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A theoretical perspective of learning in the Pacific context: A sociocultural perspective

Una perspectiva teórica del aprendizaje en el contexto del Pacífico:
una perspectiva sociocultural

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Resumen

Este artículo teórico discute la importancia de los enfoques de aprendizaje y los contextos socioculturales. La discusión sintetiza estudios empíricos de investigación previos, tomando en consideración la importancia de la cultura del individuo y el contexto en el que vive. Los estudios de Marton y Saljo (1976) y otros investigadores (Biggs, 1987; Watkins & Regmi, 1990) han proporcionado una potente base teórica en relación los enfoques de aprendizaje que adoptan las personas. Más recientemente, muchos teóricos han intentado establecer los enfoques de aprendizaje del alumno en contextos de aprendizaje (Mugler & Landbeck, 1997). Este argumento surge de la comprensión de que los enfoques de aprendizaje se encuentran integrados, y más importante aún, están relacionados con la epistemología personal. En la discusión, se utiliza el ejemplo del contexto del Pacífico para explicar como la base sociocultural y la historia previa de la persona configuran e influyen en los enfoques de aprendizaje.

Palabras Clave: Aprendizaje, Pacífico, enfoques de aprendizaje, contextos socioculturales, epistemología.

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Abstract

This theoretical article discusses the importance of learning approaches in sociocultural contexts. Our discussion synthesizes previous empirical research studies, taking into consideration the importance of individuals' cultural background and environmental settings. Research studies by Marton and Saljo (1976) and others (Biggs, 1987; Watkins & Regmi, 1990) have provided a strong theoretical foundation concerning the approaches to learning that individuals adopt in their learning. More recently, a number of theorists have attempted to situate students' approaches to learning in contexts (Mugler & Landbeck, 1997). This argument arises from the understanding that approaches to learning are embedded and, more importantly, they relate to personal epistemology. In our discussion, we use the Pacific as an example to explain how the sociocultural milieu and individuals' historical backgrounds shape and influence their learning approaches

Keywords: Learning, Pacific Context learning approaches, sociocultural contexts, epistemology.

Introduction

The concept of learning approaches originates from the seminal work of Marton and Säljö (1976) and emphasises the differing motives and strategies for accomplishing specific tasks. Since that time, a voluminous body of research has provided evidence to highlight the different approaches that students take when approaching their learning in various academic contexts. An examination of the literature shows that students' learning approaches have been studied in different sociocultural settings and with students of different ethnicities (e.g., Ainley, 1993; Akande, 1998; Kember, 2000). This interest with different cultural groups is important as it questions whether theoretical conceptions of learning are situated in social and cultural contexts (Phan & Deo, 2007, 2008). The focus of our article then, drawing on previous research studies, discusses the tenets of learning in sociocultural contexts. We focus in particular the context of the Pacific, taking into consideration the important historical and cultural backgrounds of Pacific Island and Indo-Fijian students. Our theoretical examination orientates towards a perspective that suggests the learning process is contextualised in social settings. More importantly, we argue that the contextualisation of learning has theoretical and empirical implications concerning students' learning styles.

Theoretical overview of students' approaches to learning: A Western concept?

The theoretical tenets to learning, which derive from the pioneering work of Marton and Säljö (1976), emphasise two categories of approaches to learning: *deep-level* and *surface-level* processing. In their research, the authors asked students to read a text and then interviewed them about what they had learned from the reading and how they had approached the task. Findings indicated that students who engaged in deep-level learning were more intrinsically motivated and were curious to seek and make meaning from their learning. Students adopting this approach were committed to learning, and they related subject material to meaningful contexts and prior knowledge. In comparison, according to Marton and Säljö (1976), students who adopted a surface approach based their learning on extrinsic motivation of positive and negative reinforcement. Students adopting this approach were more concerned with passing the examination with minimal effort.

