Adult education interventions by rights-based development NGOs in Cambodia: transformative learning towards agency

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Introduction
The rights-based approach (RBA) has emerged in the arena of international development since the middle of the 1990s because of the convergence of different socio-historical strands during that period. As a result, it has become one of the latest development discourses or buzzwords. In order to fulfill a wide spectrum of human rights, the RBA aims to empower the community of rights-holders (i.e. citizens) to claim their rights from duty-bearers (i.e. governments), whilst it aims to support, develop, and lobby governments to be more responsive and accountable to such demands from citizens (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004; Macpherson, 2009). This prospective research will address development non-governmental organisations’ (NGOs) rights-based interventions for citizens in the form of adult education in Cambodia. The RBA is fundamentally a political process as it deals with governance and rights issues (Macpherson, 2009). Therefore, it seems quite challenging for Cambodians to claim their rights from their oppressive, authoritarian and neo-patrimonial governments.

Rationale
The genealogy of the RBA reveals that it has been re-conceptualised in the North, particularly in the West. This western-conceptualised approach, which assumes the ‘universal’ concept of human rights and the uniform exercise of people’s self-efficacy and thus agency, is not likely to work in certain contexts. Therefore, the local expression of rights should be appreciated and affirmed in the RBA. Such expressions are shaped through the interplay between the personal (or the collective for collectivist societies) and the social, and exercised in particular temporal and contextual spaces. Hence, the research of such localised forms of the RBA requires the framework of agency, which is situated in the interplay between the personal and the social (Giddens, 1984; Bandura, 2001; Billett, 2009) as well as in particular contextual and temporal spaces of occasions (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

However, the notion of the ‘invisible’ power—the internalisation of powerlessness—suggests that such local expressions of rights should not be naively adopted, as these may function as a form of habitus that disposes people to think and act fatalistically, thereby bringing about no benefit to people (Pettit, 2006). Rather, the
local expressions of rights need to be elevated, and first and foremost people’s self-efficacy needs to be heightened to the extent that they agentically employ such improved local expressions of rights as workable negotiation strategies with governments. Research shows that adult education is associated with and has the potential to increase the agency of people towards civic engagement. In particular, it appears possible to transform the ‘invisible’ form of power or *habitus* towards increasing self-efficacy through transformative learning (TL). Therefore, my research will situate TL as the main theoretical framework for explicating the process in which people increase self-efficacy and thus agency. From the previous SCUTREA conference proceedings, Hoggan (2007) believes there can be a greater application of TL in social justice issues. However, in order to bring about actual real social actions in the context of the RBA, it is likely that TL—which only deals with perspective transformation—will need to be supplemented with another type of intervention so that people will be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary for taking such actions.

In the Cambodian context where formal education does not encourage critical reflection, the western theorisation of TL—which assumes rationality—may not work. Instead, other ways of knowing or extra-rational knowing may be appropriate as a process towards TL. In addition, research shows the causal relationship between formal education and the agency of people towards civic engagement. However, this implies that Cambodia, where there is a dearth of formal education, is not a fertile ground for agency to be generated. Moreover, Mezirow (2000) suggests a variety of preconditions—such as safety, economic security and emotional intelligence—for TL to occur, which at least some people in developed countries can afford. In contrast, people in poverty-stricken and post-conflict Cambodians face a variety of socio-political, physical-material and emotional-psychological impediments (rather than preconditions) day in and day out, which seem to make TL unaffordable for them. Therefore, it is worth examining how TL works (or does not work) in such far from ideal situations.

**Research questions**

Little research thus far seems to have explicitly investigated what content and process of adult education interventions induce civic engagement. As mentioned earlier, TL has the potential to increase such agency. The existing TL research indicates less research in non-formal settings and little research in non-western contexts. Therefore, I will ask the following as the main research question:

> How can adult education interventions by rights-based development NGOs in Cambodia enhance the agency of people towards fulfilling their rights?

There is also a lack of research on adult learning that addresses the interplay between the personal and the social (Billett, 2009). The arena of TL is no exception and in his review of TL research, Gunnlaugson (2008) suggests examining such interplay in TL research. In particular, among the small amount of research on TL in
non-western contexts, there is even less research that analyses cultural influences on TL. In addition, as mentioned earlier, TL in the far from ideal situations of Cambodia is worth looking at. Therefore, my research will attempt to answer the following as part of the above main question:

How do Cambodia’s political, economic, social and cultural contexts influence people’s transformative learning towards fulfilling their rights?

Roundtable questions

- Is it reasonable to conclude that, as mentioned above, ‘the local expressions of rights need to be elevated and people’s self-efficacy needs to be heightened to the extent that they agentically employ such improved local expressions of rights as workable negotiation strategies with governments’?

- Although the main theoretical framework is TL, how does the Freirean approach inform this research?

- Are the proposed research questions appropriate?

- What research methods are appropriate for this research?

References


Hoggan C. (2007), Transformation and "struggle of hope": an analysis of the role of transformative learning theory in anti-racism education, paper presented to *SCUTREA (Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults) 37th Annual Conference*, Queen’s University.


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