Tensions, Contradictions and Inconsistencies in Community–Based Environmental Education Programmes: The role of defective educational theories

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Abstract

This paper is derived from a PhD study conducted in rural Uganda. The study used Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology to explore how educational methods employed in community-based environmental education programmes were empowering communities to respond appropriately to environmental challenges. A community-based rural development programme by Volunteers Efforts for Development Concerns (VEDCO), a local NGO in central Uganda, was used as a case to critically explore the community-based environmental education processes. The programme aimed to empower smallholder farmers economically and socially through training in sustainable agriculture, land use and management, agric trade and microfinance. Through a critical analysis of the different educational processes this paper exemplifies how contradictions, inconsistencies and tensions in educational theory undermined practice and affected the character of the programme, its implementation and outcomes at community level. It further demonstrates how the conscious shift in thinking and actions towards more transformative educational practice created tangible positive results. The paper also engages some of the key assumptions of critical theory and their application in a community-based context, and raises the need to go beyond the simplistic uncritical adherence to such assumptions as it leads to further 'instrumentalisation' of education and the accompanying processes.

Introduction

This paper is based on findings of two PAR cycles and is divided into three sections. The first section represents experiences from the first PAR cycle, which was designed and implemented along traditional neo–classical lines despite the declared emancipatory intent of the programme. The second section is based on experiences of the second PAR cycle in which conscious efforts were made to adhere to the principles of socially critical transformative education. The third represents a critique of some of the key assumptions informing the socially critical education framework.

The central argument of this paper is that many of the tensions, contradictions and inconsistencies undermining community-based educational programmes are caused by defective educational theories and philosophies. Theories and philosophies are not necessarily defective in themselves, but it is the way they are interpreted and applied in given contexts that renders them defective. Educators writing from a critical perspective, with which I closely

identify, distinguish educational practice along three broad orientations, namely: the neo–classical, liberal progressive and socially critical emancipatory educational orientations. This categorisation is based on the notion that education is not a neutral activity. This is shared among many critical education theorists, including Carr and Kemmis (1986), Freire (1970), Giroux (1983) and others. Central to this notion is the fact that different educational practices and accompanying processes are informed by specific theoretical orientations (Carr, 1990). The orientations are informed by different knowledge constitutive interests[1] (Habermas, 1972). This implies that educational activities are by nature rooted in some form of ideology or philosophical orientation regardless of whether the persons concerned are conscious of it or not. The educational orientations often manifest differently, which makes it naturally defective to jumble attributes of different educational thoughts in any one given programme as it often leads to contradictory outcomes. This is not to argue for exclusivity of educational orientations, as this can also be defective, but to highlight the fact that different orientations have distinct attributes with distinct educational outcomes. Any such mix should be a careful integration based on the unique learning requirements of a given programme and learners, and not simply an offhand picking from an apparently unclaimed pool. This paper therefore uses the case of VEDCO's community-based participatory training programmes to illustrate these concerns and to draw out some lessons and conclusions.

The Context of the Study: VEDCO's Programme

In the year 2000, VEDCO embarked on the implementation of a community-based rural development programme in response to community needs identified in two 'participatory'[2] baseline studies. Both studies sought to identify those issues limiting people's capacity to overcome poverty and its related effects.[3] According to the findings of these studies, communities lacked appropriate knowledge and skills in agricultural production and marketing, business management and access to micro-finance and credit facilities. Land – the major community resource – was unevenly distributed, controlled and mismanaged through poor farming methods. There was also evidence of crop destruction by vermin, pests and diseases; there was food insecurity,[4] limited access to quality seeds, and unreliable markets for agricultural products, lack of diversification with most of the households depending on agriculture as the only source of income (VEDCO, 1998; 2000).

The community-based programme that arose from these needs specifically set out to address, among others, problems of food security and natural resource management, particularly land for agriculture. Programme activities included 'participatory' training of smallholder farmers in sustainable agriculture (sustainable land use, crop and integrated pest management, food security management, banana and coffee rehabilitation), management of income generating activities and marketing of agricultural products. It also entailed enhancing farmers' participation in the develop-ment and implementation of programmes for income diversification, introduction of alternative income generating activities and fair terms of trade between smallholder farmers and crop buyers.

The ultimate goal of this programme was sustainable economic and social empowerment of smallholder farmers and entrepreneurs demonstrated in the communities' ability to utilise and

manage available community resources in a sustainable way and to negotiate for support for sustainable agriculture, food security, marketing and other income generating activities.

The programme objectives and ultimate goals presaged critical transformative educational processes, including learning methods and content. VEDCO as an organisation also believed in the need for transformative education to create an empowered community, capable of responding to its needs, challenges and problems. Based on these motivating factors, VEDCO unequivocally declared its commitment to the implementation of a participatory training programme guided by transformative educational goals. This research, however, generated findings that did not always reflect the best intentions of the organisation as stated in the programme goals.

The research showed that despite the emancipatory intentions of the programme, the processes and outcomes often reflected tensions, contradictions and inconsistencies with the declared theoretical framework of the programme. These were exhibited in the programme development process, the objectives and learning content, the structure of training, the strategies adopted, training methods and techniques, and at a deeper level in the uncritical assumptions about critical theory as a guiding framework.

