Cultural learning styles

Planning a program around local learning styles

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0. Introduction

Learning is a characteristic of human life—everyone does it, and does it all the time in some form or other, but when it comes to looking at the processes involved in **how** people learn, we find that there are still more questions than answers, despite the vast quantity of research and discussion on the subject.

Finding out how people learn in our own culture is hard enough, but when it comes to looking at people in other cultures, the problems are multiplied. Learning involves the interaction of the cognitive processes of the brain with the learning environment of the person and, although this second area is easy to analyse as it belongs to the visible world, the first area, cognition, is unseen, and here is where the difficulties arise. Do different cultural groups think the same? How can we measure the thought processes? If thinking **is** different, is it because of different genetic abilities, or different usage of the same abilities? These are some of the questions I wish to touch on briefly in this paper. I will then take one model for analysing cultural differences and apply it to the Southern Kalinga people of Northern Luzon, Philippines, among whom I lived for 30 months while implementing a literacy program. Finally, I would like to discuss the implications of this topic for further literacy work among cultures different from our own.

1. Cognition and culture

Historically there are two extreme viewpoints as to how different people in different cultures think:

a. Thought processes of non-Western, so-called "primitive" cultures are linked to the concrete form. People of these cultures do not use "logic" and are incapable of the abstract, logical, or rational thought prized in Western society. Studies of the mythology and belief systems of other cultures gave rise to this view, that is, the belief system was seen as irrational, therefore, thought processes were viewed the same.

b. At the other extreme, there is the viewpoint that no fundamental difference exists between thought processes of different human groups but that the doctrine of psychic unity makes mankind as one. All cultures are capable of the same style of thought. Franz Boas was a main proponent of this theory.

c. A third concedes that basic thought processes are the same for all people, but that these processes are appropriate in different situations in various cultures and, therefore, will be **used** differently.

> Evolution has not created two different human minds—one for Westerners, another for everybody else. It is culture that develops certain potentials of the human mind here and others there (Cole, Gay, Glick, and Sharp 1971:viii).

The great difficulty in confirming any theory of cognition in relation to culture is in testing. Non-Western people tend to do poorly on IQ tests, but this does not mean that they are any less intelligent.

This could mean either that we are of a master race, or else that we are, in effect, accepting an assumption that there is only one really good way to use the human brain, and that is our way—whatever that may be (Gladwin 1974:29).

Cole and others have gone a step further than this with their theory, that the thought processes may really be the same, but that poor test results occur because the people tested simply failed to see the applicability of a particular reasoning process to the experimental tasks. In looking at the Kpelle people of Africa, we see that they did find differences—for example, the Kpelle were better able to estimate measures of rice, but less able to estimate time than the Americans tested. Western-style schooling was found to have an effect on short-term memory recall by providing structures around which the material could be organized. The noneducated people did not have the organizational structure. However, there was no clear, overall pattern to prove inherent differences in cognitive **ability;** hence, the conclusion that it was only the **use** of such abilities that differed.

Another study, by H. A. Witkin (1967), looked at one particular dimension of cognitive style, that of global or field dependent versus articulated or field independent. By using various tests involving perception, he concluded that some cultures did differ from others along this dimension, but that the differences were a result of social patterns and environment rather than innate ability. For example, the greater the strictness in child rearing and the greater the diversity in the environment, the more field dependent the people were in their perception. But, liberal parents in less diverse environments, such as

the Eskimos, tended to produce children less dependent on outer, concrete clues in their perception. He concluded that cognitive styles were the end products of particular socialization processes.

Gladwin (1974) compared Trukese and Western cognitive processes in the area of navigation and found vast differences. The Westerner works from specific details, using relational and abstract thinking to integrate and relate these, arriving at a solution deductively and working out a plan in advance that will be followed exactly. The Trukese, on the other hand, start with the total picture or the desired conclusion, then fill in the details as they go along, improvising each step with the final goal in mind. This is a nonverbal process and does not follow a "logical" series of steps, but is completely effective in allowing the Trukese to navigate a canoe over vast areas of open sea. Westerners use much the same process in driving a car, taking in many clues without conscious thought. Thus, we see that it is not that the two cultures cannot use the same processes, but that they apply them in different situations. The most crucial area affecting learning styles appears to be the culture itself, rather than inherent cognitive processes. In the words of Cole, Gay, Glick, and Sharp (1971):

> What learning experiences influence a person's acquisition of a particular cognitive strategy, or his particular situation? This reformulated question is crucial for the psychologists understanding of thought and cognition, and it cannot be answered without careful consideration of the culture in which a person lives and the environment in which his previous learning experience occurred (viii).

We will now turn to a model for comparing cultures.

