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## Action Based Teaching in Nigeria: Issues and Reflections

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### Abstract

*Action-based teaching is a pedagogical approach that emphasizes meaning and internalization of learning in ways that solidify flow and generate confidence and autonomy in learners. There are principles that are related to its utilization for the achievement of educational goals. The explanations of these principles, their applications and implementations in the Nigeria educational system for improvement purposes constitute the focus of the paper.*

**Key Words/Phrase:** Action-based teaching

### Introduction

Action based teaching is an approach to teaching which puts the human agency in the centre of attention. It is anchored in the socio-culturally mediated human capacity to act – focusing on what teachers and learners do and say while engaged in meaningful teaching and

learning activities (Bernstein, 2000). Larsen – Freeman (2003) is of the view that learning is a non-linear process that emerges in unpredictable ways. It involves series of meaningful activities; which activities are indeed part of the dynamic system of classroom/educational activities. Teachers often believe that the system, in many ways, give clues to or are self organizing. From the activities, a community of practice emerges as a result of shared goals, routines, and procedures evident in interactions, relationships and personalities.

A relevant development to action-based perspective is the emphasis on the processes of learning which combine social interactive and cognitive –reflective work in the classroom. Researchers like Swain (2005) argue on the need to represent a process-oriented participation in educational actions. The idea is to allow accommodation for the diversifying forces in the pedagogical enterprise especially as related to individual differences. Through the several forms of activities in which teachers and learners engage, workable processes emerge and are mastered by choices and needs.

The Action based approach to teaching and learning conceive learners as persons in their own rights. They are listened to and respected as speakers in their own right and as agents of their own educational destiny. They must have things to say to each other and to the teacher in class that go beyond the sentences proffered in textbooks opened on the same page at the same time by everyone in the class. Ushioda (2003) insists that active learners, whose actions are self initiated rather than commanded by the teacher or the system become strong in terms of intrinsic motivation and autonomy, motivation and autonomy being two sides of the same coin. Action based teaching stimulates motivation and autonomy in learning.

This paper regards action based approaches as closely connected to such other approaches as task-based, project-based, exploratory experiential, computer-assisted learning among others. Much as all these may not be synonymous with one another, the action based approach absorbs and subordinates them. They all see the learner as

an active person, not just a rote memoriser of facts or input receiver but one who also engages in constructing knowledge. The whole of the learners' hearts, bodies, senses and brains are involved!

Bernstein (2000) insists that an individuals' experiencing of past, future and possible contents of the curricular which would enhance his growth is vital in the educational process. This situation calls for inclusion of the person, personally, socially, intellectually, culturally so as to enable such a one to operate within the milieu at individual, social or political levels to the benefit of self and society.

Bernstein, (2000) seems to be advocating an enactment of a high democratic profile which allows pedagogic and societal democracy to meet. The two processes or forces of power couched in the educational pedagogy and control couched in the political and societal rights can melt into a socio-pedagogical political context that can be greatly transformative.

Bernstein further argues that both power and control can be relatively weak or strong. When power is weak, innovations that cut across boundaries of various kinds are possible including the action based teaching innovation, whereas when power is rigid and strong, innovations will be difficult to implement. On the other hand, with weak control, there is a deep probing of the reasoning regarding implicit rules and regulatory discourses; but when control is strong, legitimization of approved forms of interaction, which may really also be shallow, may be allowed in pedagogic discourses. Action based teaching should be structured in such away as to enhance socio-pedagogical processes.

### **Pedagogy as structure and process**

Curricular structures enable desired processes. Processes themselves also modify the structures. Teachers and learners can gain in autonomy and set goals and parameters for their work beyond the confines of the original curriculum guidelines (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). Educational work is a unity of structural and procedural ingredients. Structure and process should not be seen as independent

of one another. The dynamic interaction of structures and processes lead to meaningful and effective pedagogy. A well designed structure can instigate and enhance pedagogical process. The action-based pedagogy is centrally concerned with setting up of facilitative structures that enhance rather than impede the processes that lead to meaningful and lasting learning.

The interplay between structures and processes may however result in an unpredictable degree of consequences. Van Lier (2007) cautions that while learners can score high or low in tests, it may be difficult to predict what their skills, knowledge, motivation, and goal outcomes are. It would not be very easy to correctly predict what the learners will know, want to do next, what their goals, dreams and ambitions will be or even where their learning may take them. All education does, to this extent, is to successfully make the behavioural outcomes of students unpredictable. This stance may not go down well with standards – accountability-testing-measurement advocates who want everything to be predictable, testable and precise.