Part One: Educational Practice as a Technical Activity

The analysis in this part of the paper is based on the findings of the first PAR cycle in which programme activities took the neo-classical view of education as a technical process. Educational activities based on the neo-classical educational orientation approach educational practice as a 'neutral' instrument for overcoming technical problems, overemphasise the use of science and technology to solve problems and view educational process as a process of transmitting knowledge to change people's behaviours.

The contradictory RDDA model

The processes involved in the development of VEDCO's programme contradicted the underlying transformative/emancipatory interest of the programme. The programme exhibited a technocratic neoclassical approach to educational planning reminiscent of what Popkewitz (1984) called the Research, Develop, Disseminate and Adopt (RDDA)[5] model of programme development and implementation. Programmes following this model assume a technocratic dimension based on the neoclassical hierarchical notion of knowledge and knowing whereby the researcher, educator or development worker is assumed to have the 'right' knowledge and capacities to conceptualise issues on behalf of learners, research participants or communities (Usher *et al.*, 1997) with whom they work.

In the case of this programme, consultants were, for example, hired to conduct a participatory assessment of community needs. But as results came to demonstrate, these expert consultants used participatory methods as mere tools for data 'extraction' but not as part of the holistic empowering and co-learning process they are meant to be in emancipatory programmes. Thus, although research played a central role in informing VEDCO's programme, it was based on the technicist positivist notion of 'finding out about' people's lives (Usher *et al.*, 1997) rather than engaging

people in finding meaning in their situations. The communities were used as research 'subjects' only to provide information to the experts to make meaning of that information and in the end 'name' the community situation. As a result of this exclusion of communities from the analysis and interpretation of their situation, the actual needs, problems and interests of the community were misinterpreted and their situation misrepresented. For example it was assumed that:

- The community was not only interested in farming, but farming the same crops.
- Communities were homogenous with similar needs, interests and aspirations (no tensions, no contradictions at different levels).
- People were willing to work together on collective village demonstration gardens to acquire new knowledge and skills.
- People would automatically adopt the methods of work advocated and taught by VEDCO.
- There were no other dynamics to influence people's response to the programme.
- People's priorities were similar to that of the organisation.
- VEDCO and the community had a common understanding of food security.
- The timing of the programme in the community did not matter.

As such, socio-economic, political and cultural factors like income and land distribution, the different dimensions of poverty, gender and specific individual and group interests that influenced access to and management of key resources were not central factors in the first phase of the programme, although the baseline study had indicated them. In the end, this approach alienated both the communities, whose needs were supposedly being responded to, and the extension workers who were to implement it.

Whilst critical reflection, planning and action are integral components of emancipatory education practice to continually inform and strengthen programmes, the RDDA model applied in this case did not allow for recursive reflection and review. In essence, erroneous conclusions based on the baseline study formed the basis for inappropriate programme planning, the results of which could not be reversed before causing damage to the programme.

Behaviourist training objectives and technicist[6] programme content

The educational and development objectives that guided the programme were stated in the neoclassical behavioural manner emphasising the ultimate behavioural change, expressed in facts and figures (e.g. numbers of demonstration gardens established, workshops held and numbers of participants attended, support visits made to individual households, etc.). This depicted the underlying neoclassical instrumental view of education that disregards educational processes and focusses on the outcomes. Because technicist education is often geared towards fulfilling predetermined goals, in this case also, knowledge was treated as a neutral tool to be manipulated by the expert educator (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) in order to achieve those goals. This was often demonstrated in the emphasis on the provision of technical facts about sustainable agriculture and training techniques, especially when training lead-farmers, as the purpose was strictly to 'equip' them with particular skills and knowledge to pass on to fellow farmers.

In essence, the programme treated the situation simplistically by only viewing community

problems from a technical perspective as *lack of knowledge and skills in production, the right technology and markets*. This interpretation of community problems as technical had far-reaching methodological and practical implications. It created a defective assumption that once 'equipped' with those missing skills and technical knowledge, a tremendous transformation in the farmers' lives would be achieved. Communities were reduced to 'target recipients' in a one-way process of transfer of technical knowledge and skills, while extension workers were turned into conduits for transferring 'packages' of what VEDCO considered appropriate skills, using transmittal methods and expecting farmers to comply.

The programme used a cascade model to train members of the community to become role models and lead-farmers not only to use a community-based approach to train fellow farmers as trainers and model farmers, but also centres from which knowledge, skills and positive change would 'trickle down' or diffuse into the entire community. In using the cascade model of training, VEDCO made some fallacious assumptions that contradicted the emancipatory goal and view of education as an empowering process. Apart from ignoring the contextual dynamics, such an approach perpetuated the neoclassical linear and hierarchical view of education. For example, assuming that lead-farmers once trained would pass the same knowledge and skills on to fellow farmers in the same way was to ignore importance of context and process in learning and also the complex community dynamics. This was obviously in line with the diffusion model used in traditional agricultural extension in which extension workers supposedly have packages of 'correct recipes' to farmers' problems, to pass on to a 'homogeneous mass' of 'ignorant' farmers (Hillbur, 1998).

