TRAINING FOR THE AFRICAN MIND

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ABSTRACT. This article reviews the relevancy of four key Western adult learning principles and their suitability for the African context. For the purpose of this study, the following key precepts are examined: (a) adults learn best when they actively participate in the learning process (the basis for experiential activities in adult learning settings); (b) adults are independent learners, (indeed, andragogues believe that adults are independent learners and should be made responsible for their learning, while “teachers” serve as “facilitators”); (c) feedback is an essential tool in guiding both facilitator and learners toward their learning objectives, thereby, optimizing learning; and (d) finally, the appropriateness and effects of using Western languages such as English or French in training situations in sub-Saharan Africa.

SOMMAIRE. Cette étude évalue l'adaptabilité de quatre principes-clés de la formation des adultes dans le contexte africain. Pour cet article, l'auteur a choisi d'analyser les quatre principes-clés de l'apprentissage des adultes qui stipulent que: (a) les adultes apprennent bien lorsqu'ils participent de façon active à leur apprentissage (c'est d'ailleurs ce qui explique la préférence donnée aux activités expérientielles); (b) Que les adultes sont des apprenants indépendants qui devraient être rendus responsables de leur apprentissage, pendant que les enseignants servent seulement de facilitateurs) et (c) le feedback est un élément essentiel du processus d'apprentissage permettant au facilitateur et à l'apprenant d'atteindre leurs objectifs et donc d'optimiser l'apprentissage; et (d) finalement, le bien fondé et les conséquences de l'usage de langues occidentales telles que l'anglais et le français dans des situations de formation en Afrique subsaharienne sera également examiné.

RESUMEN. Este artículo examina la relevancia de preceptos teóricos que atanen al aprendizaje que derivan principalmente de Europa y Norteamérica, y su compatibilidad con el contexto africano. La investigación se limita a las siguientes cuatro suposiciones claves: (a) que los adultos aprenden mejor cuando participan en forma directa y activa en el proceso de aprendizaje (este precepto sirve de base para las actividades “experienciales” en programas diseñados para adultos); (b)
que los adultos son aprendices independientes (más bien, los andragogos — para diferenciar de los pedagogos— creen que ya que los adultos son aprendices independientes, deben ser ellos los responsables por su propio aprendizaje mientras que los “profesores” se convierten en los “facilitadores” del proceso; (c) que el “feedback,” o la retroalimentación, es un instrumento imprescindible qui guía al facilitador y a los aprendices hacia sus objetivos educacionales, optimando así el aprendizaje; y (d) por último, considera la idoneidad y los efectos de utilizar lengua extranjera como inglés o francés en vez de las lengua nativas de los participantes para programas de entrenamiento en el Africa al sur del Sahara.

OVERVIEW AND STUDY GOALS

Adult training is often carried out in Africa in the same way it is delivered in the West and particularly in the United States. The underlying assumption, whether explicitly articulated or not, is that Africans learn in the same way that Americans or other Westerners do. Although researchers and practitioners in the field of training acknowledge differences in the ways people from diverse cultures learn (Claxton & Murell, 1987; Hofstede, 1986; Morical & Tsai, 1992; Vella, 1993), assessment of the effectiveness and relevancy of Western training methods applied in the African context is generally lacking.

This study seeks to reexamine key principles of adult learning theories and to assess their suitability for training in an African context. For purposes of this study four principles have been selected: (a) adults learn best when they actively participate in the learning process (the basis for including experiential activities in adult learning settings); (b) adults are independent learners. (indeed, andragogues believe that adults are independent learners and should be made responsible for their learning while “teachers” serve as “facilitators”); (c) feedback is an essential tool in guiding both facilitator and learners toward their training objectives, thereby, optimizing the results; and (d) finally, the appropriateness and effects of using Western languages such as English or French in training situations in sub-Saharan Africa.

This study draws on materials from relevant sociological as well as anthropological data compiled on African traditional learning styles and patterns (Erny, 1972; Zahan, 1963). These data provide a frame for

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1Two reasons might explain this situation: First, it is possible, though some practitioners may not espouse this assumption, that current training models are being used for lack of relevant models to the African context. Second, evidence in the field suggests that many trainers, however, use these Western models because of cultural insensitivity.

2Adult learning principles that have been applied across cultures are excluded from this study; e.g., adults learn best when subject matters are relevant, adults learn by trial and error, adults have different learning styles. The first three principles listed are inherent in the work of Kolb (1984) and Knowles (1978); the fourth concerns the language of training, an issue which arises from my own training experience.
discussing the effectiveness and appropriateness of training practices and activities with regard to active participation, learner's independence, giving and receiving feedback, and the impact of the use of native vs. nonnative languages in training. The paper also draws from the author's own experience as both a trainee and a trainer during the last 10 years in several African countries.