The school is an organization where everything: lessons, tasks are planned. Moving from the curriculum to the classroom is a structure-process scenario in which it is admissible that nothing is so carefully planned that everything and every moment go exactly according to plan. The unexpected or surprising occurrences should lead to exploration and innovation in spite of earlier plans and improvisations. Routine-novelty is accommodated in action based teaching and learning.

Every subject and every topic have routines and novelties that can be turned into affordance networks for collaborative activity. Nnabuiife (2009) points out that behaviour has a multidisciplinary anchor in nature. While Psychology seeks to explain and sometimes change human behaviour, sociology focuses on team dynamics, power, conflict and inter-group behavioural levels among others; anthropology focuses on human beings and their activities in relation to their culture and adaptations. Political science covers inter-group conflicts, coalitions, power and politics, decision making and

organizational environments. Which of these is the school not directly related to or affected by?

There are cycles of action that cannot be ignored in curriculum development and teaching. It is noteworthy that all learning requires active perceiving agents. A person does not just learn by receiving input delivered through instructional mechanisms alone; rather, he also picks up information in the environment on the basis of and guided by organismic needs and purposes. This alone involves actions that should change the pedagogical approach as the curriculum also concerns itself with these activities. It is these actions after all that the teacher can effectively make resources available to guide and enable the learners to further their goals.

Van Lier (2004) relates action based teaching to pedagogical scaffolding. To him, there must be six conditions that need to be met – **continuity** such as depicted in task repetitions, connections and vacations; **contextual support** as in enacting safe and supportive environments, **intersubjectivity** as embedded in mutual engagements, and encouragements, **contingency** in task procedures, **handover/take over**, which increase roles for learner that also enable them to attend to emerging skills and knowledge and **flow** - when the skills and challenges fall into balance as participants get in tune with each other. All these can be summarized into three scales of micro, meso and macro scales. While moment to moment interactional work happen at the micro level, steps of particular activities or tasks are planned at the Meso level while chains of tasks, projects and so on are realizable at the Macro level.

There is first an overall plan that stakes out a long time period of work. The teacher and the learner then aim to undertake and finish particular projects or achieve set goals within time frames. Teachers and learners identify and spell out stipulated times and still delve into interactional work that would lead to the overall achievement of all set goals in education.

### **The Nigerian setting**

The school in Nigeria, like in many other places, is a structured agent of socialization and nurturing of children and young adults into dependable individuals. Nigerian children are taught by teachers. The children go to school to receive education and to develop appropriate attitude; acquire knowledge, skills and abilities for meaningful living within the society. Whereas Oyira (2006) claim that human beings extensively alter the environment to suit their needs and desires, human relationships have profound influence on humans. A healthy teaching and learning environment is made up of the physical, psychological and social dimensions. Saraki (2004) maintains that a positive school environment is easily created in schools where educators appreciate one another, share and plan together.

Van Lier (2004) is of the view that when teachers and learners appreciate one another, share, plan and design activities together, they are better disposed to engage in activities and tasks that enhance achievement of long term educational goals, engage in step by step processes and procedures that lead to other sub aims by participating in tasks that would specifically link up to resolve the challenges on their way.

### **The Issues**

Teachers and some other stakeholders in education such as government supervisory and controlling agencies continue to accuse each other of negligence of duties and responsibilities within the Nigerian educational setting. The Academic staff union of Nigeria Universities outlined lack of space, conducive teaching and learning environments, inadequate staff, dearth of teaching learning materials and facilities as reasons why they recently proceeded on a six month strike. In Nigeria, certain issues come easily to mind. Can action based teaching be done without space, poor teaching aids poor learning environments, and without facilities? Or do these facilities exist and teachers and researchers fail to use them to advantage?

What structures are in place to enhance the development of the learners as individuals with unique peculiarities? What provisions are in place to make scaffolding both a design feature and an interaction process in the Nigeria educational process and in the Nigerian Educational system? Sorenson (2010) asserts that these issues are crucial as structures need to be set up to facilitate teacher-learner entry into the challenging facets of project while at the same time also noting, encouraging and highlighting teacher learner initiatives.

Nigeria has actually been involved in curriculum rigging for some time now. Tasks are designed with procedures that are not provided for in all ramifications. The issue of ICT which is now being emphasized and enforced in Nigerian schools is a case in point. Ohia (2012) laments the inadequacy of computers in schools to drive ICT based teaching and learning. Inadequacy of trained staff to handle the subject, non availability of the required and conducive space to mount whatever computers are assembled, non provision of standards classroom, well equipped workshops and laboratories, were all outlined as factors that hinder the teachers' employment of active teaching and learning strategies during instructions (Ohia, 2012).