The results of the Marton and Säljö (1976) study indicate that the two study approaches encompass different motives and strategies for accomplishing specific tasks. Over the past

three decades, much work on studying and learning approaches has been carried out using Learning Styles inventories, such as Biggs' (1987) *Study Process Questionnaire* (SPQ) for tertiary students and *Learning Process Questionnaire* (LPQ) for high school students. The theory from which these learning styles inventories are derived conceptualises student learning as a combination of both motives and strategies. Implicit to this theory then, is that motives and strategies are subject to change and that students may adopt any of these approaches that they see as being appropriate: surface strategy and surface motive, and deep strategy and deep motive. The SPQ and LPQ learning inventories both contain items relating to surface strategy and surface motive, and deep strategy and deep motive; the latter items demonstrating one's effort towards understanding the material studied, whereas the former are normally regarded as a less desirable approach aimed to reproduce learnt material for assessment purposes.

In addition to the two mutually exclusive learning approaches, Biggs (1987) also identified an *achieving* approach that focuses on the motivation to compete and gain high grades. In adopting this achieving approach, the strategies used by the students are context oriented, focusing on the opportunities for obtaining high marks, and involving systematic organisation and cost-effective use of time and effort. Biggs (1987) also indicates that the achieving approach can be associated with either the surface or the deep approach. For example, a student can either learn systematically by rote in order to get high grades, or to get meaning of a content, thus constituting a 'surface achieving' or 'deep achieving' approach, respectively.

In a study carried out at the University of the South Pacific (USP), Richardson, Landbeck and Mugler (1995) used the 18- item Approaches to Studying Inventory (ASI) (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983). The study involved students registered in full-time undergraduate Linguistics courses. Their findings suggest that approaches to study amongst the sample were largely driven by motivational considerations (achievement motivation, intrinsic motivation, and passivity or a general lack of motivation). However, there was a marked absence of cognitive strategies (in complete contrast to Newstead's (1992) and Richardson's (1992) findings using the ASI in the United Kingdom); the study group's motivational orientations were not aligned to effective cognitive strategies, as one would expect and as has been noted amongst learners in Western contexts, whether students have deep, surface or achieving approaches to learning. More recently, Phan and Deo (2007, 2008) used structural equation modeling to

discern two main learning approaches (i.e., reproducing and meaning) that tertiary students engage in in their learning.

This research has, similar to some of the findings of Kember and Gow (1990, 1991), and Watkins and Regmi (1990), which established that there are variations in approaches to learning between Western and non-Western students. The aforementioned evidence of learning approaches and academic performance show: (i) academic performance positively correlated with scores on deep approach, intrinsic motivation and achieving approach; (ii) academic performance negatively correlated with scores on surface approach, disorganised study methods and negative attitudes to studying; and (iii) academic performance correlated positively with achieving approach, for the higher linguistic course. The authors agree that researchers need to be more cautious when using the current version of the ASI, as this was developed largely for the Western context and audience, and approaches to studying are context and culture specific and inventories like the ASI need to be modified to suit different local and regional contexts.

Using a phenomenographic approach, Mugler and Landbeck (1997) have also explored the conceptions of learning held by students at the USP. The conception of learning framework consisted of the following hierarchically organised categories in which learning was generally characterised as: (i) an increase in knowledge; (ii) memorising and reproducing; (iii) the ability to apply knowledge; (iv) understanding; (v) seeing something in a different way; and (vi) seeing learning as changing a person. These authors found that the most common conception amongst the sample was that of seeing learning as applying or making use of knowledge. Overall, the USP students displayed a lower percentage of higher-order conceptions of learning. The possible reasons for this could be the highly examination-driven curricula of secondary schools in the member countries of the South Pacific, as well as the lecture-based transmission mode of teaching preferred by students (e.g. Deo & Nabobo, 2003).