2. The basic values model

The model developed by Marvin K. Mayers looks at the basic values which regulate people's behaviour and plots these values along several continua. The values themselves are appropriate to all cultures, but it is the particular position each occupies on the continuum which makes the difference between various cultures. Some things are of greater value than others, and it is this difference that will give rise to different decision-making processes and different learning styles. I will discuss the six different continua and look at the Kalinga culture in the light of each one.

2.1. Time—event

A time-oriented person or culture will be concerned with the measure of time as it relates to life, punctuality, careful planning with goals set in specific time periods, and trying to accomplish as much as possible in a given time period. A relationship is seen between time spent and the outcome, so there is an expectation of a certain result. For example, if more time is spent at work, more money earned is the expected result. Time-oriented people will also not fear the unknown too greatly.

An event-oriented person, on the other hand, will not be so concerned with the time period or planning ahead, but will work on a problem until it is resolved, or wait and see what develops from a gathering of

people rather than planning what will be done. The present is more important than either the future or past history, and personal experience is the guiding force rather than the experience of others.

Western culture, and particularly American culture, is very time oriented. However, in the Kalinga village of Mallango where I worked, the culture is much more at the event end of the continuum. Very few people owned watches and, although there were many time-words in the language, they were geared to particular events or points of time, rather than a continuing passage of time.

These times are approximate and flexible, so there is no definite time point when they occur. A meeting will begin when everyone arrives—after they have all had breakfast, for example, fetched water, washed the pots, or whatever else they need to do. There is no hurry to begin "on time" as there is in western society, because the people are just not conscious of minutes ticking by as the westerner is. It is no use planning for tomorrow, because who knows what the weather will be, what visitors may drop in, or what other events may occur to alter the situation. People simply take advantage of situations when they come—when the sun shines the rice is dried, or if it rains they can have literacy class.

2.2. Dichotomy—holism

The person or culture at the dichotomy end of the scale sees the part as more important than the whole and sets up categories to understand life and where he fits into it. Things tend to be seen as black and white and the individual is very concerned about doing the right thing. He is highly systematized in terms of classifying and organizing experiences and ideas in his mind.

The holistic person looks more at how the parts relate to the whole and will become very frustrated if asked to consider parts in isolation. It is integration of thought and life which brings satisfaction, rather than doing the "right" thing.

This is the value continuum that we saw working in the Trukese method of navigation as compared to the western system, and it can be seen in the Kalinga outlook on life where the important thing is to be acceptable in the group and work in relation to it rather than the individualistic approach of Western society. Something is neither right nor wrong in isolation, but only as it relates to the whole situation. For example, killing was good and desirable in the context of headhunting or revenge, but not within the kinship group. In the area of marriage, personal desires are not as important as the wishes of the family, so a girl may marry to please her parents. There is no idea of personal rights devoid from family obligations.

2 3. Crisis—noncrisis

The crisis-oriented person focuses on one alternative—the correct one as indicated by the expert or authority figure. He will look to written authorities and history to find the solution and in learning experiences will take as gospel what the instructor says.

The noncrisis person will prefer to select a solution after being presented with all the alternatives and will be frustrated when learning is presented in a lecture situation. The selection of an alternative is not a hard-and-fast thing, but related to the time and situation, so a different choice may be made at some later date.

This is a difficult area in which to categorise a culture, as I can see a great variety among individuals, both in Western and Kalinga society. However, I feel that the Kalinga are more crisis oriented than the Westerner, looking to the ways of the ancestors as the authority on how things should be done. Philippine education is definitely crisis oriented, with the emphasis on rote learning, but in traditional Kalinga society, people learned by observation and by doing. Children are allowed their own way, to experiment with sharp bush knives or anything else they want, so in that situation they are involved in alternatives and choices. Only one alternative is really presented, however, as they look around them and copy what they see. In formal schooling then, an introduced thing, the Kalinga are definitely crisis oriented, but in other areas of life there is more a mixture—reliance on past or tradition as the authority, but on unwillingness to accept authority figures now. In everyday life, people make their own decisions and no one seems to have the right to dictate or be the authority for someone else.

2.4. Object as goal—person or interaction as goal

The goal-conscious person, the one who looks to the object as goal, sets his priority on achieving a definite goal and will sacrifice everything to reach it. His friendship is with people who have similar goals, but he will go it alone if necessary.

On the other hand, the interaction-conscious person, the one who looks to people as goal, is more interested in talking and in interacting with people than in reaching a set goal. Rules and appointments can be broken if they interfere with personal involvement, and security comes from group involvement.

In Kalinga society, the emphasis is definitely on people as goal. It is unthinkable to do anything alone—eat, sleep, or work, and friends will notice if you are ever by yourself and will come to keep you company so you will not be lonely. For the Westerner who values privacy, this can be a very frustrating experience. Relationships are very important to the Kalinga, hence, the emphasis on not shaming anyone and using go-betweens when differences have occurred. If visitors arrive or if a ceremony is needed, everything else will be dropped.