The rooting of the farmers' training in a neoclassical educational theoretical framework other than the declared emancipatory one, not only undermined the capacity of the programme to transform farmers into empowered individuals, but also blurred the organisation's capacity to understand the underlying causes of the challenges encountered during implementation. Farmers' failure to adopt new farming practices was, for example, viewed by VEDCO as a sign of inefficiency on the part of the extension workers. The extension workers themselves attributed the problem to poor logistical support, lack of farmers' cooperation, farmers' resistance, laziness and disinterest. This echoes Pretty's critique of traditional approaches to extension and agricultural education thus: 'farmers who choose not to adopt are often labelled by extension workers as laggards, with attitudinal barriers' (Pretty, 1995:188). But the truth often lies far beyond this, precisely in the educators' and development workers' worldview and the contextual dynamics that are often ignored.

It was this contradictory application of a neoclassical framework in service of a largely emancipatory education and development agenda that made the implementers lose sight of the contextual factors surrounding the programme, centring their focus on activities that would lead to the stated outcomes. What they forgot was that the achievement of such outcomes was largely influenced by the context including the process. It can thus be said that even with all efforts focussed on the ultimate goal, with contextual factors unattended to (which actually happens under the neoclassical framework), the outcomes might remain a mirage that are perhaps never be achieved in the project's lifetime.

Technicist training structures, strategies and methods

The structure of the training exhibited the neoclassical notion of a separation between theory and practice (Higgs, 1998). The initial training workshops were structured into two distinct parts, one consisting of theory and the other of practice in the form of field demonstrations. The theoretical components of sustainable agriculture were always taught at the beginning of the training workshops in school-like educational settings, obviously based on a neoclassical assumption that good learning takes place when theory precedes practice, as opposed to the socially critical belief in the creation of theory through practice (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Higgs, 1998).

Learners were made to work on demonstration plots, anticipating that demonstration would equip them with the necessary experience and capacity to transfer what they had learnt onto their farms. Conversely, whilst work on the demonstrations was practical, the method employed was the transmittal 'showing and telling' the farmers what to do, without engaging them in such a way as to become critical co-constructive co-participants (Lotz & Ward, 2000). Demonstration as a training method does not nurture a participatory spirit, and practical as it appears, it remains an autocratic didactic approach. The failure of farmers to transfer the expected skills and knowledge to their farms demonstrated that learners can go through the entire demonstration process without getting empowered to become independent actors, since the process involves following what the expert does. In the absence of the expert (who constitutes a symbol of knowledge, power and authority to follow), the learner is rendered powerless.

At the same time, demonstration as a method and the accompanying technicist assumptions caused extension workers to believe that they had to become experts, able to provide all answers to all questions. Extension workers expressed this concern on a number of occasions, as a real source of occupational stress to them, whenever they failed to do so. This is one of the ways in which neoclassical educational practices give a false sense of power to educators, while at the same time disempowering learners. As mentioned earlier, neoclassical educational thought views educators as the sole possessors of knowledge, which contradicts the critical educational notions of collective 'active-meaning-making', co-learnership and co-educatorship. This normally has key implications: it perpetuates a false confidence among educators that prevents them to learn from learners, while at the same time undermining the learners' confidence and inner motivation to work on their own (Freire, 1970). Technicist training structures, strategies and methods in this case created dependent learners. Many farmers who transferred what they learnt to their farms in the first phase of the programme, did so more due to the follow-ups by extension workers than an inner motivation and desire to change. Whenever the extension workers failed to make follow-ups, farmers reverted to their old ways of doing things and complained to extension workers '*mwatusuula*' (meaning: you abandoned us).

The above discussion represents some of the key contradictions characterising VEDCO's training programme and illustrates how the neo-classical educational framework practically reigned in a programme that was in principle motivated by a socially critical intent. The neo-classical view of education as a technical process contradicts the basic tenets of socially critical education, which view the educational process as a social activity and employ educational methods that emphasise people's participation (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). The fact that the programme was motivated by an emancipatory intent implied that the methods and approaches

employed would reflect that goal, although the opposite occurred in practice. The use of transmittal training methods in service of a socially critical emancipatory intent instead, exposed the contradictions underlying the programme and compels one to wonder as to how conscious the emancipatory intent of the programme remained a strong basis of the programme, or whether they had lost sight of it.

Such contradictions in methodology and approach can be explained in two different ways. The traditional/technicist approach to schooling in Uganda created a technocratic mindset that influenced the professional character of educators. Because little or no efforts were made to deconstruct this attitude and related practice, educators found themselves reproducing the educational processes that created them. In order to change this mindset it was necessary to re-orient the educators, but as Mezirow (1990) observed, while many emancipatory education efforts encourage transformative learning, little attention is given to the creation of sustainable structures to enable learners to freely exercise what they have achieved through the process. And according to Mezirow, the problem still remains that, 'even in a Freirian model of education, people can change their theories without having improved their capacity to change their situation' (Mezirow, 1990:85). At another level, the tensions were also exacerbated by the neo-liberal development ideology of donors, which influenced the NGO methods of operation and vision of change. The donors and VEDCO seem to have interpreted development as modernisation which constitutes a technocratic belief in a one-way transformation of those considered backward by the rich and powerful using science, technology and capital investment. This affected the methods of work, thus increasing the pressure on the extension workers to transform the behaviours of poor farmers, and undermined their capacity to pursue the emancipatory goals and principles.

