

Heart and Mind: The liminality of the learner in relation to education in the new millennium

Michael A. Mel

Classrooms in Papua New Guinea (PNG) have supported the view that since all human beings have a head (intelligence) each person should be able, with precision, (logically) to acquire knowledge. Logic has been equated with intelligence. Areas of knowledge that were built on logic have been given significance in the curriculum, while those that seemingly have little to do with logic have been pushed aside. The enterprise of education – processes of knowledge acquisition and creation – needs to move beyond the confines of logic as being equivalent to intelligence. To claim that all logic is intelligence is at best illogical and at worst irrational. There is a need to recognise that the human condition does not learn and live on logic alone. Emotions, or matters of the heart, have long been seen as the enemy of logic, or effective thinking. The two – logic and emotions – have been separated as entities. In my paper I propose that there is a need for a major shift away and beyond this mind set. If education in PNG and around the world is about integral human development and is based on knowledge from within our own cultures as much as from without, then the need to go beyond logic and sensibilities as separate entities or domains of knowledge is paramount.

Introduction

There is a commonly held belief developed in the west many years ago, which says that there are two sides to being a human being. On one side there is the human being or individual person. On the other side is the world that surrounds the individual. Mel (1996: 227) cites Lakoff and Johnson (1980) to express his view of the western self succinctly:

We express ourselves as entities, separate from the world – as containers with an inside and an outside. We also experience many things, through sight and touch, as having distinct boundaries, and when things do not have distinct boundaries, we often project boundaries upon them – conceptualising them as entities and often as containers.

Similar thinking has gone into dividing the human person. In a simple approach to this division within a person there is the head, where knowledge and intelligence are located. Then there is the heart or the emotional side, where a person's feelings are located. The head appears focused on order, clarity and logic. Matters of the heart seem murky and unclear and very imprecise. It seems all too easy and convenient.

My focus is on the process of contemporary education and the learner in the PNG context. The focus is on education because our youth, who really are the foundation for our present and future society, spend a large portion of their lives getting educated. But what kind of education are they getting in schools? Will it educate them to become citizens of our society? I do not believe this is happening and in this paper I share my thoughts as to why this is so and offer a new direction in setting an education programme that educates for a citizenry that is knowledgeable and responsible.

Education as *out there* into *in here*

Education today is largely based on a perceived fact that there is the *in here* and then there is the *out there*. What is around or outside the learner – the *out there* – are considered facts. Education has been accepted as a process for the learner to digest what is *out there* and bring it to the *in here*.

The models of education in PNG today reflect these ideas. What comes immediately to mind as a good example of how deep-seated these ideas are in our system relates to our school subjects. Subjects that are supposedly based on precision, logic and the

development intelligence have become central to the education process. Subjects that are supposedly less focused on thinking but more on emotions/feelings and hands-on experience are neatly peripheralised. Expressive Arts, Agriculture, Home Economics and Religious Education, among others, are less valued. One does not have to be a rocket scientist to realise what is being inferred: that intelligence is linked only to subjects that are built around the laws of logic and precision – and the other areas apparently require very little intelligence. We should be perturbed by the view that intelligence is only exercised with those forms of representation that require the use of logic. As eminent art educator, Elliot Eisner (1992: 593) said: “The result of such a conception is to banish from the domain of intelligence those forms of representation whose meanings are not conveyed by and do not depend upon the use of logic”.

I believe that this way of thinking as the corner-post to the form and structure of education in PNG has contributed to a host of problems. There is a growing image of disillusionment with parents and members of various communities, as one of the architects of the new Philosophy of Education in PNG, comments:

How many times have we heard stories like this: ‘I sent a child to school for 6 years but he has not learned anything’. ‘He cannot find a job and is causing trouble in the village’. ‘Last year he went to Moresby to look for a job and ended up in jail’. It seems schools are not fulfilling the expectations of many parents ... (Matane 1991: 139-140)

These comments raise concerns about the people that return to their communities after leaving school. The nub of scepticism and disillusionment experienced by both community and youth is perpetrated by our contemporary system of education that values logic as the means to being educated. If contemporary education is about cramming the head with facts, figures and formulas – if logic is the only way to define

intelligence – what should we expect from our youth as members of our communities?

