



Learning in plural cultural context

Methodological framework for multiple pedagogic practices

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to reconstruct the metaphor of classroom learning in plural cultural context. It underscores the essential complexity of the human learning and argues for multiple pedagogical practices as a tool for instructional engagement.

Design/methodology/approach – Technological innovations have given new meanings and interpretations to the social vocabulary of learning across the world. These innovations have created cultural contexts in which metaphor of classroom learning needs to be revisited and reassessed. It discusses the concept of classroom learning in a humanistic cultural context and explores a methodological framework for multiple pedagogic practices a tool for learning engagement based on critique of divergent themes in pedagogical literature.

Findings – It is argued that classroom learning is a complex microcosm of human bodies, minds and cultures, necessitating major adaptations, both from teachers and learners. It is a continuous engagement, borne out of mutual willingness of teachers and learners to become indivisible part of whole living experience of learning. Classroom as a metaphor of learning would continue to inspire the serious learners, have responded to technological innovations, currently experienced by the human societies across the world, and has gone on to become a “cyber-classroom” in the era of globalization.

Originality/value – The paper highlights underlying cultural complexities of human learning and hence underscores the need for a revised and pluralistic curriculum for the global management education and those who are engaged in it.

Keywords Engagement, Metaphor, Classroom learning, Cultural pluralism, Pedagogic practice, Multiple engagements

Paper type Viewpoint

The metaphor of classroom learning

Classrooms come to exist when two persons enter into a relationship of learning. Learning assumes a uniquely human feature, when man starts to employ language to communicate his myriad experiences in this world. The bulk of human achievements are preserved in and transmitted through the instrument of language (Boyer, 1998). The forms of this elusive tool may express themselves differently; ranging from abstract mathematical equations, visually inspiring geometrical shapes to sensual poetic imageries, eve inspiring mythologies and revelatory discourses of the prophets. As Polanyi (1986) has shown that human infant surpasses other species (e.g. chimpanzees) in learning skills, the moment, he acquires language as an instrument to explore the world and communicate with environment. Therefore, much of human cultural developments happen to be the symbolic configurations of this linguistic skill.

The primary form of learning in the human cultures starts from the infancy (McGovern, 1990; Jusezyk and Hone, 1997). Both, in Eastern and Western societies, parental care and family environment serve as the primary social context



for human learning. Piaget (1967) has termed this as the “sensory-motor stage” of human learning. The child experiences the world through the candid face, voice and hands of mother and father. The experiences of infancy make a physiological imprint, and obviously an indelible one, upon the tender brain of the human child, thus laying the foundations of a permanent consciousness of “a classroom condition” at this earliest stage (McGovern, 1990). Through cognitive internalization, this classroom condition is then transferred to later stages of learning by the humans, in order to adapt to shifting environments and learn significantly from them. The sense of symmetry, space, time orientation and organization in the learning process takes root in the human consciousness from this symbolic “classroom condition”, developed during the informal physiological experiences of infancy (Jusezyk and Hone, 1997). During the earliest cultural conditioning of the human body, a learning habit is acquired (or cultivated) by the human agents that learning is a function of responding to some real environmental states of affairs. He relates to other bodies in the external space and a well delineated setting serve as a sure and secure framework for exploring and learning new skills (Jordan and Brannon, 2006). Some of the deeply held beliefs, values and ideas about the world, reality, self-identity and culture are fashioned within these well organized spaces (Boyer, 1998).