Part Two: Education as a Social Emancipatory Process

The discussion in this section is based on findings generated during the second PAR cycle. Having learnt from the weaknesses of the first phase of the programme, VEDCO took conscious steps to adhere to the declared emancipatory framework in the second implementation cycle. Emancipatory education is founded on the notion that education should play a role in creating a just and democratic society (Giroux, 1983). This implies that education becomes a process that leads to a genuine exercise of power by the majority (Bertrand, 1995) in deciding on educational matters. A number of changes were introduced to take care of the different community concerns, including among others: a conscious effort to utilise learners' interests, knowledge and experiences, engage participants in learning for immediate action, use of dialogue, collective critical investigation of programme processes integrating critical reflection, participatory action planning and implementation. Facilitators consciously drew on the principles and assumptions of the socially critical framework in this endeavour, and findings showed that once participatory methods were appropriately used, it was possible to actively involve farmers not only in learning activities, but also in implementing what they had learnt without pressure from the facilitators.

A new training strategy was developed based on the expressed needs of the farmers. Farmers, for example, preferred to be grouped according to their interests, and specific training for particular interest groups organised around those interests. This was a major break from the type of training observed in the first phase where farmers were given generalised training, disregarding the individual and group interests. In addition, a new concept of food security was developed, the range of crops regarded as essential for income generation and food security was widened to include crops preferred by individual farmers and groups, rather than those that had been imposed upon them by the organisation in the original programme. Farmers also began to play a central role in shaping the character and direction of the programme through their active participation in the development of action plans, which included the setting of community and household targets. The results of the changes were evident not only in farmers' positive responses to programme activities and commitment to the implementation of what they had learnt, but also in their self-confidence and attitudes towards self-reliance. For example, whilst in the earlier part of the programme extension workers literally coerced the farmers to implement the new knowledge on their farms, this time round it were the farmers seeking on-farm support from extension workers to perfect their practice. Out of the 60 farmers included in the study, more than 75% applied at least 10 of the 15 sustainable agriculture practices they had been taught. As a result of the changes, many farmers felt able to challenge the NGO and the extension workers whenever they failed to meet their obligations. This, in a way, represented certain levels of empowerment on the part of the farmers as evidence in Box 1 demonstrates.

Extension workers also experienced major personal and professional transformations, which were important landmarks in their careers as educators within community contexts (see Box 2). Their approach to training changed from the technicist top-down to one of sharing and negotiation, in which learners and facilitators became co-learners and co-constructors of knowledge. This was in line with the basic tenets of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983; Mayo, 1999) and the socially critical orientation to education that informed the programme. There was a new awareness among extension workers that, as facilitators, they were not supposed to provide the answers to all the questions but to work with farmers to find the answers collectively. This demonstrated that extension workers had developed the ability not only to accept challenges and criticisms from colleagues and farmers, but also to reflect on their own abilities and actions and respond accordingly.

Box 1. Extension workers' comments on farmer transformation

There are several changes I have seen in the farmers I have worked with since I began a year and half ago. The farmers are more confident in a positive way. As I said earlier, I have been using a participatory approach where everybody in the group has had opportunity to host the entire group at his home as a learning venue. It was very difficult to convince a person to host a learning session let alone facilitate. These days they compete to host the sessions. It was also very difficult for any of them to come out and talk about their experiences or ask questions, but slowly by slowly they have accepted the practice. Another important change I have seen is in the area of self-reliance. People are now willing to contribute money for activities like exposure visits; they also accept to pay for planting materials like banana suckers, coffee clones, grafted fruit trees and nitrogen fixing trees. In the past they used to complain that they were too poor to buy these things, that they should be given for free, but when we insisted that it is only those willing to sacrifice that would work with us, they changed completely! There are some cases of dependency, but the majority have now transformed a lot in this respect. Farmers have also started to come to our field office to consult and report their concerns where they want us to help them. They can even contribute for their lunch during training, yet in the past they used to quarrel and even abandon meetings when we refused to provide lunch. Farmers have also begun to challenge our way of doing things. On many occasions during the PRA and other meetings they have criticised us on such issues as late coming and failure to follow up work plans. At first, farmers were very worried about things like where to buy pesticides and to market their products, especially horticultural products and they used to look at VEDCO as responsible to get them markets since VEDCO had introduced the crops to the community. These days they look for their markets. Others have formed groups to collectively hire vehicles to transport their produce, either to markets in Kampala or Wobulenzi town. I think this is sufficient evidence of change on the part of farmers. (Extension worker III)

I have realised that farmers have also been empowered beyond knowledge to improve their production. They know what they want. They can ask very challenging questions, which make us rethink many of the things we do. For instance they challenge us as to why we make them develop action plans which we, at times, fail to fully follow and at times come back and ask them to re-plan before the old one has been implemented fully. At times they have physically brought out the plans and asked me: '*Musomesa, okusinziira ku plan yaffe twalibadde mumusomo gwa nkoko na mbuzi ng'anda naye kati tuli kubirala!*' (Meaning: Educator, according to our plan we were supposed to be learning about rearing local chickens and goats around this time, but now you are talking about different things.) But I think even us as extension workers and our bosses have also been empowered in many ways. We can for example recognise and respect the capacity of our partners. Even our attitude has changed. You see how often we meet and decide with them what to do. (Extension worker II)

Box 2. Extension workers' views of their own transformation

My own way of doing things has changed. I think I am a better facilitator now than I was before. I have learnt to work with communities as equal partners. This has taken some burden off my mind and actions, I know I am not expected to have all answers to all problems and I also know the community has much more knowledge of their environment than me. This is a big relief to me as an extension worker. My approach was very different at the beginning. I went to the farmers to teach them and taught them as I thought was most appropriate, but I was often disappointed when they did not practice what I had taught. (Extension worker III)

