Rethinking Emancipatory Learning in Education: A tribute to Neville Alexander

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Rethinking Emancipatory Learning in Education: A tribute to Neville Alexander

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ABSTRACT

Neville Alexander's thoughts on education deserve and demand wide, civic engagements. He reminds us all of the crisis in and of education: it is not a technical crisis of numbers where government wants to improve learning attainment, but a crisis of social breakdown, of reproduction of social inequalities where radical educationists and educators need to look at schools as sites of struggle. It is a crisis of lost ground that needs to be recovered, lost to modern forms of colonialism, neo-liberal epoch, and social ills.

This paper is a rethinking of emancipatory learning. As a starting point, it draws on our reading of Neville Alexander's legacy as independent and socially critical thinker, and his vision of African education. Acknowledging the complexities of social change, we highlight the continued importance of emancipatory learning on levels of education practice and theory. The rethinking we propose touches on issues of relevance, complexity and impermanence of education theory and practice. We question the processes and dominance of research, policies and their underlying theories and make a case for the emancipatory and generative function of theory. The purpose is to enhance conversations about dominant paradigms, alternatives, and human action.

Neville Alexander's Memory

Neville set himself to combatting Afropessimism, raising a pan-African consciousness, establishing an independent non-governmental position on educational policy formulation, and capturing the dynamics of education with a view to strengthening policy formulation is one that is not only challenging, but is also an imperative that must no longer be avoided (Alexander 2013, see Soudien 2012). It is a task that demands of us strategic activism and persistence in critical thinking. For

education activists in Africa and elsewhere, there is the growing challenge and the urgent need for reconceptualizing education as a whole, and articulation of alternative scenarios and frames of reference in educational policy development in particular (Odora Hoppers 2013).

Before us is an education system whose inadequacy is the norm rather than the exception. It is an education system whose foundations require a comprehensive overhauling if it is to begin to respond to the contexts within which it is located. It is a system that has become an insulated and privileged sacred cow, way beyond the realm of critical reappraisal. Yet it is one that is the engine for the promotion of contusive psycho-social development and the perversion of the social construction of reality here in Africa (see (Hoppers & Richards, 2012).

Literature and discourse on education in Africa today reads like a flier from an exclusive club. The self-congratulatory cycle of analysis is preoccupied with issues revolving around the degree of assimilation and success of the education introduced by the colonial process. The whole world is concerned with rapidly getting all the children of the world to gain universal access to this education. The rates at which children perform, get excluded or expelled from this system is one of the problematics with which `educators' are fixated. Dropping out of the system and the ensuing psychological suicide and permanent stigmatization that follows in close tow is, of course, of lesser interest.

Neville drew our attention to the memories of Africa's colonial past and present; the state's role in perpetuating intellectual orphanage, xenophilia and dependency among people in the Third World (see (Alexander, 2002); Alexander 2012; 2013); education's role, in conjunction with the colonial and scientific enterprise, in the systematic strangulation and permanent subjugation of indigenous knowledges, environmental sciences and social systems in Africa and elsewhere in the Third World - with dreadful, if not irreparable consequences for the development of Africa, and the consequences for human and societal development for the continuation of `business as usual' particularly in Africa.

System Change and Innovation

Discovery and the desire for change, according to Kuhn, commences with the awareness of an anomaly. This is followed with a more or less extended exploration of the area of anomaly. At times, novel ideas emerge only after a pronounced failure in the normal problem solving activity. However, fundamental changes in systems or perspectives requires the reconstruction of the same field from new fundamentals, and is a process that changes some of the field's most elementary theoretical generalizations as well as its methods and applications (Kuhn 1962).

In their optimistic analysis of innovations and change, Havelock and Huberman state that human beings are not only remarkable, but are also capable of innumerable creative acts, self-reflexion, self enhancement and manipulation of many other physical and biological systems to enhance his/her sense of well-being. It is in pursuit of such enhancement that humanity is ever organizing and re-organizing itself into social systems and sub-systems. Systems, it is stated, are constantly moving

either towards completeness, or away from completeness (Havelock & Huberman, 1977).

Following from this, system change is any event which alters the level of completeness or equilibrium, while system development refers to a transformation from a status which is, by some definition, considered to be less satisfactory. As an innovation is a system within a system within a system, it is characterized by an intensity that is at once fragile, and it is the fragility of the innovation process that makes the knowledge of how it works in different settings so important (Havelock and Huberman 1977).

Emancipatory Learning: the antecedents

Emancipatory learning is not just about doodling with theories and proving them right or wrong. It is about extending the frontiers of theoretical appraisal. It is about finding new ways in which theory can be recast to show its proximity to the real world experienced by so many, and the generative visions of life that comes from that extension.