LEARNING AS A PASSIVE PROCESS

In the traditional African context, learning is generally viewed as a passive process, and one that relies heavily on extensive observation. In most of sub-Saharan Africa, from birth to age 14 (the time at which most people are initiated), the child or adolescent is expected to be a passive learner and one who asks a minimal number of questions.

Instead of the active participation in the learning process called for by many Western theorists and practitioners, African learners in traditional contexts most often undergo deductive processes in addition to utilizing observations they make of their experiences. This results in the development of specific learning styles that contrast sharply with those common in a Western context where passivity connotes a lack of energy, a lack of direction and leadership. For this reason, one consciously avoids being perceived as a passive person. Conversely, in the African setting, passivity is a quality that is valued and cultivated. For example, in the case of a dispute between two people, the one who remains passive is normally perceived to be the one who is right. Witnesses to the dispute will tend to see the passive person as a victim. It is not rare to hear from onlookers: "He was insulted, he was spat at, and yet he did not say a word! What a great person s/he is!"

Being passive in the African context is a sign that one is wise and has self-control. It is also thought that a passive person will always be helped or backed by the gods. Thus, by remaining passive, a person seeks refuge in higher powers. By extension, valuing passivity in a learning situation acknowledges that no one possesses the whole truth and therefore one should not rush to make statements or choices. This view is reflected in an African proverb that says: "Only the fool rushes." Instead, an extensive period of observation and reflection precedes action and is necessary for one to insure the next course of proper behaviors. The appropriate sequence is suggested in the following diagram:

Observation ———> Reflection ———> Imitation/Doing

Even after reaching adulthood—a phase that usually starts after a person's initiation—when one is expected to engage more actively in
one's learning process, questions are not encouraged, given the view that Africans have of questions. For the most part, questions are considered intrusive in the African context and it is improper to ask questions, especially of older people or strangers. This explains the frequent formation of questions that contain within them a proposed or suggested answer. For example, instead of asking someone where s/he or she is from, it is better to say: "I guess you are from Kaya, aren't you?" What might be an innocent way of diminishing the directness of a question can actually be perceived as presumptuous by a Westerner who might consider this type of question as too assuming or even arrogant, because it limits the choice of responses. For the African, however, it does not really matter that the name Kaya was used at all; it could as easily have been Timbuktu or Ouagadougou. The speaker's purpose is to soften inquiry because of the negative connotation that questions carry\(^7\) and to use questions only to increase one's understanding of phenomena or societal rules, but not to challenge them. This is an important distinction from the ways questions are utilized in the West to check also the veracity of a fact, statement, or phenomenon.

**KNOWLEDGE IS RESPECTED**

A second principle of Western training practices that is conflictive with the African context relates to the need for the individual to be an independent learner. Because knowledge is highly valued, respected, and even feared in Africa, the learner grows very dependent on the trainer. Indeed, from a young age and on into adulthood, a dependency relationship is nurtured and strengthened between the child and the sources of knowledge and wisdom (Erny, 1972). To understand this relationship better, one only has to go back to what was said earlier regarding the negative connotation of question asking. This dependency relationship, as explained by several authors, is cultivated by traditional societies to keep members in line with societal rules (Bowen, 1984; Disasa, 1988; Erny, 1972). It is perceived as the best method to preserve and transmit tradition. Independence, on the other hand, reflects behaviors that only social rejects and marginal individuals adopt to express themselves. It is therefore discouraged and, in most cases, punishable in one way or another.

\(^7\)The job interview situation provides an interesting perspective on the use of questions. In the Western context candidates are expected to ask questions at the end of the interview to demonstrate that one is interested in the employer's organization. Failing to ask questions decreases one's chance of being hired. On the contrary, in the African context, asking many questions at the end of the job interview is not well taken and will most likely diminish one's chances of being hired.
Independence is acceptable, however, in certain specific situations, as, for example, among peers. This arises from the fact that traditionally, children are raised together in classes or groups with other children of the same sex and age. These groups, created according to gender and age, may be likened to fraternities and sororities on U.S. campuses. Within these classes or groups one is allowed to challenge another person's thoughts and behavior. This important distinction dictates the context and situations in which individuals feel most comfortable asking questions and interacting freely without concern for transgressing societal rules. Indeed, the more homogeneous a group is with regard to sex, age, and therefore experience, the more interaction is possible. One problem that occurs in Western training programs then, is that individuals who barely know one another are often asked to work together by interacting and participating in group activities, countering local norms. Given the emphasis put on age, experience, and consensus, trainers of Africans might avoid having one person dominate discussion by adopting an appropriate format for group activities. For example, one might start by forming small homogeneous groups of two to three people and progressively move from small groups to medium-sized groups involving from four to eight people while still taking into consideration factors of gender, age, and social class.