These days I always try to come back and ask myself why are these people behaving the way they do. Am I doing the right thing or is there a problem with my approach? I try to think about those things we talked about that hinder success in learning. Is it not possible that there could be some other causes of the differences in response by farmers? At the beginning we did not examine the social and economic backgrounds of the communities. There are those with the economic muscle to implement and there are those without; some, for example, lack land to work on, others don't look at agriculture as the main economic activity and others whose needs are not met by the training we conduct. (Extension worker II)

One of the most obvious yet important changes has been in the way I approach people in the community. My respect for farmers has increased, my patience and willingness to listen to their problems has also increased. In the past, my main concern was how many farmers I visited, but these days I am more concerned with the quality of assistance I give to the farmer. I have also learnt to generate information from farmers and even to assess my own performance. I can tell when the farmers are not satisfied with my method of work and adjust; I also feel confident to meet people regardless of the numbers. I no longer fear challenges from farmers. I can accept them and use them as sources of learning for the group and myself. The other thing I learnt is to look at myself as a learner not a teacher, to accept that I can be inadequate in some of the areas. When I thought I was supposed to have answers to all questions whenever I failed, I felt very low. (Extension worker I)

The positive changes notwithstanding, there were still several opposing factors that made the implementation of programme activities difficult for many farmers. While it was essential to make use of learners' knowledge and experiences, in some instances farmers either lacked the necessary knowledge and experiences, or the facilitators did not have the time or capacity to effectively guide the dialogue in a way that would enable farmers to make useful contributions to the discussions, as one of the cases shows:

The training process was good, but we made one mistake. Because they used to ask us what we wanted to learn, we only remembered some things and forgot others. We, for example, asked them to teach us about vegetable farming, but did not ask them to teach us enough about pest control and management. We instead asked for that training after we saw our vegetables being attacked.

This is a challenge to emancipatory educators regarding the way they guide community-based learning processes. While this might have been an oversight on the part of farmers who did not raise all the important issues and the trainers who failed to apply their professional knowledge and experience, it is also true that often people do not have all the information and knowledge necessary to plan appropriate responses to their problems, rendering it erroneous to assume, as is normally the case in critical pedagogy, that learners know what they need to learn (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983). Findings also revealed cases where the more vocal and influential members of the community marginalised the poor, the quiet and, at times, women. One extension worker made an important observation in this respect:

I have also observed that when we meet in groups some of the individuals are suppressed because we tend to emphasise issues that are applicable to the general group, leaving out some of the more personal ones applying to individuals. Often farmers come out with real issues, but you realise the issue is individual and the group tries to silence such people saying they are being irrelevant. Then I realise that good as the approach looks, it leaves out the specific interests, strengths and weaknesses of individuals.

This highlights a key problem in facilitation, whereby in an attempt to overcome top-down training, facilitators err on the other extreme. It remains a challenge to critical educators to manage participatory learning processes, without perpetuating inappropriate and unproductive social differentiations. Nevertheless, the concern by the extension worker represented professional growth on the part of extension workers, resulting from the reflective processes introduced through the study. He has seen the limitations of the superficial way in which participatory methods are often applied.

Experiences like the ones above provide an important lesson regarding training as a major programme implementation strategy. It is illustrated that good training on its own is not enough to enable people to effectively implement policies and programmes because lack of knowledge and skills may constitute just a small fraction of the limitations to programme implementation.

It is also important to remember that while learners are knowledgeable about many aspects of their lives and can use such knowledge and experience to strengthen the learning programmes, it is also true that sometimes learners may not have all the knowledge they need. Hence educators' over-reliance on learners' experiences might lead to failures that will cast doubt on the socially critical educational assumptions about learner's experiences and knowledge as a basis for meaningful learning. In the same vein, failure by the educators to contribute their own knowledge and experience to boost learners' experiences can undermine their own credibility as educators and commitment to effective training.

In the final analysis, facilitators should be aware that learners might at times have limited knowledge and experience that may call for the experience and expert knowledge of the facilitator. This implies that facilitators need to be sufficiently equipped with appropriate knowledge and skills to guide, supplement and, at times, inform learners or even correct learners' misinformation and gaps in knowledge. Educators also need to be aware of the importance of their own empowerment and active involvement in the processes of spearheading the empowerment process of the learners. By entirely leaving the process to the learners, the educator will be abdicating his/her responsibility and rendering him/herself irrelevant when s/he is most needed to keep the process on course and avoid unhelpful scenarios.

Part Three: Critical Theory in a Community-Based Education/Development Context – A Critique and Some Lessons

Despite the reported positive results of the second PAR cycle/phase, my working as a full-time member of VEDCO's project implementation team and on my research project committed to those assumptions, gave me the opportunity to experience the challenges associated with the application of socially critical ideals in a community context. This, together with my interaction with more literature outside and beyond the critical tradition, challenged my views on socially critical education and some of the assumptions and claims associated with it. I realised that the framework had inherent inconsistencies that undermine the achievement of its own goals. These were exhibited in several contradictions and tensions directly related to the key assumptions of this framework, in particular those on empowerment; power, powerlessness, oppression and the emancipation; and levelling power gradients, as is later elaborated.

