

Viewpoint

CRITICAL PROFESSIONALISM AS A PATHWAY TO TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract: This article argues for the integration of the tools of transformative learning into the practice of professionals working in the international development and development education sectors. The article argues that transformative learning can be used as a means of navigating the pervasive change that increasingly characterises the international development sector, address sources of ambiguity and support development practitioners' professional identities.

Key words: Transformational Learning; Critical Reflection; Professional Identities; Identity Development.

Introduction

Whatever form it takes, at its core, the practice of development is inherently about envisioning a better future. This integral optimism however, is increasingly at odds with the reality for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the lived experiences of development professionals. This article will begin by examining the causes of this divergence in an attempt to better understand the role and experiences of development professionals. It will then elaborate on the theory of transformative learning, its suitability as a tool for professional identity development and conclude with an argument for its potential as a pathway towards critical professionalism within the NGO sector.

Shifting global development context

Changing political contexts, a shift away from the influence of countries in the global North on the domestic policy of global South states as well as the

decision by many Northern states, Ireland included, to reframe development cooperation in terms of trade and international relations (Irish Aid, 2013), are posing a potential crisis for NGOs. Simultaneously, and perhaps partly as a response to these exogenous shocks, the development sector has become increasingly operationalised and managerial in its approach (Maier et al., 2014). Increased standardisation has also been accompanied by a rise in the predominance of accountability over legitimacy as the key measure by which NGOs are understood and evaluated by the public (Hughes, 2014). Contraction of government funding in the wake of the global economic recession, posed a further destabilising force for many NGOs for whom that support had been the main source of reliable income.

As a result, NGOs are left increasingly reliant on unrestricted funds, i.e. fundraising, which rely heavily on ethically problematic, but traditional, conceptions of charity for effectiveness. In this increasingly competitive and volatile environment, adaptability and organisational agility have become requirements for NGO survival (Taithe and Borton, 2016). This further stimulates incentive for NGOs to adopt ‘business-like’ approaches, and increasingly risk falling prey to mission drift (Maier et al., 2014). Managerialism provides a new uncomfortable certainty for NGOs, offering security in instrumental and alienating forms of ‘good practice’. In the context of such challenges, long established debates about representation, power relations and legitimacy are brought to the fore, stimulating ethical ambiguity for development professionals and posing further obstacles for NGOs. This disparity between vision and practice - the professional ambiguity and the ethical tensions it creates within development practice - are not a recent phenomenon and have been long acknowledged and discussed. Nevertheless, these issues have become exacerbated for NGOs as they face these increasingly volatile and ever-changing circumstances (Houghton, 2016). These factors have combined to produce a particularly challenging working environment, and a potential cause of harm for development professionals, who risk burnout and disillusionment.

It is in this turbulent context that development professionals are (in)forming their professional identities. While it might be argued that individuals working in the development sector are more comfortable conceiving themselves as development ‘practitioners’, policies and trends continue to shift towards increased professionalisation. For the purposes of this discussion, the term ‘development professional’ will be used, and will be defined as individuals in paid employment in an organisation that works in the areas of overseas development, humanitarian assistance and development education. Professional development can be defined as ‘a lens that can be used to make sense of experiences, practice and work’ (Trede, 2012: 164). Although identity comprises both social and psychological elements, identity formation occurs in groups, and provides a sense of ‘who one is in the world’ (MacLachlan et al., 2010: 83).

Professional identity learning should not be considered uniform nor monolithic, but for those in professional employment professional identity is somewhat unavoidable, regardless of how consciously one chooses to engage with it (Trede, 2012). Development professionals are no exception to this, but undoubtedly roles and experiences vary significantly across the sector which results in a more indefinable professional identity. Depending on the size and activities of the employing NGO, it is not unusual for an individual to be responsible for several different functions. However, with the rise in dominance of a small number of large-scale organisations, development professionals are becoming more and more siloed within specialised departments i.e. programmes/ fundraising/ development education. Pursuing a career in development, consequently, lacks the established routes that are often seen in other professions where professional identity, behaviour and expectations are known and understood by all stakeholders, and act as a guide or benchmark to individual professionals performing their role (Andre, 1991). This variation of experience has also led to a perception of ‘competing subgroups’ within development professionals as a whole. These subgroups centre around orientation and purpose, such as development educators being considered distinct from development practitioners. These perceived divides are a further point of tension within NGOs.