Because much emphasis is also put on extensive observation during the learning process, this, too, has implications for the skills required of learners. One such skill is memorization, which is needed and valued in many oral tradition-based societies. Consequently, conveying information in a lecture format, for example, may often be more appropriate than involving trainees in a more participatory approach. Indeed, it is also part of a learning pattern that is common throughout the African continent at all levels of education, including higher education. It is firmly rooted in the oral tradition, which stresses history, the word, and memory (Calame-Griaule, 1965; Courlander, 1975; Zahan, 1963). As an example, while in high school, I had a history professor who came to class and talked for 2 hours without looking at his notes. What we liked best and admired him for was his ability to provide vivid descriptions of historical events complete with exact places and dates, all from his excellent memory. We called him the modern griot, and other students were envious that we had him as our professor. Ten years later when I returned to Burkina Faso to work as a Program Assistant at the American Cultural Center, I happened to organize a conference on the "Role of the United Nations in Regional Conflicts," which my former professor attended. On one occasion, when a question was asked of the guest speaker, he took over and dazzled the audience with his long answers and his precise historical dates. I began to feel annoyed by his long tirade and pondered whether I should ask him to be brief, but when I looked
around at the audience, I realized that almost everyone in the room was in awe of his speech. This made me refrain from cutting him off. The important lesson here is that one's ability to memorize facts is highly valued and one cannot dismiss lecture presentations as an appropriate form of teaching adults in an African context. Western models often display an ethnocentric view when lectures are almost exclusively replaced by other training approaches.

To illustrate a training and learning framework based on traditional African models, the training-learning context can be represented by two axes. In Figure 1, the vertical axis is unidirectional implying that the trainer can ask questions of the trainees, but very few questions are asked by trainees of the trainer. Conversely, the horizontal axis, which suggests more interaction and dialogue, should therefore be the preferred model for learning activities in smaller homogeneous groups involving peers whose relationships are perceived as more nearly equal because they were formed around same gender and similar ages.

GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

*Trainer: How do you feel about this session?*
*Trainee: I don't feel anything.*

**FIGURE 1.** A training and learning framework based on traditional African learning styles.
I have yet to meet anyone, including myself, who has had a bad training experience in Africa. All one hears from the neophyte to the more experienced trainer is that everything went extremely well in the training program and that it was a marvelous experience. Feedback is normally overwhelmingly positive and because of this, rarely provides useful recommendations for improving future training sessions. Below the surface of the trainees' responses though, lie opinions and critiques about the sessions, their content, relevancy, and training methods. Yet the hierarchical relationship that exists between trainers and trainees (as represented by the vertical axis in Figure 1) allows a only person of authority—either by age or knowledge (yam)—to be in a position to offer feedback. Therefore, the notion that a trainer (who presumably has knowledge) might solicit suggestions from people who perceive themselves as recipients of the trainer's knowledge (vertical axis) is an improbable and unusual situation.

This circumstance is compounded by the fact that in high context societies, as is the case of much of Africa, people refrain from critiquing each other openly because of their unwillingness to separate the actor from the actions. One way to circumvent this blockage of feedback and to facilitate a more open exchange of views and impressions along the vertical axis is to use a triangular model of obtaining feedback. This involves engaging an intermediary to help channel feedback comments back to the trainer (Figure 2).

\[\text{FIGURE 2. A triangular model of feedback.}\]
In a triangular model of feedback, the trainer is removed from the direct feedback line. This has the merit of safeguarding the trainer's honor, since losing face is indeed socially unacceptable and further shames and isolates an individual. For this reason, a triangular approach provides the benefit of removing the trainer from the "trajectory of words" that participants may express about his or her performance and thus render the content of the feedback less personal.

The triangular model of feedback achieves optimal success when intermediaries are persons who are trusted by the participants. Intermediaries should be chosen on the basis of gender and age and should be familiar with the training topic. An alternative approach, of course, is for trainers to seek to gather impressions from trainees informally during talks after hours. Dialogs in informal settings work better because they lessen the distance and respect created by the hierarchical axis.