The learning skill as well as its outcomes becomes more complex and multiple when a person enters into the advance circle of learning such as school, college, or university and the world at large. However, “classroom condition” of informal earlier learning settings assumes a more formalized, structured and differentiated form of cultural conditioning. As pointed out by Lorschach and Jink (1999) “student perceptions of the learning environment influence learning behaviors and outcomes that, in turn, become part of the experienced learning environment of self and others”. Therefore, the perception of the classroom as an effective, secure and sure spatial context for learning, generates useful learning behavior among the learners. The environmental conditions of the classroom have a direct bearing upon the learning attitudes of the learners (Ramsey, 1995). Of all the spatial conditions, the bodily interactions of the teachers and students play a noticeable role in communication and exchange of ideas. The communication of a well established bodily behavior by the teacher promotes healthy classroom environment in which learners become physiologically engaged in the learning activity. The teacher must engage his students in culturally valid physical interactions in the classroom, allowing them to express freely and fearlessly (Margo and Scruggs, 2001). The cultivation of a trustworthy physical relationship between the teacher and learners can dissolve the sense of alienation, difference and cultural “otherness” (Nikitah, 2004; Grant, 1984). The classroom, when transformed into a dynamic whole of interacting human physiologies, turns the learning experience into a unified body of oneness; learners and teachers function in a synchronized way. Both teachers and learners need a will to transcend their culturally cognized physiologies, and develop a new classroom physiology, thus forming a singular identity (Margo and Scruggs, 2001). This would cause, instantly the dissolution of the perception of the sense of “otherness” felt by the teachers and students. The physiology of classroom learning depends largely on how different and at times contradictory parts of human bodies are welded together to form a holistic picture of learning sense among all involved partners (Wertheimer, 2004).

The positive classroom physiology is ostensibly, conditioned by bundles of mental attitudes manifested by all partners in learning. Everyone in the classroom comes with his/her own image of learning as well as a cognitive attitude towards the classroom learning environment (Ramsey, 1995). Divergent mental worlds, formed in specific personal parameters come to interact with each other. What would happen to the learning expectations of the individual learners, if their mental worlds and private opinions are questioned and challenged by his fellow learners? How far teacher should intervene or alter the private mental world of the learners. A simple answer would be that teacher has every right to change the mental world of the learners and mould their mental attitudes according to his mental world or he should formulate his mental response depending upon the classroom situation. The answer to this question constitutes a moral choice as well as responsibility on the part of the teacher, which may have tangible social consequences for the human societies. However, a teacher must deeply consider what Festinger and Carlsmith (1987) have termed as the, "cognitive consequences of a forced compliance" to a particular cognitive attitude. The teacher needs to rise above cognitive autocracy or taking a rigid moral posture. This autocratic attitude may unfurl rift and disharmony in the learning environment. The teacher must in advance grasp the complexity of not only intrinsic human psychological differences but also, as Anderson (2003) have shown the inherent complexity of, "neural pathways" in approaching even a uniform mathematical problem in the classroom. The positive classroom learning neuro-psychology must grow out of the independent, self-evident neuro-psychologies of each and every learner in the classroom. Each and every person in the classroom must be pondered carefully by the teacher and integrated into an effective classroom learning mind-set with a sense of enhancing the learning experience for everyone present (Ramsey, 1995; Lockheed and Harris, 1984).

Learning in its various forms involves some sort of shift in human cognitive structures (Piaget, 1967; Boyer, 1998). The classroom learning does it in a more elaborated way. Persons come to the classroom with different and at times contradictory personal values and mental attitudes but are driven by the new classroom environmental conditions, to adapt and adjust to new behavioral patterns. The task of the teacher is to show a path of inquiry, analysis and self-discovery to each and every learner present in the classroom (Margo and Scruggs, 2001). Learners having different cultural selves come to interact with each other and learn certain new cultural ways of doing things and communicating ideas in the classroom settings. The classroom provides a new cultural context for the learners to absorb advance and at times contradictory cultural values from teachers as well as from each other. This micro-cultural reality of the classroom learning experience becomes effective if, it is harmoniously integrated into the macro-cultural world of the school, college or university (Ramsey, 1995). The outcomes of the educational performance largely depend upon purposeful unification of the classroom learning into the broader cultural matrix of the educational institution and the society at large. As Peterson (2002) has commented that, "being able to understand and shape the culture is the key to schools' success in promoting staff and student learning". The ability of the learners in the classroom to absorb new concepts and skills is manifestly influenced by the cultural identities which they bring along themselves into the classroom environment and how these are negotiated with other colleagues. Both teachers and students have to define a new cultural semiotics of, what Lee and Yolanda (2003) have termed as a "shared social reality"

of classroom learning experience. Apart from this, learning attitudes of both learners and teachers are, as contented by Merrill (2004) “constrained by class inequalities in many ways”.