There is a need to re-educate our communities and our system of education for our youth – our future. This is rather a tall order but if we are to make any inroads into solving the crisis that is enveloping our communities, this will be one way. In order to re-educate ourselves, one of the most immediate among a number of steps that can be taken is to re-examine the position of the learner placed within the context of education that values logic as the only window into intelligence.

The Learner as Creator of Knowledge

Consider the phrase ‘determining the level of success’ in school: what does this really mean? Quite simple, I dare say. Success in bringing the *out there* into the *in here* – and this depends on a learner’s ‘ability’, ‘IQ’, ‘cleverness’, and ‘brightness’. But what do we mean by such notions? Are they tangibles? Is there a stage of being ‘clever’? Who is ‘bright’? ‘Lacking ability’? In other words are these states of being in that *out there*? If we continue in that vein of question, is there an *out there* that is apart from an *in here*?

In order to find answers to the questions, we need to examine some local or indigenous worldviews and determine how we comprehend reality and the human subject. There has been very little consideration given to local knowledge. We cannot continue to advocate the global perspective – the western worldview that assumes that since we are all human beings we should think and feel the same the world over. I believe that while we human beings may have the same hardware, we have and operate with different software, to borrow from a system that operates at a global level, Information Technology; the software is crucial in determining what we see and how we know the world.

In many indigenous contexts, the concept of an *out there* and *in here* as two separate entities is challenged. I provide as an example

my own context of the Mogeï in the PNG Highlands. In that society, there is no separation between an *out there* and an *in here*. Allow me to provide a very brief description of this worldview. The human being is referred to as *lamb* and the world (environment, cosmos, people both alive and dead) as *kola*. Each *lamb* is unique in that it has *noman*. *Noman* relates to thinking, feeling and knowing. *Iamb* through *noman* constructs a meaningful existing through language, referred to as *Ing*. *Ing* refers to communication (oral and sensory). The *lamb* imposes meaning on *kola*. Similarly *kola* makes every effort to impose meaning on *lamb*. This nexus of dialogue provides a tension, not a tension of temperament or violence, but a tension related to finding a meaningful existence referred to as *mbu lamb* living within the made sense world of *mbu kola*. Neither *mbu lamb* nor *mbu kola* are locatable entities but processors that constitute the individual and as the individual constitutes the world. The implications for education with such a worldview in the relationship between the *in here* and *out there* is that knowledge is created by the individual. Language is not a neutral medium that reveals truth about the world but is used by individuals to impose meaning and make a meaningfully constituted world of *mbu kola/mbu lamb*.

From this perspective, terms like ‘ability’, ‘clever’, even ‘IQ’ are contentious because they are not referring to value free states. From a teacher’s point of view, and indeed for those who subscribe to these terms as ‘natural states’, we would be imposing our own meaning onto other people’s (learners’) performance and value those over others. Tests, exams and quizzes instituted in the process of education would be about confirming and conforming to a particular interest or a specific status quo. Foucault’s (1974: 49) notion of discourse as “practices that systematically form the object of which they speak” makes a useful contribution in this perspective. Harrison (1991: 5) develops this point. “What if these were rather the self-perpetuating obsessions of the

regarding eye than the immanent properties of the objects under consideration?”

Assessment and evaluation practices that support logic as the only way of recognising intelligence have dominated the educational landscape of PNG. This way of producing the next generation raises ideological issues regarding students and their performance in classrooms. Even the teacher is seen as being responsible for enabling the learner to digest the knowledge – a trickster who devises ways and means to deliver the *out there* to the *in here* of the learner. The students have been denied any capacity to determine and develop their own knowledge because their efforts are interpreted through the teacher’s eye.

It is my belief that change is needed to give recognition to the students’ efforts to see and make sense of the world. Moreover, in indigenous contexts such as that of the Mogeï, the learner is recognised as having a capacity to make decisions and gradually learn to contribute meaningfully to the community. In PNG there has been a strong shift in this direction since the publication of the Matane Report (1986). One of the fundamental shifts in the document was for the recognition and enunciation of indigenous ways of seeing and knowing by all those involved in the enculturation project in PNG, and particularly in the way learners must be enabled to make their activities in school satisfying and insightful.