Another way of understanding the African's attitude vis-à-vis feedback is to view feedback in the same way that greetings are viewed and performed in many African societies. For example, even though the person being greeted might be sick, in most cases the anticipated reply to the question "how are you" is "fine" or "I am well." Only after one has gone through the usual greeting sequence might the interlocutor acknowledge that he or she is sick. However, even in this case, the closure will usually be "... But I feel better today." When training Peace Corps volunteers, I remember they would often jokingly ask "When am I allowed to say that I am not feeling well, or I am dying?" The point is that pain or discomfort can be acknowledged but only after first saying that everything is fine.

The following example further helps to illustrate the state of the African mind when giving or receiving feedback. Imagine that someone has stolen all 60 of Kakou's cows. Kakou goes to seek help and counsel from the village chief. He does not announce his problem as the first matter of his visit. In fact, during the exchange of greetings he must first say that everything is fine. After a moment the chief will then ask, "So what brings you, Kakou?" Only at this time can Kakou tell him about his problem. Contrast this approach to the way one would speak after dialing 911 in the low-context culture of the United States. In the African context, effective feedback can be obtained only if it is conducted in the appropriate sequences (similar to greetings). In the first stage, feedback is devoted to identifying and discussing positive aspects of the training session; in the second stage, the trainer might gradually move on to solicit recommendations (see Figure 3).

The framework shown in Figure 3 suggests several implications for training design and implementation. For example, discussion groups should be constituted based on criteria that promote group solidarity, such as sex, age, and social class, found along the horizontal axis. In
rural settings, group discussions that do not consider these aspects are less likely to function effectively since the oldest male will most certainly curtail the discussion process and discourage contrary viewpoints. Moreover, it would not even occur to anyone to express any opinions until the acknowledged leader (by sex and age) has first expressed his or her own opinion. From there on, however, the remainder of the exchange would be a concerted effort to expand on and to support the leader’s views. ‘Competition ensues to see who can best rephrase and agree with the leader’s viewpoint, often providing an interesting theatrical and rhetorical display to watch. Respect for age and knowledge is so important that training activities are most effective when designed to allow each participant to work individually, and then in small homogeneous groups before moving on to larger discussion groups.

A final consideration is the preference to be accorded to activities that require in-depth observations and that utilize visual, listening, and memorization skills. Throughout these activities, facilitators should consistently prompt trainees with questions to facilitate their learning rather than wait for questions from the participants themselves.

THE “LANGUAGE” OF TRAINING

Given that the training and learning framework presented in this paper highlights traditional African teaching and learning approaches, one cannot help but wonder about the implications of using English or French as the medium for training delivery, since Western languages necessarily convey different perceptions, realities, and world views (Fantini, 1992). The last part of this paper considers whether or not the use
of a non-African language is a hindrance to the African's learning style. For this discussion, the focus will be on contrastive meanings and connotations of key training concepts used across French, English, and Moore, a language of Burkina Faso.

Given that the African learning mode favors a sequence of observation, reflection, and imitation, one can assume that the preferred cognitive strategy is a deductive one. This, then, also raises questions about the use of English or French in training, since these languages represent cultures that often utilize inductive cognitive processes (Kaplan, 1988, p. 208). One could argue that inductive cognitive processes coupled with a linear, cause-effect reasoning favored by English and French speakers emphasize training activities that may not necessarily correspond to the thought patterns and problem-solving approaches of Africans, more accustomed to deductive cognitive approaches.

Trainers who use African languages in their training will be better equipped to express themselves in a less linear fashion with a message structure that is based on high repetition and that utilizes narrative and critical incidents. Furthermore, the inductive cognitive processes favored by many English or French speakers, could undervalue observation as an important first step in the learning process. Instead, Western trainers often emphasize the use of questioning, abstraction, and sequential argument in which individuals are challenged, as a common approach to developing knowledge. This in turn further mitigates against trainees accustomed to a different learning mode. Furthermore, the French and English languages are less compatible with the key training precepts discussed earlier in this paper and may even interfere with or negate African cultural and contextual meanings and implications.

Language and cognitive processes are categorized in Table 1 in four ways: message structure, message transmission, message retention, and

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>Language and Cognitive Processes in Moore, French and English</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mossi language and culture and other cultures valuing orality</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Message structure</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Message transmission</td>
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<td>Message retention</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication pattern</td>
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communication pattern. These categories are adapted from Robert Shut-
er's work on the learning styles of the Hmong of Laos (Shuter, 1994).

To explain further, I will discuss three of the key concepts from Table 1: imitation, passivity, and feedback. In Moore, for example, the word *imitate* does not have the negative connotation that it sometimes has in English and French. Indeed, the same word, *zamse*, which is used for "to imitate" is also used to mean "to learn and to teach." Similar findings are reported in several other African languages (Erny, 1972). The French verb, *imiter*, and the English *to imitate* both exclude the notion of either "teaching" or "learning." The same can also be said about the concept of "passivity". In French and English, *passivity* connotes a lack of energy or a lack of initiative. In Moore, however, it means "good heart" (*ne bugseg*) or "a person who proceeds cautiously" (*ne maasgaa*).