Many years ago the philosopher and educationist John Dewey remarked that education for a society constitutes an activity whereby individuals participate into the, “social consciousness of the race”. This social consciousness starts taking a more formal cultural shape during the classroom learning sessions. Teachers must perform the role of facilitators of learning activity in the classroom (Simplicio, 1999). They should not only engage, as Knowles (2002) has asserted, into the divergent thinking patterns of the learners during the learning sessions, but also translate his pedagogical skills according to the classroom cultural diversities and the broader cultural matrix of the society at large. As a rejoinder, it must be added that this participation into the social consciousness of the race should not be discriminatory and selective, rather a social democratic one, open and fair recognizing the inherent cultural complexities involved and the natural right of each and every human culture to train and educate its young ones according to their peculiar cultural and environmental needs. The human societies across the globe must understand and respect cultural pluralism and pedagogical divergence, while engaging in a particular cultural strategy of learning or training the youth and adults alike. One crucial theme must be cultivated both by teachers and learners alike and that is: respect and teach cultural varieties of human existence. This would lead to create a basis for cultural cognition of diversity and heterogeneity present not only in the classroom learning environment but also evident in the larger social and cultural worlds outside.

The teacher has dual responsibilities of restraining his cultural biases and moderating the student behavior towards learning in the classroom. The teacher must transcend the routine teaching practices, which emphasize conformity, discipline and mannerism as hallmark of teaching competency and instead he should create such classroom culture in which genuine expression of personal freedom and intellectual diversity is accepted as a norm and rule of the learning game for everyone present there (Margo and Scruggs, 2001; Ramsey, 1995). The behavior of the teacher plays a crucial role towards shaping the learning attitudes of the learners. He should demonstrate cultural flexibility in regulating classroom behavioral practices while conducting the learning sessions. The teachers’ attitude of enforcing, coercing, intimidating, and dominating can mar the learning environment as well as learning attitudes of the students during the classroom interactions. This usually happens when the teacher places himself on some high pedestal of infallibility and separates himself from the learners in the classroom. This leads to confrontation and at times rowdyism during the classroom sessions. The teacher must not let himself to be trapped in the illusion of infallibility causing irreversible damage to his pedagogical skills *vis-à-vis* student perception of his teaching competency. He should transform the classroom learning into a lively engagement of mutual exchange and dialogue among the persons present there. He should turn the learning experience into a dramatic, “playfulness” (Mann, 2004) and adopt an attitude of, “poetic not knowing” (Irving and Moffat, 2002) towards the classroom learning sessions. However, he should maintain a regulatory thread helping and facilitating the students to stay focused on the topics of discussion (Ngew and Kong, 2003) and engage them continuously in doing their learning activities such as “lesson study” in an effective way to improve upon their learning indicators (Wilms, 2003).

The outcome of classroom learning can be significantly different, if students are made into partners in the learning activities. When students are made to feel central feature in the learning sessions, their learning performance can be visibly enhanced manifold.