2.5. Prestige ascribed—prestige achieved

People for whom prestige is an ascribed thing will be anxious to conform to the society's norms. They will sacrifice much to achieve the rank and prestige they desire; they expect others to respect this rank. They associate most with people of like rank and look to formal credentials as important signs of prestige. They will play the role demanded by the status.

People who see prestige as achieved will ignore formal credentials and look instead to the qualities of the person. They will work to prove themselves and struggle constantly to achieve prestige in their own eyes.

In traditional Kalinga society, prestige was earned or achieved through skill in head-hunting and oratory. With headhunting no longer being practiced, educational achievement has become an accepted way to earn respect and the consequent emphasis on certificates and credentials would almost seem to point to the prestige ascribed end of the scale. However, the person must still work to prove himself and will gain recognition only when his skills are manifested in oratory, education, or wisdom in mediating personal

disputes. Fighting can still earn this prestige, too, and local rebels we met were very quick to boast about how many soldiers they had killed.

2.6. Vulnerability as weakness—vulnerability as strength

The person who sees vulnerability as a weakness will do everything to keep from making errors and will try to cover up if he does make mistakes. He will use euphemisms or speak vaguely about personal areas of his life and be unwilling to be involved in a new experiment.

The person who sees vulnerability as a strength will not worry about making mistakes and will be willing to admit them when he does. He will tell stories that expose his weaknesses and will talk freely about personal areas of his life. He also will be willing to be involved in new experiments.

Of all the six value continua, I feel this is the one most governed by individual differences, rather than cultural characteristics. Most people in any culture tend to see vulnerability as weakness and the Kalinga are no exception. Shame is one of the most powerful controls in Philippine society, so not only do people hide their mistakes, but they will also avoid exposing others' mistakes to refrain from shaming the individual. The Kalinga are also great debaters and enjoy arguing a point to the end, another characteristic of the vulnerability-as-weakness end of the continuum. As already mentioned, oratory is a means of gaining prestige and because arguing is a great pastime, people will continue a discussion all night if they are interested. This is the way believers have shared their faith and by which the Gospel has been spread.

To sum up, my observations of the Kalinga people indicate that they tend strongly toward the following cultural values:

Event

Holism

Crisis

Interaction (people as goal)

Prestige ascribed

Vulnerability as weakness

The remaining part of this paper will look at how these cultural values may affect a literacy program.

3. Implications for literacy programs

Traditionally, the Kalinga had no formal institution for education, for passing on the knowledge of their culture and needed skills. Instead, children were allowed complete freedom but learned through observing and helping. The only things that were purposefully passed on involved the history of the child's kinship group—wrongs experienced, revenge needed, and possessions owned. The social values themselves and the practical skills were simply learned by osmosis.

> There is … no formal education of the child, but the very spontaneity and unconstrainedness of the process probably make it the more efficient in molding the young individual to conformity with his group's social patterns (Barton 1949:13).

Government schools have been in the area for many years now and education is highly valued among the Kalinga. In fact, mothers will often sell all their prized antique beads to put their children through school. As I have already mentioned, the methods used in Philippine schools rely heavily on rote learning, and in areas where the medium of instruction is not in the mother tongue, or even in a language spoken by the students, the rote learning emphasis becomes even greater.

There is a dichotomy, then, between the traditional or more noncrisis style of learning which is by practical experimentation, and the recent emphasis on the crisis-oriented formal schooling. However, since literacy falls into the "educational" sphere (new and formal learning), the methods of the school system must be taken into account as well as the other basic values of the society. To be culturally relevant, the literacy program must take all the aspects discussed into consideration.

For the event-oriented Kalinga, it will be useless to insist on a set time or duration for literacy classes, and the teacher must be prepared for long waits while the students finish other tasks, and stroll along to class, discussing all the latest gossip along the way! The key here is flexibility and, in my own experience, I found that the weather was the biggest deciding factor as to when classes would be held. On sunny days there was much work in the fields or in drying rice around the house, but if it rained the students would want class all day and at night too, if the teacher could keep going. I found their attention-span incredible when they were geared up to learn—perhaps another factor of being event-oriented. It did not matter to my students how much time had passed if the situation was still right to continue.

The holistic orientation points to the importance of the group in providing a social context for learning and the need for each student to feel acceptable in that group. In the village of Mallango, there was a division between those who lived in the "down" section, and those who lived in the "up" section. People from one section did not want to go to class in the other part, so we had to have classes for "ups" and classes for "downs." They would have felt uncomfortable in the opposite group.

The methods and materials should also keep the wider context in focus by relating the parts to the whole. I feel Sarah Gudschinsky's method does this. We used a modified Gudschinsky approach, always relating back to bigger chunks of words and sentences, so the small units of letter and syllable could be seen in the context of the rest of life. Here the importance of relating reading instruction to intercultural community work comes into focus. We did not do this, and we found that only the Christians had the motivation to stick with the hard job of learning to read. It may have been that the rest could not relate reading to their lives. An intercultural community work component perhaps would have provided the needed relevancy.

