

Teaching and Learning in Context

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Teaching and Learning in Context

Why Pedagogical Reforms Fail in Sub-Saharan Africa

Richard Tabulawa



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This book is dedicated to my family.

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Foreword

Why Pedagogical Reforms Fail in Sub-Saharan Africa

Few would argue that among education scholars on the African continent, Richard Tabulawa has emerged as one of the finest critics of the received wisdom on educational reform. I first encountered his work by coincidence when I discovered that we both had a well-grounded suspicion of what was then and remains a travelling wisdom of the international donor community – that the progressive ideal in education of learner-centered pedagogy did not take account of the social, cultural and political meanings of education and authority within African classrooms. This was as true of Botswana, where Professor Tabulawa does his research, as it is true in my native South Africa where I have been grappling with the political tsunami of ‘outcomes-based education’ which has flooded post-apartheid classrooms since the middle 1990s.

The author takes us inside what he calls the socio-cultural world of African classrooms to help us understand why prevailing practices persist despite the progressive ideal represented in one funded reform package after another. His conceptual analyses capture the best of both the sociology of education and the anthropology of education in contexts of poverty, and not a little about the politics of education as well.

There are reasons teachers dominate classroom life and rely disproportionately on didactic methods of teaching. To change that, you need to understand the conditions under which most African teachers continue to teach, and what sustains those practices.

A poorly qualified teacher teaching a class of 60 energetic children inside a classroom built for 40 children and with the scarcest of science materials, for example, available for learning, has no choice but to fall back on what has

worked for generations of teachers before her – a very present in-front-of-the-class didactic posture. Anything short of such a posture risks chaos. Your first instinct, even as an experienced teacher, is to assure control. None of these conditions are factored into the otherwise noble ideal of open-ended, inquiry-driven, progressive education.

Then there is this subtle thing called authority. How does a teacher in rural Southern Africa with established patterns of adult authority and childhood obedience begin to give away or share that authority on demand from an alien curriculum? I know, this might not be the way the curriculum phrases the notion of learner-centred pedagogy, but in the mind of the teacher used to centrally-directed instruction (I use the word deliberately) this is how he or she understands the proposal for change. I have been fortunate to teach on both sides of the Atlantic, in Africa and the USA, and it is certainly true that what would pass as normative in one cultural setting (learner-centredness in a middle-class Palo Alto, California, school) would be considered outrageous in another cultural setting (a village school in a tribal authority area of rural Botswana).

It is important to make the point that African societies are not static, and that norms for teaching and learning are certainly changing across national borders – much faster these days as a result of new social media and even the now humble mobile phone. Still, announcing the progressive ideal and making it work through considered implementation strategies requires great effort and, of course, considerable resources for teacher development.

The progressive ideal often fails because of oversell. Whether intended or not, we leave the message with teachers that ‘everything you know is bad’ and that ‘everything you are about to receive is good’. This kind of message spells the death of any reform, but especially one challenging cultural and political norms for teaching, learning and leading in classrooms. Smart implementation would affirm what works, and gradually introduce those elements in progressive pedagogy that coincide with traditional pedagogy. Teachers should, under smart implementation, not feel that their authority is being eroded but rather that it is being strengthened albeit through a different form of teaching. This takes time, and requires patience.

One thing I find useful in talking teachers (and policymakers) through the progressive ideal is the value of the didactic lecture. Teaching the history of the atom is probably best done through an excellent expository lecture that builds the drama of discovery into the oration of teaching; I have seen this done while I was in the audience, and still remember the goose-bumps

felt as the professor-teacher outlined the plot. Teaching multiplication tables is probably best done, at some stage, using a degree of repetition or chorus backed up by teaching methods that deepen the meaning of those tables learnt initially through what is so easily dismissed as 'rote' learning. Of course, didactic teaching and memorization should form a smaller part of a rich mix of teaching methods and should always be judged for its capacity to advance the meaning of what is learnt. However, the mere fact that teachers recognize the familiar makes it so much easier to introduce the strange.