Who are development professionals and why should they be of concern to development educators?

Development education and development practice are inextricably bound-up with the development professional, but what does it mean to speak of a ‘development professional’? Non-governmental organisations have been practicing ‘development’ in some form or another from as early as the mid-nineteenth century (O’Sullivan et al., 2016). The professionalisation of the development sector, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon occurring during the period of rapid expansion and ‘NGO-ization’ towards the end of the 1980s (Khoo, forthcoming). Development professionals occupy a wide range of roles within NGOs, spanning the areas of management, programmes, campaigns, communications, advocacy, policy, fundraising, accounting and finance, administration, research and development education. This list is not exhaustive, but rather illustrates the multiplicity of experiences that exists within the term ‘development professional’.

Development educators, therefore, exist within the ranks of development professionals. It is DE professionals such as these that are responsible for debating, creating and delivering DE for schools, informal education sectors such as youth and community, and political advocacy. DE is something that is ‘produced’ by development professionals for a particular audience and purpose. It is important to note however, that while development educators exist within development professionals, not all development professionals are development educators or actively engage with their work. This begs the consideration that development professionals, and the development of their professional learning, represent an area for potential further enhancement for DE. The professional development and the learning that shapes the professional identities of development professionals, are worthy of attention due to the integral positions they hold as the primary agents of change in development practice. By considering the implications of the NGO sector as a working environment and as the context in which development professionals are forming their professional identity, it will be

possible to determine what DE for development professionals could/should look like, and reflect on what potential benefits such learning could provide.

Transformational Learning and its potential as a tool for professional identity

How then, can development professionals seek to navigate these difficult and unavoidable uncertainties and engage with DE to develop their professional learning and construct their professional identity? One potential avenue to professional learning is the concept of transformative learning. Transformative learning was first outlined by Jack Mezirow in 1978 and since then has been established as a main theory in the field of further education and adult learning. The transformational approach is a process by which individuals challenge their assumptions and perspectives in a manner that achieves transformation (Mezirow, 2009). What distinguishes transformative learning from non-transformative learning, and makes it particularly useful for professional development, is that it is focused on identity learning (Illeris, 2014). Mezirow describes how an individual's habits, assumptions, expectations and past behaviour interact to create a 'meaning perspective'. This is the combination of presuppositions upon which events are interpreted and actions decided (Mezirow, 1990), and so is a major constituting factor in identity. These meaning perspectives act as the template for interpretation and are both enduring and self-reinforcing (Mezirow, 1990).

Events that undermine or contradict the underlying assumptions of an individual's meaning perspective are often selectively blocked out in order to avoid anxiety inducing revelations that threatens an individual's identity (Brown and Starkey, 2000; Mezirow, 1990). This impulse applies to groups and organisations as well as individuals, who are also motivated to preserve and defend their existing identity (Brown and Starkey, 2000). Transformation occurs when the individual is confronted with a disorienting dilemma that challenges their current identity, and instead of engaging in cognitive avoidance, decides to actively undertake a process of critical reflection and participation in dialectical discourse in order to strengthen and

validate a new perspective (Mezirow, 2009). In short, transformational learning is the processes of critically evaluating assumptions that are often taken for granted and perceiving things from a different point of view.

This is often a difficult process, involving change, fear and uncertainty. Geijssel and Meijers argued that this ‘suffering’ should not be a deterrent to undertaking critical reflection as it is unavoidable but also an essential part of growth, and a necessary condition for ‘the formation of a reflexive consciousness’ (2005: 424). By understanding professional identity within the framework of transformational learning it is possible to gain insight into ‘the current conditions and frames of society that create both the growing need for and the conditions of the transforming process’ where development professionals find themselves (Illeris, 2014: 153).