A personal synthesis

Over the past few decades, the separation of technology from nature, body from mind, and the spiritual from the material have been terrains for contest – much as there has been the division between the *out there* and the *in here*. In view of the discussion on the Mogeï ideas and experiences of the world, experience is at an immediate level the

synthesis of mind and body – of the *out there* – *in here* nexus. Williams (1977:128) characterizes as “structures of feelings”. It is a process: “... that ever-changing part of our relationship with experience where our feelings are inexorably in advance of our ability to order them socially” (Hornbrook 1986: 23). Williams (1977:129) relates that these human experiences, upon reflection, appear as common knowledge where there are contentious distinctions: “the objective from the subjective; experience from belief; feeling from thought; the immediate from the general; the personal from the social”. Education and the process of education are really to do with that rather embryonic phase in the learner, that practical consciousness, which is “not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought” (Williams 1977: 132). It is the liminal location of our learners in their pursuit of knowledge and knowledge creation that is of prime importance. In the context of the Mogeï, and indeed within PNG, it is a real way of re-looking and re-framing the western European notions of teaching and learning. Indeed, teaching is not about bringing the *out there* into the *in there*. Rather, as Mel (2000: 4) cites Eisner (1999) and says of teachers:

We must realise that meaning matters and that it is not something that can be imparted from teacher to student ... [Teachers] are shapers of the environment, stimulators, motivators, guides, consultants, and resources ... [I]n the end, what children make of what we provide is a function of what they construe from what we offer. Meanings are not given; they are made.

Learning, or meaning making, is an accumulation of moments of personal and at the same time social pleasure. The personal/social pleasure is not a question of mind or body, or of object and subject. It is an entanglement of sorts that emerges as personal experience within a social situation. Performance in *nanga* (my) *mbu kola* is to do with the blurring of the borders between mind and body, between subject and object, between spirituality and reality, between thought and feeling, between sense and sensuality, between being male and female and

between being black and white. Of course, from a European point of view, personal experience, feelings, emotions and things to do with these have always been suspect and understood as inferior qualities of seeing and knowing. However, as Dewey (1934: 36) writes: "To think effectively in terms of relations of qualities is as severe a demand upon thought as to think in terms of symbols, verbal and mathematical".

In the Mogeï context, the *nanga mbu kola* or the contemporary classroom in actual physical presence represents a temporary and temporal location. The physical space, while various markers like desks, chalkboard, timetable and teachers may distinguish it, is a social space. This space and its significance are no more when the social occasion has ended. All that remains of the occasion and performances are the friendships, relationships, recollections and memories of personal experience, satisfactions and insights.

If our education process in PNG is to do with satisfaction and insights, then a system that arbitrarily divides the human condition and asserts that logic is the only way to greater and better education must be reviewed. It is time for us to re-educate our communities by looking at our own sense of indigenusness. The seeds are there for a paradigm shift. We should move now to make the system of teaching and learning more meaningful, and one that is our own.

References

- Dewey, J.** (1934) *Arts as Experience*. Minton Bach. New York.
- Eisner, E.** (1992) The Misunderstood Role of the Arts in Human Development. *Phi Delta Kappan* 73, No. 8 April 1992: 591-595.
- Foucault, M.** (1974) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London. Tavistock.
- Harrison, C.** (1991) *Art and Language*. Cambridge, UK. Blackwell.

- Hornbrook, D.** (1986) Drama, education and the politics of change: Part Two. *New Theatre Quarterly II* (5): 16-25.
- Matane, P.** (1986) *A Philosophy of Education for Papua New Guinea (The Matane Report)*. Papua New Guinea National Department of Education. Port Moresby.
- Matane, P.** (1991) Teachers for the Future. In Beatrice Avalos and Laevai Neuendorf (eds) *Teaching in Papua New Guinea: A perspective for the Nineties*. UPNG Press. Port Moresby. pp 139-145.
- Mel. M. A.** (1996) *Mbu: A Culturally Meaningful Framework for Teaching, Learning and Performing in Papua New Guinea*. Unpublished PhD thesis. The Flinders University of South Australia, Adelaide Australia.
- Mel. M. A.** (2000) Interfacing the global and the local in the context of education in Papua New Guinea. Plenary paper presented for the conference on 'Information Technologies in Educational Innovation for Development: Interfacing global and indigenous knowledge' in Bangkok, Thailand, December 12-15, 2000.
- Williams, R.** (1977) *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.