These potential contradictions between teacher centeredness and learner centeredness are sometimes dealt with by placing these approaches along a continuum, thus allowing for variations of emphases along the two extremes. This appears to make sense, for in the practice of teaching, neatly codified categories in teacher- or learner-dominant classrooms fail the test of complexity in real-life classrooms. Tabulawa warns against a reading of the 'continuum approach' that leaves the impression that simply by adding resources one could move the system, technically, from the less progressive to the more progressive side – to put it simply. It is precisely this 'technicist rationality' that must be displaced, the author would argue, with his preferred model of a 'socio-cultural approach' to pedagogy.

I am not sure this proposed shift towards a socio-cultural approach will be persuasive among the policy elites of some African countries. The rationale for the progressive ideal remains persuasive – it is a way of advancing democratic ideals in the classroom, it empowers learners to take charge of their own education, it relieves the teacher of having to do everything, and it empowers young children for active participation in the economy.

Moreover, as Tabulawa no doubt knows, the funding conditionalities that come with clear-minded ideals from the West leave little room for elevated deliberations on the philosophy and politics of imported pedagogies. At the same time, the author warns, we cannot assume that learners are lifeless and teachers dominant across complex systems. If I may take a setting more familiar to me, it would be hard to make the case for lifelessness in Soweto schools, the seat of a major student uprising in South Africa. This is, of course, a point taken up in relation to missionary schooling in Africa, also dubbed backwards in the Western ideal of progressive education; this Tabulawa refers to as cultural supremacy in the progressive ideal.

The collection of writings from the pen of this distinguished cultural critic of progressive pedagogy will open cans of worms from Washington to

London, and not sit easily with elites in the postcolony. That said, it would be a mistake not to take these criticisms seriously as we continue to seek what I would call a genuine curriculum conversation between progressive ideals, from whatever quarter, and the hard realities of teaching and learning inside African classrooms. If that is the goal, this is the book to help us get there.

Jonathan D. Jansen,
Vice-Chancellor and Rector
University of the Free State

Preface

The issue of pedagogical reform first attracted my attention in the early 1990s when I registered as a doctoral student with the School of Education, University of Birmingham, England. Initially, I had wanted to do my doctoral research on how best to teach map reading skills to secondary school students in Botswana. It was not long before I realized that the question I wanted to address was the wrong one: if I wanted to come up with improved techniques of teaching any aspect of geography, I would first need to establish why geography teachers approached map reading the way they did. As I worked further on re-focusing my study, I abandoned the limited area of map-reading skills in favour of the broader question of why geography teachers in Botswana schools approached the teaching of the subject the way they did.

The result was an ethnographic study entitled 'A Socio-Cultural Analysis of Geography Classroom Practice in Botswana Senior Secondary Schools'. The approach to the study was multi-disciplinary, benefitting from insights in areas as diverse as political theory, sociology, anthropology and cultural studies. The approach helped me appreciate much better the complexities of teaching, specifically that teaching is both a moral and ethical activity and that it has both temporal and spatial dimensions. In short, I got to appreciate the contextual nature of pedagogy. As I analysed the socio-cultural context of Botswana, I came to the conclusion that transferring learner-centred pedagogy to that context was never going to be easy. It had been tried before and efforts were still continuing, but none seemed to have borne fruit. That there was an important relationship between pedagogy and context became clear to me. Increasingly, I became critical of the view of pedagogy as technique, and realized that pedagogy was problematic, given its embeddedness in the social-cultural/political/economic context.

In other words, pedagogies are products of socio-cultural contexts. My research on the relationship between pedagogy and context resulted in the publication of a series of articles. 'Pedagogical classroom practice and the

social context: the case of Botswana', which appeared in the *International Journal of Educational Development*, 17 (2) in 1997, was my first articulation of this social embeddedness of pedagogy. In the article, I demonstrate how teacher-centred pedagogy has been historically engendered by the enveloping Botswana social structure. In turn, the pedagogy perpetuates that social structure. That is, the pedagogy is as essential to the perpetuation of the social structure as the latter is to the reproduction of the (teacher-centred) pedagogy. Thus, the two are dialectically related. 'Geography students as constructors of classroom knowledge and practice: a case study from Botswana' appeared in the *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, Vol. 36 (1) in 2004. In this article I problematised teacher-centred pedagogy further by demonstrating how the pedagogy is co-constructed by teachers and students on the basis of their epistemological viewpoints and expectations of one another's roles. These agents work collaboratively to protect and police the boundaries of the pedagogy. The agents have vested interests in this pedagogical style, meaning that reforming the style can never be expected to be easy.