Like Gergen (Gergen, 1985, 1994), Neville asked us to ponder on the question of how difficult it is to abandon traditional assumptions once they have entered one's compendium of commonsense! How difficult it is to expunge portions especially of written record! Yet, like Gergen, Neville asked us to `think positive'. Yesterday's sins may, indeed be the forerunner of tomorrow's redemption.

For change or for emancipatory learning as a methodology to take place we have to have it clear in our minds what we are up against (Odora Hoppers & Richards 2012). In Dewey's words, the conceptions that had reigned in the philosophy of nature and knowledge for two thousand years rested on the assumption of the superiority of the fixed and the final; they rested upon treating change and origin as signs of defect and unreality. An acceptance of the Heraclitean dictum that `all things flow' was tantamount to nihilism. Impermanence had strong associations with death, and too often, change is suffused with feelings of threat or peril. Novelty and irregularity pose continuing threats to on-going patterns of adaptation, and at any point may thrust existence into jeopardy. It is this romance with permanence that has served as the primary impetus behind the development of modern science:

...The more systematic observations of science reveal certain repetitions or regularities in the world... The laws of science are nothing more than statements expressing these regularities as precisely as possible… (Carnap & Gardner, 1966).

And this, per se, is not bad. The products of such discovery can be of untold benefits to humankind. If science can identify systematic and recurring patterns, the society may, indeed, alter its path, harness the predictable to its advantage, and enhance the human capacity for controlling destiny. The simplicity of such fallacious argument is as optimistic as it is compelling, and the result is a formidable scientific establishment largely devoted to the tasks of locating, documenting and explaining permanence and the flux of passing experience.

Real life however, tells a different story. In real life, one is constantly exposed to the painful awareness of the multitude of disordered and discontinuous events taking place outside the scientific or academic sanctum. Outside the laboratory in which the socio-behavioral scientist conducts his experiments relying exclusively on a highly de-limited set of constrained experiences, is an arena consisting of wars, revolutions, international allegiances, economic spurts, national and domestic policies, religious institutions, cultural heroes, aesthetic movements, intellectual insights, value commitments, marriages, loving relationships, family ties, personal beliefs `all wending their way through consciousness and depositing themselves into the quagmire of memory' (Gergen, 1994).

What one wonders is: Is it a matter of time, a matter of resources, a matter of more hard work before the behavioral scientist standing behind a good lot of the professors, academics, and social scientist; will begin to discern and master the rudiments of human conduct? At what point can the behavioral scientist begin to recognise that there is no such thing as trans-historically valid principles if they cannot even see that their very research is being conducted within a contemporary historical context, one that forces upon the scientist certain observations while precluding others? In fact history, as Feyerabend characterizes it, confronts us with a morass of ever-moving complexity:

...History is full of accidents and conjectures, and curious juxtaposition of events, and it demonstrates to us the complexity of human change and the unpredictable character of the ultimate consequences of any given action or decision of men (Feyerabend 1976).

Research activity itself is also situated within the unfolding and ever-changing web of accidental relations. Yet scientific research remains insensitive especially to this fact. How are we to furnish insight into the dismaying discrepancy between the productivity of the natural and socio-behavioral sciences? How can we fashion a science that is of vital significance to the society?

It is significant to note that without the traditional aim of the sciences being reformulated to take into account impermanence in pattern and life, the efficacy of the scientific endeavour will continue to flounder. A serious confrontation with impermanence in human action of course implies, if not demands a reformulation of the nature of the behavioral sciences and a critical re-consideration of its true potential.

The scientist and the characterization of theory

Neville tells us that new grounds for the generative criterion for theoretical construction and appraisal needs to be developed, and the characterization of theory as interpretive element has to start.

In challenging the scientific construction of reality in the 21st century, units of understanding of human action are not furnished by observations alone, but rather through a participation in the cultural system of understanding. Yet, in their furnishing of ontological education, socio-behavioral scientists, via the descriptive mode, only seem fixated at the level of establishing an inventory of `what there is'. In giving labels to various phenomena, the scientist pays attention neither to the

socio-cultural specificities of meaning nor to the logic of action embedded in the selection of descriptive terms.