Methodological framework for multiple pedagogic practices

What pedagogical skills are more effective in enhancing the classroom learning experience? There is no simple answer to this question. There may be several factors having an impact on the pedagogical behavior of the teachers while interacting with the learners during the classroom sessions. Among these two are most significant; self-perception and relationship with the other selves in the classroom setting. If the teacher is not fully aware of himself and cognizant of his personal involvement with the learners, he might experience an irreversible breakdown of pedagogical communication in the classroom. This would cause to permeate a learning limbo in the classroom, where no one understands what is happening. In order to avoid this intractable situation, the teacher must cultivate a sound phenomenology of pedagogical skills to communicate with the learner in an effective way. He must step down from the pedestal of infallibility and authority and act like a mortal being ready to amend and learn new habits from one classroom to another. He must grasp the interminable existential complexity of his pedagogical exercises *vis-à-vis* the human beings which he encounters from one classroom space to another. He must rise above his egocentrism and break cultural stereotypes and transform physiological selectivity in the learning activities by posturing himself as what Rogers (1961a, b) termed as a person and perceive also others as complete persons who have a personal involvement in the act of learning and are self-initiated in the process of learning. Once pedagogical phenomenology is correctly established, the teacher can go on to engage the learner in multiple and diverse ways of communicating and learning new skills or analyzing and criticizing the old cognitions in a new perspective. In order to enhance the learning skills of the learners, teacher must question, what Argyris (2004) describes as the, “underlying values and assumptions” of the learners and a classroom environment of trust and worthiness must be established, without which nothing effective and useful can be taught or learnt. For the realization of this objective the teacher must understand the intrinsic complexity of the classroom environment in terms of physiological, neuropsychological and cultural constructions of the learners and employ what can be described as pedagogy of multiple engagements to motivate and integrate the diverse learning appetites of the learners. The theoretical assumptions of this pedagogy are:

- Classroom learning consists of a microcosm of bodies, minds and cultures. It is inherently complex, interdependent and multiple in natures.
- Classroom learning is influenced by the pedagogical phenomenology of trust and mutual worthiness of learners and teachers.
- Classroom learning is most effective when pedagogical infallibility is replaced by pedagogical contingency.

Hereunder are discussed the multiple engagements, based on the above mentioned assumptions to be employed by the teacher as an alternative to the conventional classroom pedagogical methodologies. The relationship and interaction of multiple learning spaces have been shown in Figure 1.