In 2003, 'International aid agencies, learner-centred pedagogy and political democratization: a critique' was published in *Comparative Education*, Vol. 11 (2). In this article, I sought to demonstrate the interface of education – through the mediation of learner-centred pedagogy – and capitalist democracy. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 saw international aid agencies coming out explicitly in support of learner-centred pedagogy. Why the explicit support at that historical juncture? I contend in the article that in the 1960s and 1970s, generally, education was viewed in technicist terms. That changed in the 1980s with the ascendancy of neo-liberalism as the dominant development paradigm, a paradigm that established a necessary relationship between political democratization and economic development. Education was identified as a potent vehicle for delivering capitalist democracy across the world. And learner-centred pedagogy, given its democratic pretensions, was singled out by international aid agencies as the nexus between education and the broader principle of capitalist democracy. That set the stage for the globalization of the pedagogy, a relentless effort by international development agents to this day. Given this political/economic nature of learner-centred pedagogy, any continued treatment of pedagogy as technique has no basis whatsoever.

Neo-liberalism has entrenched itself as a dominant discourse. However, neo-liberalism is not just a political theory. Its significance lies in the fact that it is constitutive of identity. To this end, neo-liberal education is tasked

with the responsibility of producing autonomous (of state provision) and self-regulating individuals. It does so by appealing to progressive education ideals and language. However, progressive education under neo-liberalism is not the same as the progressive education (of the 1960s and 1970s) of ‘embedded liberalism’ (Ruggie 1982). Given this ideological nature of progressive pedagogy, I now not only lament the failure of efforts to implement learner-centred pedagogy in sub-Saharan Africa, I also question the desirability of this form of pedagogy in the sub-region. Thus, mine has been an intellectual journey – from critiquing technicist models of pedagogical reform to questioning the desirability of the reforms themselves. This book reflects my thinking on the first part of the journey. However, as I show in the concluding chapter, the questioning of learner-centred pedagogy in developing countries is growing, opening a new frontier in researching pedagogy.

Rationale for and Significance of the Book

Cuban and Tyack (1995: 134-5) made the following statement, one that is as true today as it was when the two writers made it nearly twenty years ago: ‘To bring about improvement at the heart of education – classroom instruction ... – has proven to be the most difficult kind of reform...’ This is a world-wide problem, but one probably more pronounced in sub-Saharan Africa where there have been concerted efforts to implement pedagogic reforms in the past ten to fifteen years. Despite the reforms, instruction in schools in the sub-region is characterized by a persistent, stubborn continuity. The failure of these reforms has been largely rationalised in terms of technical problems associated with innovation delivery systems. By adopting a technicist stance towards problems of instructional reform, curriculum developers and policy makers have tended to pay scant attention to the fact that pedagogic innovations are social constructions, and as such are value-laden. Cuban and Tyack (1995) express this concern thus: ‘The typical rational and instrumental assumptions of educational reformers fail to give due weight to the resilience of schools as institutions. This institutional structure probably has more influence on the implementation of policy than policy has on institutional practice’ (p. 134).

In this book I critique the rational and instrumental assumptions referred to in the above quotation by Cuban and Tyack insofar as these assumptions are evident in the way pedagogic reforms have been handled in sub-Saharan Africa, using Botswana as a case study. Unlike Cuban and Tyack, however, I go beyond an analysis of the ‘grammar of schooling’ to embed pedagogy in the enveloping social structure. This calls for a socio-cultural approach in which

the social nature of pedagogy is recognised. I argue that the failure of pedagogic reforms should not be sought solely in the inadequacies of the innovation delivery system. It should also be sought in the enveloping social structure. That is, it is essential to adopt a macro-social approach to issues of pedagogic practice if the complexity of such issues is to be comprehensively appreciated (Farquharson 1990). This, in my view, is a major departure from the norm. With this rationale in mind, *Teaching and Learning in Context* aims to:

- Demonstrate the social embeddedness of pedagogy by exposing the inadequacies of the technicist approach.
- Advance a socio-cultural explanation for the ‘tissue rejection’ of pedagogic reform proposals (e.g., learner-centred pedagogy).
- Provide teachers, educators and students of education with a resource book that contextualises the teaching and learning processes.