But the problem is more than just the descriptive and labelling character of scientific endeavours. In specifying behavioral sequence (i.e. not only asking the question `what is there'?, but `what leads to what'?), the scientist is not only describing phenomenon. He/she is setting out **to alter public expectation**. And with the alteration of public expectation, the stage is set for the **modification of action**; a modification which more often than not, leads to **a self-fulfilling prophecy.**

In discussing self-fulfilling prophecies, Merton (1957) states that predictions may, by virtue of their dissemination, hasten the results which they predict. He cites, for example, the demise of a private bank in New York City in 1928 that was in no serious difficulty. However because the depositors came to believe that the bank would collapse they withdrew their funds and the bank thereby became solvent. In similar vein, politicians and public opinion researchers have demonstrated concern over the effects of voting predictions on the outcome of the elections. Predictions of a win may discourage those otherwise voting for the designated loser, thus ensuring his or her defeat.

Extending this line of reasoning, it can be argued that the implementation of theory serves to engender behaviour consistent with its premises as Schwartz, Lacey and Schuldenfrei (1978) maintain:

...a society that employs a theory of environmental reinforcement, whether it be in terms of broad programs of social change or on the interpersonal level, may undermine the system of intrinsic motives that previously existed. In implementing a theory of extrinsic reinforcement one may essentially create an artificial and arbitrary dependence on a system of extrinsic rewards. The theory becomes predictive because of its application. Applications (adds Lacey 1977), change the world. If the applications of one theory predominate, then the world will increasingly exemplify the principles of this theory (in Gergen 1994:25).

But the scientist does not only ask `what is there?' and `what leads to what?', but proceeds into **`why' sequences as well**. Specification of a casual source for a given phenomenon is also to furnish a logic for reaction; and most scientific activity tends to favour psychological explanations for the activity. Such psychological explanatories in turn **usually provide the basis for person blame**, and the ultimate results might well be an exacerbation of the very activities that the research was designed to diminish.

In contrast, should the investigator attempt to trace the violence to such factors as political and economic oppression, the responsibility for the same actions would be implicitly lodged with the broad social system (i.e. system blame), and not the actors. Alterations of the system would thus be favoured and punitive measures de-emphasized.

In other words, the choice of research paradigm and research methodology shapes the explanatory locus which, in turn, affects the subsequent social policy (see Van der Westhuizen 2013). In the final

stage, the chain linkage has the consequence of altering the subsequent life forms within the relevant communities.

But the scientific paradigm goes one more step. Not only is it committed to a deterministic form of explanation in which behavioral events are viewed as lawful consequences of specified antecedents, but the whole concept of intention and voluntary action is rendered both misleading and obsolete. The scientific paradigm has had this peculiar but dangerous propensity to obscure the true cause of human behaviour - which lies in the voluntary control of individuals over their actions. In this framework, the entire question of moral responsibility is tossed to the dogs, and as Gergen, quoting Shotter (1975) argues;

..to abandon the concept of personal responsibility maybe to undermine the basis for organized society. If people cannot be punished for their maleficence and rewarded for their virtues, and if guilt and self-reward cease to play a role in human affairs, then the basis for social order may be severely weakened. The essential question is not whether the deterministic view of science is a valid one; its validity is fundamentally indeterminant....In accepting the scientific form of understanding, the culture may be modified in a substantial degree (Gergen 1994:26-27).

The scientist as moral agent

Something must also be said concerning the scientist as a `moral agent'. We have already pointed out above that scientific activity and the baggages associated therewith, does enter the understandings of culture. What needs to be elaborated is the valuation character of scientific knowledge and its capacity to alter society through an inherent and inescapable moral advocacy.

This advocacy centres around deepening the divide between fact and value especially as the proper scientific posture should essentially be dispassionate. And yet, the scientist takes no responsibility for the dangerously passionate or even sinister uses to which its results are put.

The evil with this framework is that if, indeed, behaviour is fundamentally dependent on `stimulus events', then successful functioning in relationships requires that one gains control over the stimuli that control others' actions. To achieve benefit in life, this paradigm suggests, one must adopt a manipulative posture towards others.

It is in this vein that Chris Argyris (1975) has demonstrated how the stimulus-response orientation has led to a form of knowledge that encourages governmental manipulation of the public. Accordingly, it is the task of the policy maker to manipulate the variables in order to control the public. It is quite obvious what this paradigm has accentuated in a context of unequal relations, racial prejudices, or colonial conquest. It is the subjugated who become the `dope' `guinea pig' or `robot'.

Their very conditions provide endless but often insulting fascination with the so-called `poor' by the dominant group. Expertise built through years of dissecting the lives of the poor without relating to

them, without knowing them, without wanting to know them characterise the relations between the dominant and subjugated groups. It is from this paradigmatic framework that the paternalistic exhortations of white social scientists over non-whites, the Northern experts over the Southern, emanate. What these scientists select for attention are isolated, trivial or marketable elements of the non-white experience.