Assumption on empowerment
Critical theories emphasise the relationship between education, empowerment and emancipation. Whilst I do not contest the validity of this assumption, in the case of this study, I found the concepts of empowerment and emancipation a bit problematic – firstly, because of the deceptively simplistic way in which they are used in critical literature, and, secondly, because of the variety of assumptions that accompany them. According to Usher *et al.,* (1997:187):

> Empowerment does not mean individual self-assertion, upward social mobility or increased disposable income or even a psychological experience of feeling self realised... it means... an understanding of the causes of powerlessness, recognising systematically oppressive forces and acting individually and collectively to change the conditions of life.

I found the above description to embrace the views of many critical scholars on empowerment. Nevertheless, my interaction with local farmers who participated in this programme makes me agree and disagree with it at the same time. Whereas I agree that becoming critically aware of the causes of powerlessness, recognising the oppressors and acting to transform the oppressive conditions constitute a major component of empowerment, I also

find this view riddled with discomforting assumptions that are not consistent with realities on the ground.

At one level, the above conceptualisation of empowerment is exclusive in one important way. The view emphasises the end result and ignores the contextual dynamics which underlie the so-called ideal. Using participatory methods in different communities to map out the existing socio-economic and environmental situation, communities were able to collectively identify, critically grade and prioritise the nature of obstacles and challenges impeding their capacity to lead more sustainable lives. Interestingly, most of the problems were related to people's immediate survival needs. Even after a deeper problem-causes analysis and probing with the 'but why' question, the answers were still tilted in the same direction. From a critical perspective, one could conclude that farmers were probably not empowered enough and therefore unable to analyse 'the deeper' causes of their problems, and that is why they stopped at the immediate causes. My contention is that, to argue that because people have not talked about what critical theory calls the 'deeper causes' of problems, then they are not empowered enough, amounts to an imposition of our own view of reality on people. I see this as a drawback of critical theory, for while it is a principle of critical theory to analyse the material conditions of life in order to discover falsehoods and as such become empowered to address the deeper causes of problems, some underlying assumptions of the tradition, such as what constitutes 'true empowerment procedures', and the desired outcomes are uncritically adhered to. This in a way evokes Lather's critique of critical theories for adopting technicist tendencies, to achieve instrumentalist 'emancipatory' goals and objectives, which she summarises as 'falling prey to the irony of domination and repression inherent in efforts to free one another' (Lather, 1991:59).

This discovery intimates an important suggestion that empowerment should not be as rigid a process as often presented by critical theorists. It is a process, the starting point of which depends on the context of the society in question. For it is argued under the same critical theory that knowledge of the world is always an interpretation of reality from a particular viewpoint (McKay & Romm, 1992), a point explored further by Krippner & Winkler (1995), both post-modern analysts, who argue that 'truth' is a matter of 'perspective'. Hence, although my initial motivation and expectation was to study how issues related to community politics and power-related structural injustices associated with resource use and management at different levels manifested in environmental educational activities at community level, I was convinced that in order for those issues to be understood, more obvious problems of poverty and food security had to be addressed first, secondary as they might have appeared from my own perspective. For as Angelson (1997:137) argued, and I was also convinced: 'Environmental thinking starts after breakfast, and with none, or insufficient meals, there will be little environmental thinking.' Naturally, from the socially critical stance that I had chosen, the change raised key questions and debates, for I had always believed that such a move would lead to an unfortunate situation where, like many other uninformed development workers, we would end up, as Ellsworth put it, treating the symptoms but leaving 'the disease unnamed and untouched' (Ellsworth, 1989:297). The fact that we were consciously responding to issues of utmost priority to the community convinced us to go ahead, fully committed to a participatory approach to community challenges and obstacles.

The initial outcomes of participatory training of farmers demonstrated more individual self-assertion, upward social mobility, increased incomes and a general sense of realised self-confidence for both farmers and extension workers. Whilst this did not constitute empowerment as is often described in critical literature (Usher *et al.*, 1997; Huckle & Sterling, 1996), in the case of the farming community and the NGO, it represented a significant push towards people's transformation. To the farmers, the visible oppressor, which was food insecurity and poverty, was beginning to retreat and they were taking more informed decisions on how to manage the resources at their disposal and even exhibiting a better understanding of the causes of their plight.

This evidence compels one to re-conceptualise empowerment as a process that starts at the current status of people's lives, and progresses according to the material conditions of the people in question. Within this process, the milestones in the form of the various sustainable achievements people attain in the struggle, mark the steps towards different levels of empowerment, but not the strict criteria established elsewhere. Secondly, contrary to the common socially critical assertions on empowerment mentioned above, in the light of this study it was revealed that empowerment includes individual self-assertion, upward mobility and increased disposable income, the psychological experience of feeling self-realised, in addition to *understanding the causes of powerlessness, recognising systematically oppressive forces and act individually and collectively to change conditions* (which is often over-emphasised). In the absence of the former factors which are directly associated with the basic survival of the individual, the latter can be rendered totally impracticable.