Other research studies investigating learning approaches using different learning inventories (e.g. LPQ and SPQ), by means of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), indicate distinct latent factors that correspond closely to the learning approaches identified (Biggs, 1987; Marton & Säljö, 1976). This evidence is consistent across different sample groups and in different social/cultural contexts: British psychology students (Wilson, Smart & Watson, 1996),

Chinese health-care students (Jones & Jones, 1996), Australian nursing students (Murray-Harvey, 1994), and tertiary students in Hong Kong (e.g. Biggs, Kember & Leung, 2001; Kember & Leung, 1998; Kember, Wong & Leung, 1999). For example, Kember and Leung (1998) found from CFA with tertiary students in Hong Kong that the SPQ is best demonstrated by a two-factor model, which the authors termed as *meaning* and *reproducing* approaches, with a third dimension referred to as 'achieving approach', which shared components of both the meaning and reproducing approaches of learning. Biggs (1987) and Marton and Säljö (1976) found that teaching and assessment practices encouraged students to adopt a surface approach to learning. This was more apparent when teaching and assessment approaches did not align closely to the aims and objectives of teaching in the particular subject area. The orientation and adoption of a surface approach indicated that there were limitations in teaching and/or assessment methods, but this is something that research studies should address and investigate further.

The Pacific context to learning: A sociocultural and historical perspective

Much as has been said about the Pacific students and their ways of learning and knowing. Perhaps the nature of knowledge and knowing in this region has to do with the various historical and social factors that shape students' perceptions of knowledge and the concept of learning (Tuinamuana, 2007). In this article, we argue that students' approaches to learning vary distinctively with different cultures, and are shaped by social forces and historical events. This theoretical contention is not new, but based rather loosely on Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theories of learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985). A few scholars in this region (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Phan, 2008) have suggested that the contextualisation of knowledge in Pacific sociocultural settings influences how individuals perceive and interpret the world. More importantly, however, the social construction of knowledge based on previous experiences, as argued by Phan and Deo in their studies, influences the learning approaches that students adopt:

> *One may speculate that students' current learning approaches are formed, in part, by their previous primary and secondary school experiences*. (Phan & Deo, 2008, p. 372)

Personal epistemology, or the nature of knowledge, is an important area of research in the Pacific region as it focuses on our perception and understanding of knowledge and what constitutes knowledge. Similar to previous research in the Western context (Baxter Magolda, 1987; Hofer, 2004; Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Schommer, 1990), personal epistemology here concerns the source or social origin of our knowledge, and how we come to know this knowledge. In this regards, attempts have been made to discern the true purpose, meaning, and beliefs concerning knowledge and our ways of knowing (Nabobo-Baba, 2006). In the context of Fiji, the nature of knowledge and how individuals come to acquire this knowledge may be explained from a cultural perspective. The Fijian culture, historically and contemporary, underlines the importance of silence and respect (Nabobo-Baba, 2006). The notion of truth is accepted without reservations and entrenched as "divine" and "fixed". Individuals are taught from an early age to respect authority figures and to realise that questioning is an unacceptable conduct. Any behaviour contrary to the *status quo* is seen as a sign of disrespect and disobedience. Importantly, for many, embracing the traditional learning and knowing practices is reflective of excellent cultured upbringing (Nabobo-Baba, 2006).

The introduction of formal schooling and education by the Christian missionaries and European colonisers (Mangubhai, 1984; Phan & Deo, 2008) has also reinforced the notion of empowerment, respect, and silence as a *status quo* in this region. In her writing, for example, Tuinamuana (2007) discusses:

> *The nature of early Christian forms of religious knowledge as being objective, factual and unchanging promoted a view of the word of God as well as the word of the teacher as infallible*. (Tuinamuana, 2007, p. 116)

Formal schooling, in this sense, emphasises the notion of indoctrination and the acceptance of truth as being fixed and unchangeable. The Western ideologies imposed in Pacific schools and higher institutions focus on the transmission of knowledge, uncontested and infallible, and the idea that learning is passive, authoritarian, and non-reflective. The schooling system and the pedagogical practices of many small island states adhere closely to Western exam-driven curricula and reflect the regurgitation of knowledge (Bacchus, 2000; Phan & Deo, 2008; Tavola, 1991). The teaching – learning process is very much automated and teacher-centred, emphasising on rote learning and memorisation (Phan & Deo, 2008).