It is the case that most texts on teaching and learning used by education students and educationists in sub-Saharan Africa have been written from the perspective of the rational-technical paradigm, meaning that they are insensitive to context. *Teaching and Learning in Context* offers a different perspective on teaching and learning by grounding these activities in their local context. The book suggests that meaningful reform of instruction in sub-Saharan Africa might require major shifts in social structures, such as child-rearing practices. This might be discomfiting for teachers, policy makers and international aid agencies working very hard to bring about reforms in instructional practices in sub-Saharan African classrooms. But this exactly is the intended effect of the book – to make our comfort zone less comfortable.

Although *Teaching and Learning in Context* is based largely on research carried out in the area of geography teaching in secondary schools in Botswana, its general principles could equally be applied to other school subjects. Given the non-existence of texts that approach teaching in this way, the book is aimed at subject specialists and general practitioners in the area of education, ranging from teacher educators, schoolteachers grappling with perennial problems associated with instructional reform, students of education, and education policy makers anywhere in the developing world, as well as development aid agencies and students of international and comparative education.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter One presents a critique of the way teaching and learning have been traditionally understood locally and internationally. In particular, the marginalisation of *context* is targeted for criticism. I argue that this

marginalization has only served to promote a technicist approach to teaching and learning, with its attendant weakness of portraying teaching and learning as context-free, non-problematic activities. Lack of cultural sensitivity in the treatment of teaching and learning has led to the pervasive view that these are generic activities. This in turn has led to the generation of generic 'principles of teaching and learning' (presented as universals) whose application has tended to be oblivious to the context in which they are being applied. The philosophical basis of this technicist perspective on teaching and learning is traced back to the application of scientific rationality (positivism) to teaching. Given the claims of scientific knowledge to universality, models of teaching and learning derived from this form of knowledge have likewise laid claim to universal applicability, leading to the dominant (albeit tacit) view that teaching and learning are value-free activities. Having critiqued the dominant perspective on teaching and learning, a case for the alternative socio-cultural approach is advanced. It is argued that 'context matters' (Crossley and Jarvis 1999). Teaching and learning do not occur in a sociological vacuum. The shape these activities take in any given context is a function of many factors to do with that context – the political, historical, economic, social and cultural aspects of the context. No two contexts can be exactly the same. By the same logic, effective teaching can never be achieved by adopting exactly the same paradigms across contexts. Therefore, models of teaching developed in one socio-cultural context may not fit well in a different context. There is no 'one-true approach' to pedagogy (Bowers 2005).

Chapter Two questions the 'official' rationale for instructional reform in sub-Saharan Africa, in particular the preference for the constructivist learner-centred pedagogy. I argue that although the efficacy of this pedagogy is often couched in educational/cognitive terms, in essence, the pedagogy's justification is a political/economic one. This is a justification that can hardly be expected to appeal to teachers in contexts where students' performance in tests and examinations is more important than any other consideration one may think of. Where teachers and students cannot perceive an obvious relationship between a pedagogical innovation and students' performance in tests and examinations, chances are extremely slim that these agents will embrace the innovation. In other words, the perceived utility of a pedagogical innovation has implications for how it is received in the host environment. Therefore, I argue in this chapter that the apparent disconnect between the rationale for introducing learner-centred pedagogy in sub-Saharan Africa on the one hand, and its perceived utility by teachers, students, administrators and parents on the other, may be partly responsible for its 'tissue rejection'.

In Chapter Three, I invoke Thomas Kuhn's (1962) concept of 'paradigm' to demonstrate that, contrary to technical rationality, learner-centredness and teacher-centredness are informed by opposing epistemological positions, constructivism and objectivism respectively. Each position engenders in its adherents (or those socialised into it) a way of looking at the world compatible only with its own tenets. Further, each promotes its own unique orientation towards classroom architecture and desk arrangement, student-teacher relations, interactions and assessment regimes. Thus, teacher-centredness and learner-centredness constitute diametrically opposed pedagogical paradigms. A teacher or student socialised in one of the two would find it difficult to shift positions. Thus, teaching methods are necessarily value-laden. Teaching and learning, therefore, are not technical activities.