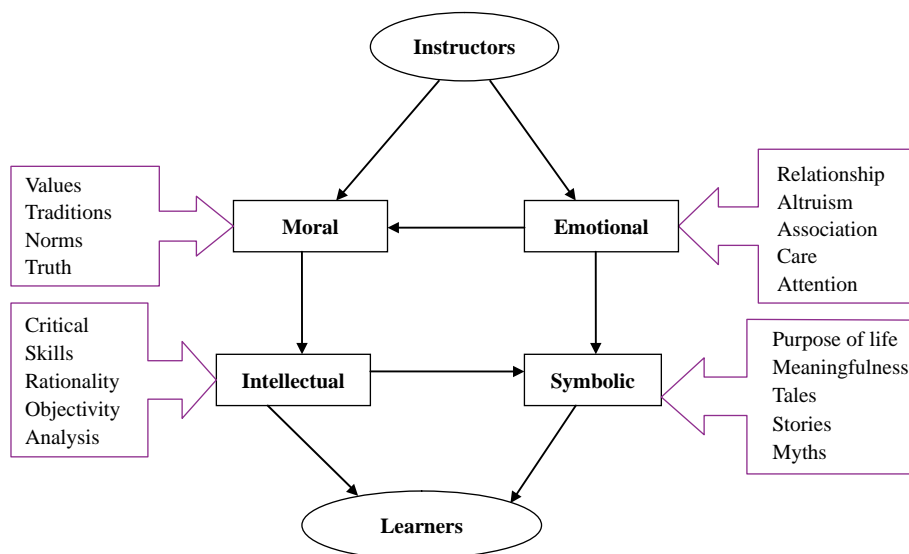


Figure 1.
Multiple pedagogic practice model

Emotional engagement

Teacher must understand the emotional complexity of the classroom environment. Some of the most inspiring teachers of humanity have been people who could emotionally engage their audience. The teachers' ability to engage his audience in the act of pedagogical communication is what constitutes the stuff of an effective teacher. They are not sterile and cold when responding to the emotional dynamism of the people whom they are trying to teach. The learning becomes unique act for each of the learning partners, which is continuously tested and adjusted to the classroom learning needs. The integration of teacher and learner into a single act of learning emotion dissolves what can be termed as Cartesian dualism of cogito experienced both by the learners and teachers. The effective and widely influential teachers in the history of mankind were the people who could reach out to the emotional needs of their audiences and integrate these effectively into their pedagogical discourses. They demonstrate this skill to empathize completely with the emotional divergences of their audience. They use their emotional skills as contended by Callahan (2004) to twist, change, transform and cultivate the emotional energies of their listeners, to reshape the learning emotion from moment to moment. Such emotional versatility can be witnessed in the lives of such great teachers as Socrates, Buddha, Christ and Muhammad, whose teachings are continuously shaping the successive generations of mankind.

Moral engagement

Pedagogical practice requires a consistent moral commitment on the part of the teacher. Teaching constitute a profound moral responsibility, entrusted by the society for the personal and moral development of it young generation. Teacher must develop a clear moral vision and simultaneously be capable of handling the moral diversities of the classroom participants. Attitudes, values and personal beliefs of the students as well as teachers go a long way in not only shaping the ethical culture of the classroom

learning but also the ultimate outcome of the educational process rest upon it. Moral engagement is of crucial significance in any pedagogical practice, with varying degrees of emphasis and shades of preferences. But the enterprise of education as a whole makes no sense if it lacks sound moral foundations. As Hare (1952) puts it very vividly that, the question, “how shall I bring up my children?” is to be faced by every parent, and teacher alike in his life. The bringing up of children demand a moral justification for teaching certain ideas as valid and true while others as wrong. The teacher has a dual responsibility in this regard. He must not use a morally offensive language or indulge into a morally questionable behavior in the classroom interactions as prescribed by the general moral and ethical frameworks of the culture in which he is teaching. He should also take into account the moral complexity of the classroom environment and integrate divergent attitudes and values into the broader moral purposes of the social and cultural institutions of the society. He must enable his students to see the significance of ethical behavior and moral sense behind educational accomplishments. The effective moral training in the classroom learning should prepare the learners to contribute usefully not only to their families and societies in financial and social gains but also become a responsible human being who can respond to the needs of his fellow human beings in times of need. In the age of globalization this has become a very profound question for the survival and growth of human societies. Never before in the history of mankind, have diverse moral philosophies come to encounter each other so violently and influence meetings and interactions in the markets, forums and through media at large. This calls for a moral choice on the part of teachers of management as well as practitioners to understand each others point of view and develop, what Iqbal (1983), termed as, “mutual harmonies” between east and west, between science and religion. The clash of civilization would not augur well for the entire humanity. The respect for alternative moral codes in conducting business and carrying out managerial responsibilities have to be made part and parcel of the main discourse of the management education all over the world. The world faces a moral crisis which needs to be addressed seriously both by the educators as well as international leaders and the debate must be carried forward in plausible way without harming any particular society or economy. This challenge is to be addressed by the teachers of management, curriculum writers and students in a morally engaged manner and, in order not to fail the collective wisdom of the entire humanity.

Intellectual engagement

Sir Whitehead (1957) once wrote that, “culture is an activity of thought, and receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling” and education being the most advance vanguard of human civilization in this regard, which promotes, propagate and preserve this activity at its best, therefore, must be taken seriously by everyone involved in it. The teacher must demonstrate intellectual skill to incorporate the intellectual needs of the classroom learning environment. Teaching is not merely a reproduction or representation of concepts and ideas as written down in books and shown in charts. It is more than this. It seeks intellectual engagement both from the teacher as well as the students. As Scheffler (1965) puts it, “what distinguishes teaching, as we remarked earlier, is its connection with rational explanation and critical dialogue: with the enterprise of giving honest reasons and welcoming radical questions”. Classroom learning activity is not only effected by the stories which the teachers tell about