Asiyai (2005) insists that the use of innovative instructional strategies by teachers requires instructional aids of high quality and quantity as well vowed; stressing that these facilities help to make the teaching learning process more practicable, meaningful and exciting to teachers and students. It was also argued by Asiyai (2005) that when a positive social learning environment is not maintained within the school organization as is the case in many Nigerian Schools, (Ohia 2012) communication and interaction between teachers and students and other personnel associated with the school is impeded. The deprivation affects the sense of belonging and self esteem of both staff and students, which, in turn, affects their motivation to strive for excellence.

Whereas adequate materials and resources have been said to support creative and imaginative teaching and learning, these are largely unavailable in Nigerian schools (Ohia, 2012). Even in an era of digital

revolution and knowledge explosion, insufficient exposure of students to these gadgets is not considered a serious setback in teaching and learning. Whereas the National Policy on Education document prescribed the student teacher ratio of 1:40 at the moment, which would further be reduced to 1:30, (FRN, 2004), Principals, teachers and students are struggling to keep their classes at fifty or not exceeding fifty five as a standard that is practicable (Asiyai, 2005).

Issues of power and control in the Nigerian educational setting is still a bit confusing; Government takeover of schools and the recent returning of some schools to their original owners as evidenced in Anambra State leaves some unresolved issues related to power and control in all their ramifications in such schools. Whereas government pays and employs the teachers, the owners, to whom the schools have been returned, discipline and control the teachers. The adage that he who pays the piper dictates the tune leaves the teachers sailing along and tagging on government officials to retain their jobs even when not wanted by some missionary and private school principals. The unfortunate situation emanating there from is that the great flexibility that enhances and supports action based teaching is doused by teacher-earner demoralization instead of fired by strong generational control.

Van Lier (2004) insists that continuity is evidenced in task repetitions, connections and variations. With the death of many teaching and learning resources, task initiations are problematic enough not to mention task repetitions. Connections are realized in processes and in their variations. Where an initial action is not guaranteed, their appurtenances are not cocksure guaranteed. The contextual support from which safety and supportive environments are derived, are this largely, a mirage. The dilapidation evident in the existence of archaic structures, building facilities, antiquated and obsolete gadgets such as exemplified in stocking manual typewriters, smoky stoves, caved ceilings and leaking roofs leave much to be desired in safety related provisions and for good teaching learning supportive environments (Ohia 2012).



Intersubjectivity, contingency and flow, appear to be higher in the hierarchy. When the more basic provisions are not met, the meeting of the higher ones becomes doubtful. Mutual engagements and encouragements are both social and psychological constructs that find expression in acceptable and congenial situations. What level of Routine – novelty scenario get converted to explorations in the midst of scarcity experienced in all spheres of the Nigerian education sector? Pessimism is not the aim of this paper. The point being made is that the tension between process and structure are becoming more dynamic. The structures put in place constrain the processes and these should be considered thoroughly for necessary and meaningful pedagogical activities that are deeply rooted. Structures that are provisional, temporary are more open to revision in the light of emerging practices and processes. Which structures in the Nigerian classroom and educational settings are provisional and which ones are permanent? These questions are begging for answers.

### **Conclusion**

There are basic principles and benefits of action- based pedagogy. In as much as it closely relates to other meaning-driven approaches, the action based approach to teaching and learning incorporate thoughts of notable educational thinkers like Piaget and Vygotsky among others. Yet it can be observed that it has not found wide spread acceptance and implementation in Nigerian schools for many reasons. It needs to be incorporated into Nigerian educational system for transformative successes. Periodic high stake tests should be made to lose their strength and appeal in series of action-based work in the classroom. It is advocated for its ethically responsible and human individualism in socio-dynamic growth processes. While politics still affect pedagogy every rule of the game should be applied and adhered to.

### **The Way forward**

The Nigerian teacher functions in a milieu. The Nigerian learner is a whole personality – not just an input-processing head. He has social

inclinations embedded in his dreams, aspirations and concerns. He should be assisted to forge a productive personality that would link self and worldly demands and features. Even in interactions enacted of the classroom levels.

Negotiating identities involve some investments and engagements. There should be a proper identification of what makes sense in the educational system, how best they can be done, what challenges are likely to be encountered and what supports should be put in place to satisfy desirable fronts.

Identification of the micro, meso and mega levels in the developmental processes and structures of the Nigerian educational system, their commitment at all times in innovative thoughts and actions as they are related to the Nigeria educational system are crucial issues in the success of such programmes.

Nigerian teachers need to produce students that can “do” not just those that possess theoretical jargons. Action based teaching would gradually lead to the creation, identification and conversion of affordance opportunities that would transform the Nigerian student to a hands-on proficiency level that and would, make each of them to fit into a food flow.

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