...Black clientele are treated as commodities - useful for a time, but ultimately undeserving of genuine consideration except as may be required to ensure the attainment of investigatory goals (Gordon 1973:89).

Dumont adds:

...There has been a vampirish quality to the manner in which researchers sucked the data from their subjects.... Moreover, they did so with a sense of righteousness as if every monograph partook of Galileo's divinity (Dumont 1969:19-20).

The emancipatory and generative function of theory

A theory serves to structure momentarily what is fundamentally unstructured. However, as analytic lenses, all theories have significant limitations. Each lens serves to blind as it illuminates. Although given the theory, one has a means of analyzing action, answering questions and formulating plans, any given theory furnishes only a limited way of understanding, and thus a limited range of possible implications. It is for this reason that a premium should be given for multiple theoretical perspectives. From a multiple perspective, the potential of the theorist to influence the course of society can be immense. This is because the theorist who creates compelling theory is engaged in a form of ontological education, for, it is with the emergence of theory that patterns and desirable actions become discernable.

Given the power of theory to shape both understanding and action, we can now ask, `What forms of theory may be viewed as desirable?', and `At what stage should a theory be discarded?' And here, we have to find out whether, in a given context, we should seek a theory that duplicates existing lenses, or one that supplants them. When we deal with situations in which parochial views are transposed in a context of hegemony, as the view, then what we need to explore further is generative theory, its prospects and possibilities to address multiple perspectives.

Generative theory is that which challenges guiding assumptions of the culture, raises fundamental questions regarding contemporary life, fosters reconsideration of the existing constructions of reality, and by so doing, furnishes new alternatives for action (Gergen 1994).

Generative theory works in two central ways.

Firstly, is the generation of doubt. To begin with, any theory that commands widespread belief, that

serves as the univocal view of reality within a given culture poses a threat to that very culture. This is because our actions are often consistent with our comprehension, and the companion to partial comprehension is delimited range, and often inflexibility, of action. When a theory is used generatively, it will generate doubts in such constructions thereby rendering them open to new realms of flexibility. When used generatively, theory may increase the adaptive potential of an individual or a culture.

The second attribute of generative theory is the formation of alternatives. Not only should generative theory give reason to pause and reconsider current modes of activity, but ideally, should point to other forms of actions and their results. If, for instance, we are interested in the reconstruction of social institutions, one way to go about not changing anything is by merely describing contemporary patterns. On the other hand, if one seeks to reform or transform public policy, compelling theoretical rationales are required to legitimate alternative forms of action at the conceptual or intellectual level.

To recap therefore, the positivist empiricist metatheoretical approach has engendered and sustained particular theoretical orientation toward human action. In this paradigmatic framework:

- the external environment drives the senses and objectively grounded knowledge about this environment is possible. From an endogenic point of view however, knowledge is known to be primarily a product of the processing agent. Traditionally positivistic notions of objectivity are therefore rendered suspect.

- people of a sound mind should reach common agreement and science should strive for consensus among practitioners. Dissent is dismissed. However in the alternate, the endogenic thinker upholds that multiple interpretations of experience are usually held to be both legitimate and desirable.

- reality is independent of the observer and values lead to a default in scientific procedures; but for the endogenic thinker, recordings of reality are not so much correct or incorrect as they are the creations of the observer. The possibility for scientific neutrality is questioned.

- the casual locus of human action is the environment, and human behaviour is dependent on, or are determined by antecedent environmental events. The endogenic thinker recognises that the individual can and does construct or interpret sense data furnished either from the environment or from memory. Determinism is replaced by voluntarism.

- facts and value are, and should be separate from each other. From an endogenic point of view, personal constructions of reality and the inseparation of fact and value are almost inescapable. Declaring this irrelevant is morally culpable.

- measurement and control are the hallmarks of positivistic empiricism, but for the endogenic scientist, `correct assessments' are part of a process of sustaining positions already embraced. Methods therefore furnish rhetorical rather than ontological support for the scientist.

African educators must renew their relationship with the African systems and derive fresh mandates to act, to define and conceptualize reality. The challenge for researchers in this continent is to disentangle the meanings, definitions of reality that is prescribed and reconstruct new notions of emancipation to its next level. African culture and identity must be seen as a living and organic reality; not just something to be negated and discarded.

As researchers and practitioners in Africa, we have to recognize that the ultimate post-graduate qualification lies in our ability to go beyond the certification and credentialization accorded us by the people processing industry called schooling. We have to develop new `post-graduate' skills that can enable us to individually or collectively combine self-reflection, activism and advocacy as starting points on the long road to developing truly generative theories of social reality that can capture the complexity of today's reality in Africa.

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