Of the three concepts under discussion, however, the concept of feed-
back is perhaps the most difficult to translate into Moore. More than just a mere lack of a word, it is the particular behavior or practice of conducting feedback that is inconceivable in this particular environment. A few words closely related to the notion of feedback are *widbo* (criticism), *wiligri* (to show) and *sagle* (to counsel). While the word *widbo* (criticism) has an obviously negative connotation, *wiligri* and *sagle* can be used along the vertical axis only by the trainer, but not by the learner. Over all, the meanings of these words and the ways in which they are used further attest to the Mossi society's negative view of the practice of questioning a trainer's knowledge or giving advice or counsel to one who presumably has already mastered the "secrecy of knowledge" or *bangre*.

In Table 2, samples of instructional as well as conceptual language are contrasted with French and English. Clearly, the Moore words do not have the same meaning as corresponding words in either French or En-
lish. Thus, the use of key concepts and words commonly used in French or English when training most likely ignores meanings and connotations in Moore. The lack of cross-linguistic correspondence often leads to differing interpretations between trainer and trainees and makes it difficult, if not impossible, for trainees to develop behaviors corresponding to these concepts or words. In several instances concepts can be conveyed only by utilizing two or more words, which is frequently an indicator that they represent different realities. In this sense, using French or English may obfuscate more than explicate.

Of course a case can be made that French with its two pronouns, *vous* and *tu*, for example, is appropriate for describing hierarchical relationships also found in the African context. However, the notion of respect expressed in French by *vous* is associated with social roles and degrees of familiarity with an individual. A child, for instance, will not use *vous* with his parents. In contrast, the hierarchical scheme in Africa is normally based on social role, age, and gender. In the African context, then,
TABLE 2
Cross-linguistic Correspondence of Training Concepts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moore</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>English</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bangre</td>
<td>Savoir; connaissance</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilgi</td>
<td>Demontrer; indiquer</td>
<td>Demonstrate; indicate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daabo</td>
<td>Volonte'; voeux; besoin</td>
<td>Will; wish; need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Djese</td>
<td>Regarder; observer</td>
<td>To look; to observe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karemsaaba</td>
<td>Maître; enseignant; formateurs</td>
<td>Teacher; trainer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maane</td>
<td>Faire</td>
<td>To do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makre</td>
<td>Demontrer</td>
<td>To demonstrate; to try</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essaye</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minim</td>
<td>Savoir; savoir faire</td>
<td>Knowledge; know-how</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soule</td>
<td>Groupe; groupe communautaire</td>
<td>Group; community group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sukiré</td>
<td>Poser une question</td>
<td>To ask a question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sukre</td>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiligri</td>
<td>Montrer; Indiquer</td>
<td>To show; indicate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yam</td>
<td>Intelligence; ruse; bon sens</td>
<td>Intelligence; ruse; common sense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zamse</td>
<td>Apprendre; enseigner; imiter</td>
<td>To learn; to teach; to imitate</td>
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a child will use the respect pronoun (as in the French vous) to address anyone who is older, including one's parents.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

This essay has attempted to demonstrate how learning patterns that are deeply rooted in African culture, traditions, and languages make learning in the African context a very different experience from what it is in many Western societies. Nonetheless, training models used in developing countries such as those in Africa by Western donor agencies, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), have often been inappropriate and/or ineffective. This paper has examined how and why four key points underlying Western adult learning precepts may not always produce the desired results. The inappropriateness and ineffectiveness of training designs and delivery methods are compounded by the fact that training is often done in English or French rather than in the native tongue of the training participants.

Despite wide applicability of the contrasts described in this article, however, their implications should not be viewed as a standard for all learning situations on the continent. Clearly, there is need for further study of adult learning throughout Africa. It is hoped, however, that by examining these four key concepts, other assumptions will be further investigated. To this end, the following questions might be considered for future research:
1. What traditional strategies are commonly used in the African context and how much change, if any, has Western education (British or French) had on traditional patterns?

2. How can the learner's past experience be acknowledged, valued and used to advantage in training situations conducted by Western trainers while imparting new skills, particularly in technological areas, that are foreign to the learner's socio-cultural context?

Finally, it is hoped that questions of this sort will lead researchers and trainers to develop learning concepts and models that will optimize learning for African adults and enhance development in a culturally sensitive manner.

REFERENCES