Despite the emphasis on passive acceptance and a need to respect those in power, the contemporary Pacific societies, similar to those of previous decades, also advocate in the recall of personal accounts and informal experiences. One could argue that personal experiences are the product of a specific culture. Culture in this sense does not imply, say, an Indo-Fijian culture or a Tongan culture. Culture from a wider perspective includes for example – schools' institutional culture, home (rural and urban) culture, and remote, small islands' culture. There is the recognition that individuals' particular culture, whether it is a distinct culture from a remote village in Fiji or an outer island's culture in Cook Islands, embodies differing beliefs concerning the source and nature of knowledge and knowing. Individuals whose culture is "backward" in modernity are more inclined to see the world and knowledge as being different in origin and composition (Ninnes, 1991; Phan, 2008). Furthermore in some parts of the Pacific region, especially in places that are isolated and remote, strong cultural sentiments often dictate how one views knowledge, and many Pacific Islanders align closely to these ethos and values. Authority figures such as those who hold high social status and/or power pass on their knowledge, fixed and uncontested, to the less able and fortunate ones (Phan, 2008).

The cultural elements of the Pacific region dictate specific learning styles that are preferred by Pacific Island students. In his writing, Phan (2008a) argues that the common culture accentuates the importance of a collective society, where communal learning, sharing and caring are part of the norm. Communal learning and the importance of collectivism negate the argument concerning the self and one's individualistic development (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). One could argue that Pacific Islanders' ways of life are reflected by the following:

> *This collectivism, as observed in the Pacific Islanders, posits the notion that personal accomplishment is not about the self, but concerns with the fulfilment of honour, respect, and pride for the community at large*. (Phan, 2008)

Daily observations of students in tertiary institutions in this region suggest a preference for group work and discussion. Students draw on ideas from peers and friends in their quest to learn new knowledge. Their conduct draws parallel to the notion of sharing and the appreciation to work collectively with each other. Students often discuss and study together, preferring in particular to the use group projects and assignments (Phan & Deo, 2008). Assessment tasks used by staff also emphasise on group oral presentation and write-up (See Phan & Deo, 2008 for a detailed description). This examination, in our view, highlights an

important element of learning styles that has not been discussed in other empirical research studies. Cross-culturally, as evident from previous research, students of different cultures adopt one of three main approaches to learning in their studying (Akande, 1998; Biggs, 1987; Kember & Gow, 1990; Marton & Säljö, 1976). The theoretical contention here in our discussion is that communal learning and sharing facilitate deep learning. The emphasis here, in this analysis, is concerned with students' preference and ability to work collectively and to assist each other. The sociocultural beliefs and historical background of the Pacific Islanders, as such, dictate the need to belong and to share knowledge with each other. More importantly, perhaps, is the compelling need to develop and to master skills for preservation and life-long survival. In essence, our postulation is that the approach of deep learning is subsumed within the practice of communalism. Very few research studies have, to date, discerned the underlying process of different learning approaches and how they feature together in a social milieu that nurtures collective collaboration and sharing. Researchers have overlooked the possibility that students' motives and strategies may be produced within a particular social network and may be shaped by sociocultural elements, such as personal ethos and indigenous beliefs (Nabobo-Baba, 2006).