themselves (Chapman, 2004), but also differences in class and economy (Nesbit, 2004) reflect in the intellectual strengths and weaknesses of the learners and teachers. The teacher must create and help his students to sustain honorable intellectual culture in the classroom environment, which should inspire them to make rational and critical inquiries into the questions which they have about the concepts and techniques they are currently learning and acquiring. Socrates in particular characterized this kind of intellectual engagement very often, while discoursing with his students. The student must be made to realize his own intellectual capabilities and trust them to use them effectively in solving problems of his practical life situations. The student must learn new intellectual beliefs, not by a predefined intellectual régime of the teacher rather, it should be accomplished by, “exercise of free rational judgment by the student” (Scheffler, 1965). The classroom intellectual activity should be driven by the questions of the students, and their ability to ask right questions and the extent to which these could be answered (Chin and Chia, 2004). Instead of being motivated by rewards, punishments, medals and grades, student must be enabled by the teachers to rise above the reinforcements of different kind and cultivate a virtue of intellectual excellence *sui generis* (Ryle, 1967; Skinner, 1968). Classroom learning becomes highly satisfying and virtuous, if the learner is enabled and facilitated by the teacher “to avoid troubles, disasters, nuisances and wasted efforts in helping them to move where they want to move” (Ryle, 1967).

Symbolic engagement

The teacher must be capable of creating justifiable semantic, semiotic and symbolic context for his pedagogical communication to enhance the classroom learning experience for the learners. The effective skill of linguistic discourse in the classroom, which is both simple and substantive, can transform the learning activity into a lifelong worthwhile experience for the learners. The teacher must demonstrate reasonable literary, imaginary and meaningful use of the concepts during classroom sessions. Many centuries ago Mevlana Rumi, Jalal-ud-din (1997), a Muslim mystic wrote in his famous *Mathnawi* that, “words are like pitchers and water in it can be likened to meanings”, so teacher must fill his pitcher of pedagogy with moving waters of meanings, symbolic knowledge, myths, fables and stories that help the learner to assimilate what the former is trying to convey in the classroom. The effective establishment of a noetic engagement by the teacher, to communicate meanings and substances of all the learning objectives in the classroom can help the students to uncover implicit relationship between the phenomena and the reality. Through a simple yet a semantically powerful imagery, teacher can relate weirdo concepts with the practical affairs of life with which management education is primarily concerned. The teacher must enable the learner to free him/her from the stifles of the society, culture and mythology and let him uncover, what Montessori (1941) has described as the, “exigencies of his spirit, of his soul”. It is through the noetic engagement that the teacher can build the personalities of the learners around commitment, character and love for everything they do in their practical life (Buber, 1965; Spranger, 1958). If the teacher is able to establish a meaningful relationship with the learners, he can then be effective in communicating whatsoever ideas he is interested in. Even abstract and abstruse scientific theories such as quantum mechanics and general relativity can be taught in an interesting and amusing manner, as was witnessed in the teaching style of Physics Nobel Laureate, Richard Fennyman.

Conclusion

Classroom learning constitutes an arduous task for the pedagogical practitioners. They have to apply multiple engagements in order to retain the attention, concentration and interest of the learners in the classroom sessions. Classroom is a complex microcosm of human bodies, minds and cultures. While teaching in the classroom the teacher must know that complex physiological, neuropsychological and cultural diversities are influencing and constraining the learning abilities of the learners. He must engage the learners on emotional, moral, intellectual and noetic dimensions of the whole learning process in the classroom. He must integrate learners, economic, social, moral, intellectual and cultural differences while embarking on a pedagogical communication. The teachers should approach the classroom as a person, whose is interacting with learners as a person, taking into stock the deficiencies and competencies of his instructional recipients. This is how he can dissolve, difference, alienation, and subject/object dichotomy which often hampers the learning activity. Classroom as a metaphor serves as a sure setting for learning new skills. Classroom may become an internet classroom, a cyber classroom, online interactive learning or distance learning; nonetheless, remind us of the fact that a person learns best in sure, secure and trustworthy environments. Classroom would continue to serve as backdrop of serious learning, both for the teachers and learners, even in the age of cyber culture.

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