Chapter Four builds on the argument advanced in Chapter Three – that pedagogical paradigms constitute teachers' and students' taken-for-granted worlds. Findings presented in Chapter Three showed that teachers in Botswana and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa actively construct the pedagogical world called 'teacher-centredness'. However, it would have been an unintended outcome if the findings created an impression that teachers construct that world by themselves and of their volition. More often than not, they are 'forced' into an information-giving position by their students, a possibility not accommodated by approaches to teaching and learning informed by technical rationality. Chapter Four, therefore, factors in students as active co-constructors of teacher-centredness. A view of teacher-centredness as co-construction re-defines 'teacher-centredness' – it is not an ambience created by the teacher acting *on* the students, as 'teacher-centredness' is often understood. Rather, teacher-centredness is constructed *jointly* by the teacher and students acting on one another. It is a classroom ambience in which students have an interest which they are always prepared to defend should the need arise. Employing Michel Foucault's conceptualization of 'power', I present findings from a study in which students were observed forcing their teacher into an information-giving position in class. Besides being an affront to the position of teaching as a rational and instrumental activity, the idea of 'co-construction' complicates our understanding of pedagogical change in that it suggests that attempts to change classroom practices in African schools must include both the teacher and students. And yet this is rarely appreciated in extant models of pedagogic reform.

In Chapter Five, I offer an explication of the relationship between pedagogy and the social structure. I demonstrate this relationship by taking Tswana

cosmology as an example. Specifically, I link the perceived authoritarianism in Botswana classrooms that research has established to aspects of Tswana social structure, in particular child-rearing practices. It is customary to explain the perceived authoritarianism in terms of culture. However, rarely is it explained how this culture promotes authoritarianism and how this in turn reaches the micro level of the classroom. Successfully linking the enveloping social structure to observed classroom practices requires a theory of socialisation. The work of Pierre Bourdieu provides such a theory. Tswana cosmology, it is argued in this chapter, embeds a theory of knowledge, learning and a view of the learner. Acquisition of knowledge is in a hierarchy between the adult and child. Internalised during primary socialization, this relationship with knowledge is carried to the classroom as the participants' (students and teacher) cultural baggage and helps to structure relationships in ways akin to authoritarianism. Bourdieu's views on education enable me to demonstrate the social embeddedness of the teacher-centred pedagogical style and, as a corollary to that, its resilience.

Chapter Six adopts a more historical approach to the evolution of teacher-centred classroom practices in Botswana. I argue that the education introduced by the missionaries in Botswana in the nineteenth century was hierarchical, bureaucratic and condescending, reflecting its social context of origin, nineteenth century Victorian Britain. However, this model of education interacted creatively with contemporary African values and ways of doing things to entrench teacher-centred educational practices. This educational model has been further entrenched in post-colonial Botswana, giving rise to an impersonal organisational structure, one that could only be expected to promote impersonal and bureaucratic social relations in the entire system, including the classroom.

In Chapter Seven, I argue that post-independence educational planning in Botswana has had an impact on classroom practices in ways never intended. It has encouraged the development of a utilitarian/instrumental view of education – the view that formal education bestows material benefits upon those who are able to acquire it. This view of education constitutes a stabilized element that permits the production and reproduction of hierarchical classroom social relations. Inadvertently, a teacher-centred pedagogical style is thereby sustained.

Chapter Eight attempts to link curriculum form to classroom practice. Rather than presenting it as an innocuous arrangement of subject-matter, the curriculum is presented as a structure that simultaneously enables and

constrains teachers' and students' actions. In Botswana, the publication of the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) in 1994 led to the crafting of a secondary school curriculum informed by behaviourism. It is a curriculum which seeks to attune education to the workforce needs of the economy. The resurgence of human capital theory in its crudest form is obvious in this curriculum. Underpinning human capital theory is an instrumental view of education. School-acquired knowledge, as a result, is increasingly commodified and objectified. Logically, this can be expected to encourage a hierarchical pedagogical style. Ironically, this is the same policy that makes the use of learner-centred pedagogy mandatory in schools. It creates pedagogical tensions that teachers and students resolve by withdrawing into the safe cocoon of teacher-centred pedagogy.

The Conclusion brings together the central arguments of the book, urging the reader to re-think his/her comfortable assumption regarding the twin processes of teaching and learning. More importantly, the reader is urged to question the desirability of constructivist, learner-centred pedagogy in Third World contexts, given its colonizing and hegemonic tendencies.

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