The sociocultural milieu of the Pacific and her economical and political instability has also contributed to the changing view of knowledge, learning, and formal schooling (Mugler & Landbeck, 1997; Phan & Deo, 2006). Evident at present and transcending rapidly is the acceptance that formal education, a concept introduced by missionaries and colonial powers (Mangubhai, 1984; Phan & Deo, 2008; Tuinamuana, 2007), is a perpetuated phenomenon that elevates social and economical mobility. According to this view:

> *Many individuals in urban locations are embracing, willingly, the Western education system as this is perceived as an instrument that may provide an alternative route to success and a better life*. (Phan, 2008)

Other scholars in the region (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Phan & Deo, 2006, 2008) have noted that contemporary societies in the Pacific, with ongoing social and economical development, are encouraging many families to view education as a commodity that brings forth good prospect. Parental expectations and the competiveness of Pacific societies have inculcated a belief that one must strive to succeed in life. The Indo-Fijians, for example, are nurtured from an early age to compete and to excel academically at all cost. In their research stu-

dies, Phan and Deo (2006, 2007, 2008) reported that the Indo-Fijians are individualistic and orientate specifically towards achieving and reproducing approaches to learning. In accounting for this evidence, the authors suggest that the socio-historical origin of the Indo-Fijian people plays a major contributing role in shaping their beliefs and ethos. The plight of the Indo-Fijian people over the decades, such as the social experience of poverty, landlessness and racial discrimination has instilled a strong conviction and belief that they must do whatever it takes to succeed in life. Children are nurtured and pressured from an early age to realise the importance of having an education. Personal characteristics such as dedication, hard work, and competitiveness are a norm for many Indo-Fijians. Based on this examination, there is a preference from the Indo-Fijian students to engage in learning that emphasises on producing performance-based outcomes (Phan & Deo, 2006, 2007). This "transmission" mode of instruction (Bacchus, 2000), taken from the theoretical concept of "banking education" (Freire, 1972), is the preferred pedagogical teaching-learning method. This pedagogical teaching-learning style, passive and authoritarian in its approach, has been argued to perpetuate and promote non-reflective practice and indoctrination (Phan, 2007). Consequently, many Indo-Fijian students remain passive in their learning, preferring "academic nurturing" that includes verbal dictations of answers, summarised handouts, and ready-made solutions (Phan & Deo, 2008).

In general then, there is evidence to argue that many students in the Pacific region are at a cross-road in their development and learning; transgressing between the traditional forms of learning to the more contemporary 'Western' approaches that reflect the notion of relative functionalism (Sue & Okazaki (1990) as cited in Salili (1996)). On the one hand, there is credence to suggest that Pacific Islander students hold strong beliefs in the notion of communal learning and sharing in a collective society. In this sense, there is a strong emphasis on deep learning and the need to develop skills for self-preservation. There is also the perception, as influenced by the historical-cultural milieu of the environment, that truth is uncontested and respect for authority figures is a norm. The contrasting view held by many Indo-Fijian students is that learning is instrumental in perpetuating social and economical mobility. Acquiring knowledge is important as this feat cultivates wealth, privilege, and social status in society. Consequently, the whole concept behind learning is that one must produce and achieve the highest grades possible. It is not surprising, perhaps, to find that many Indo-Fijian students resort to the strategies of rote learning and memorisation (Phan & Deo, 2008).

Theoretical examination of the Pacific region indicates that there are different approaches to learning. The acceptance of the dual approaches to learning is seen to cater for students' rapidly growing ambitions and socio-economical mobility (Mugler & Landbeck, 1997; Phan & Deo, 2008; Thomas, 1979). This transgression of learning approaches is influenced by the institutional culture and the educational environment. There is recognition in the present geographical-social climate that formal schooling is imperative to the continuation and stability of a society. Many Pacific Islanders and Indo-Fijians are becoming increasingly desperate to improve their living conditions, and formal schooling is perceived as a means to which this upward mobility may be achieved. These concerns have been recognised by educators in this region (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Ninnes, 1991; Puamau, 2002; Taufe'ulungaki, 2003; Thaman, 1999) who, in turn, propose more culturally inclusive pedagogies that encompass and encourage both traditional and Western forms of learning. However, Mugler and Landbeck (1997) argue that the inclusion of different learning approaches may not necessarily resolve the problem at hand, and that the current debate and future research should focus more on learners' ability to adapt to the requirements of the learning environment and institutional culture. This argument suggests then that learners worldwide bring with them prior experiences and knowledge, but are still able to adapt to changing situations and environments *per se*.