The major implication of the above evidence is that, as educators working towards community empowerment, it is necessary for us to look at the process horizontally and vertically. The struggle to achieve the practical needs (basic human needs) in life is a horizontal one. Any success in this direction places the individual or community at a level where they can begin to pursue the more strategic goals in life, which I have decided to call the vertical dimension of the empowerment process. This addresses the more critical issues of politics, power and the related structural dynamics. My view is that the two are integral components of the same process of empowerment and without one, the other cannot be achieved because both dimensions are complementary and as such equally important.

Assumptions on power, powerlessness, oppression and emancipation

Related to the foregoing issue, the results of the study demonstrated that critical theories make sweeping assumptions on power and powerlessness, oppressor and oppressed, which divide society into two diametrically opposed sections – the powerful oppressors and the powerless oppressed (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998). I found this inconsistent with the existing reality in the society. Powerlessness did not always arise as a universal phenomenon for any specific group of people. I found it difficult to categorise any group or individuals as entirely oppressed, powerless or powerful. Poor as most of the farmers were, this did not imply that they were necessarily oppressed or powerless, e.g. they exhibited the power to reject or undermine the NGO's efforts; similarly the NGO was both powerful and powerless; the donor agencies were also 'powerless' at times.

Different individuals and groups expressed their power in various ways. The power of the villagers lay in their capacity to decide upon their actions independently and follow their own ideas rather than VEDCO's agendas, even when they appeared weak and vulnerable in their poverty, landlessness and food insecurity. This was demonstrated during all phases of the programme. In the first phase, they quietly refused to apply VEDCO's training because it was imposed on them and implemented at the wrong time of the year, trying to divert them from their programmes, which to the farmers would have spelt disaster. This forced VEDCO to respond to people's concerns in the second phase of the programme.

The way in which the villagers expressed their power often threatened VEDCO, an apparently strong NGO, its machinery and its donor friends. For instance, by refusing to respond to VEDCO's training that did not correspond with their personal interests, VEDCO was forced to rethink its approach and strategy as mentioned earlier. VEDCO itself and the donors were powerless in the face of farmers who refused to implement the programme as expected. Neither VEDCO nor the donors were able to keep their records and accountabilities straight without the cooperation of the farmers. Power was thus continuously changing hands. This demonstrated the fluidity of power and devalues the practice of branding people powerless, for anybody could be powerless at any given time. In the same way, identifying the oppressors was not always easy as shifts in power location often reflected shifts in advantages and disadvantages, and therefore levels of vulnerability to oppression. In this way, there were two obvious areas of disempowerment on the part of the farmers, namely: (a) their lack of knowledge of how much power they had over the future of VEDCO and donors, or else they would have used it to negotiate better deals for themselves; and (b) knowledge about marketing dynamics, especially at the international level which rendered them helpless in the face of exploitative middlemen. Theoretically, the above discussions find support in the writing of Foucault (1980), who viewed power as dynamic, dispersed, circulating, heteromorphous and always linked to knowledge. This in a way challenges the advocates of critical theory to look beyond and outside it in trying to explain socio-political dynamics.

Another finding that seemed to challenge the generalised notion of empowerment was related to the uniqueness of the communities VEDCO worked with. While it is anticipated in critical theory that collective action is necessary to deal with collective problems, in the case of my study I realised right from the beginning that collective action was not a favoured method of work among members of the community. Thus, expecting people to respond to problems collectively (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983) was an imposition of our own view of how communities should deal with their problems and contrary to the expectations of critical emancipatory learning and independent 'action-taking' arising from one's genuine understanding of the situation. Hence, prescribing the expected behaviour or semblance of an empowered community was in itself a manifestation of subtle technocratic assumptions, characteristic of the neoclassical framework and practically defeated the spirit behind the professed emancipatory goals of participatory development, action research and transformative education.

It must therefore be emphasised that power is not a possession or speciality of certain individuals or groups of people, which they can control and are free to dispense it as and when

they want. Power is dynamic; it shifts with time and the particular circumstances of people at a given time. The fluidity of power is part of the dynamic that ensures the survival of human society as it underscores the need for interdependence and symbiotic living. Secondly, society is not polarised into two diametrically opposed groups of oppressors and oppressed. The ability to oppress and be oppressed migrates with the shift in the location of power. In addition, because there are several forms of power and locations of power, even the fields of oppression can be many. Hence, the different dimensions of oppression based on aspects like gender, class, age religion, ethnicity and race.

In the final analysis, assuming that some people have power and others do not is a serious source of disempowerment for all people. In this case, the power of the so-called powerless is not utilised, while at the same time the powerlessness of the so-called powerful is not addressed, yet the two are important in addressing fundamental causes of disempowerment. Therefore, as an educator within community-based contexts one needs to be sensitive to community power dynamics as they directly and indirectly filter into the entire set up of learning processes and influence the results.

The socially critical assumption of levelling power gradients

Critical theory aims to reduce the power gradients between those with power and authority to dominate others and those considered powerless. This is when people gain the capacity to organise themselves collectively and without authoritarian control (as explained in Janse van Rensburg & Lotz-Sisitka, 2000). I found this assumption to be based on the defective premise of a polarised society of powerless and powerful classes of people. In situations with fluid power relations, like the one described above, a universal levelling of the power gradients is not easy to achieve due to the subtle nature of power structures and its many locations and manifestations.