We have seen rather a mixture along the crisis-noncrisis continuum. Although tradition is the authority, or one **person** is, and although the traditional learning style is by observation and doing, the formal school, which now figures largely in village life, uses the rote method. There seem to be two systems at work here, so to be relevant in the traditional way, we need to use traditional materials for our stories, if possible, and also allow students to copy and learn from each other, rather than to insist that each

individual do his own work, as Westerners often emphasise. On the other hand, more use may be made of rote learning, the new system, as that is the expected method for any new schooling. Although it goes against the Western grain, our lay-teachers did revert to this, despite our entreaties not to, and their students learned just the same.

There is one other factor that comes into play, and that is the theory of limited good. Although not a part of Mayers' model, it affects the area of authority, so I will discuss it here. This theory looks on the good things of this life as limited and, therefore, if one person gains more, someone else will automatically lose out. Because of this, if someone teaches he may feel he is giving away some of his "good," or if someone sets himself up as a leader, he is trying to take more than his fair share of respect and prestige. We found that no one wanted to take on leadership roles in Mallango, and most of the lay-teachers we trained quit after a short time, with only vague reasons as to why. Although not the only reason, I feel this theory sheds some light on the problem. Therefore, it is all right for the foreigner to teach (he is outside the system and brings in extra good with him), but the local person must teach obliquely in order to avoid criticism from his friends. For an ongoing program in this society, then, there needs to be some sort of social group whereby people can learn by observation with a minimum of casual help from the "teacher." The church seems the obvious structure where this would be possible, and maybe some sort of social clubs along intercultural community work lines would also work.

For interaction-conscious cultures, where people are the goal, we cannot expect students to work in isolation or put the "lesson" ahead of the needs of people in the group or the community. Therefore, students must be allowed to work together and help each other, and the class should be a social time where general needs or matters of interest can be discussed. Because our classes were very much this way, they also provided me with the perfect language learning situation as well as a way of making close friends and becoming a part of the society. We must also expect the class to take second place to other events, such as visitors dropping by, a peace-pact celebration, or even birthday feast (a recent innovation), and be willing to enjoy these events without getting frustrated over the time lost for the literacy class.

Earned prestige is a great motivating force for literacy and education is already seen as a means of earning it. Achievement must be acknowledged and it is very important to give certificates and other recognition at a graduation ceremony. The fact that the district government school supervisor came to our adult graduation in Mallango was a topic of conversation for a long time afterward and gave the adults a tremendous boost—he had never before made it to any of the school graduations.

Finally, with vulnerability seen as weakness, we need to be careful that students can learn without ever suffering embarrassment or shame. Steps should be small enough to be handled with success and mistakes must not be pointed out too bluntly. Also, because of the love of arguing a point, it would be good to allow discussion wherever relevant and the teacher or leader must know his subject well enough to be able to convince the students.

These are just a few implications that a study of the values and learning styles of a culture can have on the literacy program. The program can probably never be completely done in traditional style, by the mere fact that it is introducing something new, but the closer it comes, the more likelihood there is of success and ongoingness. Many aspects of the cultural learning style can be discovered by research before the

program is developed, while others may become obvious only when it is well underway. The key then, is to be aware that differences may exist, to look for them, and above all to be flexible in dealing with them.

Basic values	Characteristics in Kalinga society	Implications for literacy programs
Event oriented	Things are done when needed. Time is seen in blocks rather than continuous. All work is dropped for a special occasion.	[There are] no set times for classes. Flexibility is a must. Do not be frustrated at having to skip classes for other events.
Holistic	Things are judged right or wrong only in relation to the situation. [People] need to be accepted in the group.	Importance is of providing a social context for learning. Methods and materials should always present the parts in relation to the whole. Literacy needs to be seen as fitting into the rest of life, for example, intercultural community work approach.
Crisis oriented	Tradition is the authority; learn by doing. Rote learning [is used] in schools. Theory is	Use tradition in text material. Accept students' copying each other. Make

		of limited good.	greater use of rote learning.
goal	People as	is done alone.	Nothing	Do not expect students to work in isolation. Accept their helping each other. Accept class as a social time—allow general discussion.
achieved	Prestige	earned traditionally by headhunting and oratory. Education replaces headhunting in earning prestige. Industry also gains respect.	Respect	Education is an important way to gain prestige, so achievement must be acknowledged. [Realize the] importance of certificates and graduation ceremony.
Vulnerability as weakness		Emphasis is on not shaming anyone. [Know the] importance of arguing the point.		Be careful not to point out mistakes too bluntly. Allow for discussion where relevant.

Summary chart

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