Cultural Styles and Institutional Culture

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This excerpt is reprinted from an article[1] reporting on a survey of University of the South Pacific (U.S.P.) Extension students' study strategies and conceptions of learning, based on interviews with 25 Fiji Extension students. The article concludes with the authors' reflections on the importance of both cultural and institutional factors in understanding how students approach their studies and what they think learning is all about.

One of the first questions we are often asked about our research concerns "cultural differences". Are U.S.P. students different? The implied standard of comparison is usually the somewhat fuzzy concept of "Western" students. U.S.P. students come from at least 12 different nations, belonging to three broad cultural areas and countless smaller cultural and linguistic groups - perhaps the region with the greatest cultural diversity in the world. The forty or so students we have interviewed so far cannot possibly be representative of all this diversity and this is one reason for shying away from premature generalisations.

The issue of culturally-preferred learning styles is nonetheless important. While some approaches to study and conceptions of learning have many features in common across cultures, reflecting the universality of some cognitive processes, different cultures may emphasise different teaching and learning styles. While both cooperation and competition exist in the Pacific and in the West, for instance, Pacific cultures tend to emphasise cooperation, and the West, competition. A study of Samoan high school students, for example, found that their preferred learning styles were collaborative and participatory rather than competitive or individual (Lesa 1995). Here at the U.S.P., our interviews confirm everyday casual observations that most students find group work extremely useful, efficient and enjoyable. This generalisation cannot however help to predict individual preference, which does vary, and some of our interviewees indeed report preferring to work alone.

The persistence of rote-learning among university students and their alleged preference for it or inability to adopt any other learning style, is often blamed, in casual conversations on our campus, on the authoritarianism of Pacific society. While authoritarianism undoubtedly exists in the Pacific, so does egalitarianism, competition and individualism. Another point is that, whatever culturally-transmitted informal learning styles children first bring to school, by the time they reach university, they have had at least a dozen years of exposure to a formal education system which was imported from the West as a result of European contact and colonisation and is still very much influenced by an exam-driven, teacher-centered, decontextualised model of education, based to a large extent on transmission of knowledge through language, and in our case specifically English, which is not even the students' first language.

If students want to survive in the school system, they have to adapt. By the time they enter university, they are far from being only a product of their culture, they also are a product of the school's institutional culture. Evidence that students can develop different learning styles under different conditions can be found in Thomas, who shows that Fijian middle-school children prefer to perform tasks cooperatively outside schools, but individually and competitively in the classroom (1979). Similarly, U.S.P. students are often said to be reluctant to ask questions in class, and cultural explanations are adduced: figures of authority must not be questioned, you do

[1] France Mugler and Roger Landbeck (1997) *Learning in the South Pacific and phenomenography across cultures*. Higher Education Research and Development (HERD). Special issue on phenomenography. Vol. 16, No. 2, 1996.

not want to be seen as a "show-off". Ninnes demonstrates, however, that questioning, which is taboo in formal settings where the transmission of knowledge is considered sacred, is one of the traditional learning strategies in informal education in the Solomons' Western Province (1991). Ninnes' approach to curriculum design and teaching is that they can only be enhanced by starting from culturally-preferred learning styles and strategies. This fits in squarely with the general pedagogical principle of starting from what students already know. This does not mean that students cannot also be taught alternative learning strategies. Indeed, students at university (and, ideally, much earlier) must go beyond mere acquisition of knowledge or even problem-solving and develop critical skills. The initial lack of such skills and difficulty in developing them among many beginning university students must be faced. These difficulties are of course quite common among beginning university students worldwide. As for U.S.P. students, their cultural milieu cannot possibly be held to be the sole culprit for whatever characteristics are deemed detrimental to successful learning. We cannot ignore the fact that they spend many of their waking hours in the midst of a different, institutional culture. Many of the characteristics of that institutional culture persist at the tertiary level itself. This institutional culture must look at itself and its effects on students must also be taken into account.

Bibliography

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