit in the mainstream of alternative pedagogical frameworks themselves. The three key principles which form the basis of most alternative learning schemes do not seem to provide enough scope to engage with these other ways of knowing, learning and being (whether critically or constructively) as much as they could. Instead they privilege conceptual and cognitive sense-making as the apex of knowledge within rather linear cycles, systems and hierarchies of learning. As a result, change is usually most evident at the level of consciousness and worldview – for which there is much to celebrate – but does not always penetrate to deeper levels of knowing, being and power.

To conclude, I want to reiterate that this is not an attack on intellectual sense-making, or on cognitive and conceptual learning. I agree with the old adage that “there is nothing so practical as a good theory”, *especially* for challenging relations of power and knowledge. Rather it is a wish to examine what might be missing in our alternative pedagogies if we want these changes to really take root and endure.