At another level, the assumption that society is polarised does not take into consideration other scenarios like that of VEDCO, which is not necessarily on any particular side of the main divide, but rather a 'friend' to the so-called powerless. The truth is that even this kind of interaction involves power relations. Even in this case, I found the harmonisation of power relations a complicated matter because of the different positions occupied by the different people in terms of their socio-economic and other privileges. These positions would not only affect the interrelations between them, but also their understanding of each other's situation. Ellsworth (1989) brings out this paradox in her own situation where, as a person from a privileged section of American society, she was constrained to understand the situation of her racially harassed students.

Ellsworth's observation resonates with what happened in this study. VEDCO's understanding and analysis of the situation of the villagers was constrained by their different locations as follows: educated, employed, smartly dressed, compared to the villagers, riding motorbikes and able to advise farmers on matters that appeared complex to them. The extension workers' understanding of poverty could not be the same as that of the poor farmers. This revealed itself in some of the assumptions that were made about farmers, despite the participatory engagement. The assumption that all farmers could afford to get the necessary requirements for sustainable agricultural practices was a case in point. The question that arises here is, whether

power gradients can ever be effectively levelled, given the multiple locations of individuals and groups as a result of the fluidity of power in society as discussed earlier. I see this as an idealistic contention of critical theory that is very difficult to achieve in its entirety. The fact that it starts from the assumption that one group of people is empowered and the other is not means that it is flawed even before the process begins. My view is that, instead of aiming to level power gradients from a flawed technicist view of empowerment, as if it is a one-way transfer of power by the empowered to the disempowered, one should engage in a process of mutual empowerment from all angles through increased knowledge of and about each other, in order to appreciate one another's situation and be able to work towards each other's goals. My view should not be misconstrued to mean that no empowerment could ever take place. In this study, certain levels of transformation that could be seen as empowerment were attained but the degree and sustainability of the observed changes remained open to question.

Concluding Remarks

A number of lessons can be learnt and conclusions drawn from the experiences analysed in this paper. It reaffirms the ideological nature of education and points at the necessity for educators to be critically aware of this as they approach educational practice. The study has also demonstrated the potential of competing educational ideologies/theoretical frameworks to influence educational practice and breed inconsistencies and tensions whenever educators fail to clarify their own theoretical locations and take conscious steps to pursue them. In a community-based context, the paper has illustrated that not only competing educational ideologies, but also the competing worldviews of the different development actors and the incumbent complex community dynamics, exacerbate the magnitude of the contradictions and tensions.

   With regard to the use of emancipatory methods, it has been revealed that although participatory educational methods are potentially empowering, they can be used in a technicist-disempowering manner, to meet the educators' interests, depending on the ideology of the educator, his/her capacity to make effective use of the methods or some other contextual factors beyond the educators' control. In the case of this study, this is evident in the shifts in the direction of the application of participatory methods in the different phases of the programme. The findings have reiterated the fact that technocratic training structures, methods and strategies encouraged dependency among learners and also exposed the falsehoods behind the technicist belief that learning can be cascaded and trickled down from lead farmers into the community, while ignoring the contextual factors in which learning takes place.

   This paper has also illustrated that it is possible to achieve many of the goals of education as a social emancipatory process when pursued consciously using the appropriate methods and taking into consideration the contextual realities of a given community. Nevertheless, the critique of critical theory awakens us to the necessity to move beyond the simplistic uncritical adherence to some of the tenets of socially critical educational principles that may lead to instrumentalist outcomes, and instead seek their applicability within a given context. This helps us to re-examine the assumptions of critical theory on power, powerlessness and emancipation

and the role of education as an empowering process. We are made to realise that power and powerlessness are a little more complex, dynamic and fluid than often assumed. This has key implications for education in general and community-based environmental education as an empowering process in particular. It calls for educational programmes that employ processes that recognise the complexity of power and nurture strategies that can foster reciprocal empowerment for all stakeholders. It also implies educational approaches that emphasise synergy, go beyond and outside the rigid confines of given theoretical frameworks and seek theoretically appropriate and contextually relevant educational approaches.

Notes on the Contributor

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Endnotes

1   Habermas (1972) argues that there are three fundamental human interests; namely the technical, the practical and the critical or emancipatory, knowledge-constitutive interests that influence the different types of knowledge and educational processes.

2   Although the studies were in principle supposed to be participatory, in reality it turned out that participatory data collection methods were used technocratically to extract information from people, making the end product more of an organisational rather than a collective community/NGO programme.

3   Poverty is a major national problem in Uganda and a key policy concern towards which several major government interventions have been directed in the last decade. The country's major strategy for rural development for the current decade is specifically designed to address rural poverty through the modernisation of agriculture. VEDCO's concern for and focus on poverty alleviation through agriculture is directly linked to the national policy framework.

4   A study by Kyaddondo and Kyomuhedo (2000) discovered that a large number of households (45%) experienced a food deficit for at least three months every year.

5   RDDA is a top-down approach to programme development and implementation based on the traditional centre-to-periphery development model. The model entrusts the destiny of people to the hands of a few experts believed to have the capacity to analyse the problems of others and come up with appropriate responses to identified problem (Popkewitz, 1984).

6   E. Schuurman (1997) describes technicism as a fundamental attitude that seeks to control reality and to solve all problems with the use of scientific-technological methods and tools. Technicist approaches therefore make exclusive efforts to explain and deal with development and other socio-economic issues using science, technology and the related scientific methods as if the causes of problems confronting society are always exclusively technical and only solvable through similar means.

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