Examination of the literature cross-culturally indicates various reasons as to why individuals adopt a particular learning approach. The seminal work of Marton and Säljö (1976) has provided a strong premise for researchers to contribute theoretically and empirically to the inquiry pertaining to learning approaches. A synthesis of the literature suggests that a strong emphasis has been made with Asian learners and how they engage in the learning and teaching processes (see Kember, 2000; Watkins, 2000). Comparing the particular cultural ethos, geographical location, and socioeconomical status of Asian students with those of the South Pacific context (Mugler & Landbeck, 1997; Phan & Deo, 2007), suggests that there varying differences between the two types of learners. Despite these differences, one could argue that the personal ethos, origin, cultural values and beliefs, and the social conditions of a society shape and influence a collective group of individuals in their learning and learning approaches. This synthesis suggests then, that learning approaches adopted by individuals may be embedded in contexts and exist in tandem with the contemporary *status quo*.

Directions for further development

Future challenges in the area of inquiry that we have highlighted can be made. Our discussion in this article has been made based on previous empirical evidence. Developing a theoretical perspective of learning and learning approaches in sociocultural contexts requires documented ethnographical and phenomenological examinations. A number of studies (Mugler & Landbeck, 1997; Phan, 2008) have used qualitative methods to explore the socio-historical and the cultural beliefs and ethos of a particular community in the Pacific context. Future research investigations could adapt a similar methodological approach in the study learning approaches and the sociocultural milieu of a society.

Documentation of the different cultures and their learning approaches has been made (Kember, 2000; Watkins, 2000). Often the case, many researchers have used existing inventories with statistical manipulation and inference to explore different facets of learning and students' learning approaches. In addition to this examination, future research studies could investigate the extent to which shared cultural values of a collective group (e.g., Eastern Europeans) influence and shape individuals' beliefs about learning and learning approaches. Likewise, an individual's sociocultural origin and its dialectically relationship with his/her ethos, philosophy and cultural practices is relevant to the study of learning approaches. This theoretical contention reflects the emerging interest in the development of students' motivation from sociocultural perspectives (e.g., Walker, Pressick-Kilborn, Arnold, & Sainsbury, 2004).

The aforementioned issues for investigations are not exhaustive and there may also be other venues for research development. What is clear, however, in our view, is that the facets of learning are complex, and cannot be captured solely from quantitative methodological approaches that have been used to date in many research studies (Akande, 1998; Justicia, Pichardo, Cano, Berbén, & de la Fuente, In press; Kember & Leung, 1998; Phan & Deo, 2007, 2008). We argue the inquiries pertaining to knowledge and the approaches to learning that students take exist on many levels, notably cognitively, culturally, and socially. This complexity in development and adaptation requires an amalgamation of different theoretical conceptualizations and methodological approaches. In this analysis, we emphasize that the social and cultural perspectives of learning approaches call for other personalized, historical derived methods of investigation.

Conclusion

In this article we have discussed two major theoretical orientations: the concept of learning and learning approaches. Research interest in the area of learning approaches, for example, has spawned a voluminous body of research studies (e.g., Akande, 1998; Marton & Säljö, 1976; Mugler & Landbeck, 1997; Phan & Deo, 2007). Furthermore, research efforts have also been made to explore the sociocultural contexts of learning and students' approaches to learning. The discussion in this article has provided a theoretically grounded conceptualisation of students' learning and how the sociocultural origin of a person may shape his/her view and understanding. More empirical research is needed to validate and confirm the contentions made previously.

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