

COMMUNITY-RELATED ISSUES/EDUCATION

Commentary on: A Description of a Community-oriented cum PBL Post Graduate Training Course for Health District Managers in Central Africa

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A. Le Vigouroux describes a very important and very unusual educational experiment. It is very important because it demonstrates that if given a chance learners can become the architects of their own learning. It is very unusual because it is happening where very few of us would expect it to happen: French-speaking Africa.

It has the liveliness of an autopsy report, the facts, just the facts, only the facts. But it is so understated that I decided to tell you what I know in addition to this truthful description. What follows is based on direct on-site interviews that I made in October 1996 while auditing the Centre and on the review of over 2 hours of videotaped interviews of teachers and students made by the school.

PBL was mentioned as an educational approach from the inception of the Centre in 1988. However, most of the teachers came from France on short term missions. They were not familiar with that approach and until 1994 a classical approach was in fact followed. Learners were instructed by straight lectures.

Back to the Original Orientation of the Centre

In 1994 a new Director decides, as described by the author, that learners will be asked to define their future professional profile so as to become able to “find solutions to health services problems at ‘district’ level” and that training will be community-based. Candidates were informed, in a presentation document

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prepared by the Director called “The CIESPAC as it is”,¹ that they should make sure they “are ready to use the proposed educational method and that in the contrary they should apply to another institution”.

There Is No “Programme”: There Is No “Curriculum”

Try to imagine students arriving at the Centre. They obtained their medical or nursing degree from a “normal” school by attending a normally planned curriculum. They ask “what is the programme?” Response: they are “thrown into the swimming pool” with a copy of two WHO publications (*If you are in charge ...* and the *Educational handbook for health personnel*). Guess what? “We quickly got rid of our apprehension at approaching a teacher as we could see that they were there to help us.” The period of adaptation is surprisingly quite short. “After four to five weeks we felt at ease with the approach.” “It has no negative aspects as it helps us to become the actors of our own present training and our continuing education. It is not easy, it requires a lot of work.” Senior students help juniors. Students share the school administrative responsibilities. “For example, there was no professional librarian and it was our responsibility to ensure the smooth functioning of our library. We learned basic principles of financial management in order to run our cafeteria. For our field work we had the responsibility of its logistics and making contacts with local authorities.”

Management Implies Team Work

The Director remembered a famous quote from George Miller in 1977: “The student body represents the largest untapped educational resource in most schools”. He ensured that in a learner-centred approach students should define their personal objectives but that peer learning was also essential. The students reacted very positively. “We realised quickly that peer group work was indispensable. Working solo is not the solution. Group work is a good preparation for professional team work.”

Management Implies Solving Conflicts

The curriculum was not “planned” nor was a “conflict” planned as an educational exercise. But early 1996 the students “were confronted with a disturbing situation. Two members of the teaching staff expressed openly that they disagreed with the educational orientation of the Director”. One of the two (PhD Public Health, University of Montreal and citizen of one of the member states) had visited the Centre in March 1995 and discovered that

“teaching had not even started, that students were (since October) spending time defining learning objectives”. He returned in July and was asked to “insure the interim” while the Director was on home leave. He planned a “classroom common track”, with knowledge-based learning objectives not related to professional activities, which he started to implement from January to mid-May 1996. The students “had reading assignments followed by clarifying plenary session during which the teachers spoke more than the learners”.

Then the Director realises he has a big problem on hand. He suspends the two teachers on 6 May 1996. They start inciting students to take sides preferably against the Director. On 11 June 1996 the main opponent distributes a two-page text, on CIESPAC letterhead, titled “I accuse”, which in summary accuses, namely, the Director and the Assistant Director “to have organised a second rate training”, accuses “the Minister of Health (Congo) to have deliberately ignored this fact and the Dean of the Medical School to be a mute accomplice”. He “pays tribute to the President of the Republic, to whom everything has been hidden” and concludes by informing of his “decision, as of 11 June 1996, to go on a hunger strike to be terminated only if (inter alia) the Director and his Assistant are dismissed”.

The students did take sides. They decided they wanted to continue to be directly involved in their educational process. The interviews revealed that “In fact being involved in this conflict was an illuminating experience, an enriching opportunity. Conflicts are frequent in professional life (...) We wish that all the teachers were better acquainted with our learning method”.

It is interesting to note that they did not realise that they were the only students in the world that were given such an opportunity in a school of public health. No other school has given as much decision power to students, as the Director gave them, even in the (numerous) schools now using the PBL and/or a community-based educational approach.²

The Political Context Needs to be Mentioned

You may have noticed a footnote by the author in his typical understated style: “The turbulent events that occurred in Brazzaville in June 1997 prompted the transfer of the institution to Yaoundé in Cameroon”. What he calls “turbulent events” were in fact a full-fledged civil war which started on 5 June opposing the forces of the elected president³ to those of his predecessor (and successor) and which provoked the death of over 200,000 people, according to international organisations. It is common knowledge that a powerful oil company financially supported both sides. The readers of the *International Herald Tribune* (1 February 2002) may have noted that the interested oil company “privatized (by the French government) in 1994 was later merged into what is now one of the world’s leading oil company. Corporate bribes to foreign officials were legal and tax deductible under French law. France profited from

African oil in exchange from providing political protection and secret offshore payoffs to African leaders”.

For 12 days and nights the students “took refuge in the school buildings under artillery fire, then escaped through the border to Gabon”. The expatriate staff (the Director and his Assistant Director) were evacuated by the French army. They ran to the plane under machine gun fire and “all their belongings were left in Brazzaville, stolen or destroyed. The school was also devastated, files destroyed, material (computers, reprographic machines, chairs, tables, motor vehicles, etc.) stolen”.⁴

Seven months later the students resumed their learning activities in Yaounde (Cameroon).⁵

Notes

1. Canonne F. *le Ciespac tel Quel*. CIESPAC, Brazzaville, mai 1997 (unpublished document).
2. I wish to be proven wrong by a better informed reader.
3. Now living comfortably in London, UK.
4. Personal communication from the Director, 4 April 1998.
5. The Director is in Madagascar. You may have read that several hundred thousand people were demonstrating recently in the capital city (Tanananarive), unhappy with the results of the latest presidential elections. The author is now working in Gabon. Good luck to both of them.