Transformational Learning and the development sector

Transformational learning is an arguably under-utilised approach with potential applications for development practice. It is notably absent from higher education literature, despite its versatility in application potential for ‘individual, small scale as well as collective and larger scale processes, including the learning taking place in institutions, through policies and policymaking and across society more generally’ (Khoo and Torres, forthcoming). Some critics have pointed to a lack of tangibility in the theory, arguing that it is better served as a ‘conceptual metaphor’ (Howie and Bagnall, 2013). Whether it is a metaphor or not, it is clear that the tools of transformative learning provide a means of sense-making, particularly in the context of upheaval and change.

The usefulness of these tools, including critical reflection and dialogue, are not new to development practice. Participatory methods, community development and critical pedagogy are all familiar topics for development professionals, the most popular example of which is Paulo Freire’s work on power, oppression and emancipation, particularly his 1970 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. For some development professionals, critical reflection methodologies like those in development education are something

that they may be more involved in applying rather than supported in experiencing themselves. Learning is then clearly considered important within development practice, but prioritised for partners, development beneficiaries and publics rather than for professionals themselves.

This lack of attention on the needs and identities of development professionals is, arguably, short-sighted. It reflects a lack of understanding and appreciation for the role of individual professionals as agents of change in the development process. While a full discussion on the nature of such transformation for the development sector is beyond the scope of this article, one must look no further than the articles within this special issue on human rights to shed light on the ethical commitments that drive development practice, and could provide a normative focus.

Conclusions: The potential for Transformative Learning as a tool for development professionals

There is value in exploring transformational learning as a potential resource for development practice, as it presents benefits for the individual, organisational and even sectoral levels. Opening up a discussion about professional identity in the NGO sector would centre professionals in the development process and integrate a ‘respect for experience’ in the approach to ethical dilemmas and challenges affecting the sector at large (Campbell and Zegwaard, 2012). Furthermore, professional identity development offers a more long-term and individual focused alternative to the short-term and instrumentalisation and alienation of professionalisation. The tools of transformative learning provide development professionals with an opportunity to develop more resilient and robust identities and avoid professional burnout and internal divisiveness.

This is not to suggest that development professionals should seek to become new or different people, abandon their existing identities or seek homogeneity. Rather, transformational learning should be perceived as a restorative process, a way for development professionals to return to core values and the ‘inner compass, which has been submerged under the deluge

of adult expectations, cultural scripts and workplace practices’ (Lange, 2004: 130). The benefits of such transformation could possibly include development professionals becoming more confident in their practice, secure in their identity, and potentially, enabled to act as more effective active agents of change. Change is both the object of and context for development practice. NGOs that are invested in learning within and from this change must invest in the learning of their professionals, and encourage them to develop their professional identity through reflective practice (Brown and Starkey, 2000). As outlined by Pettit: ‘reflective practice is the art of including yourself in your approach to your work, and acknowledging the influence of your position, assumptions and worldview on your understandings and actions’ (2006: 76).

It is not enough for NGOs to merely champion reflective practice or become aware of transformative learning. For transformation to occur the individual must be motivated to achieve it and also be provided with adequate space and support (Illeris, 2014). Transformative learning, therefore, as a learning endeavour, could be facilitated within DE spaces and bridge the perceived gap between development educators and development practitioners. It is important to state that transformative learning should not be viewed as a catch-all solution to the problems that NGOs face, but alternatively should be considered a possible strategy to ameliorate the experiences of development professionals to strengthen the capacity of the NGOs in which they work.

Individuals are ultimately the ‘vanguard of change’, and so the experiences and transformative potential of development professionals warrants consideration as a powerful force for reimagining culture and achieving positive futures (Billett and Somerville, 2004). Making development professionals present in the process, could provide a pathway for NGOs to move closer towards the optimism that drives development, and re-centre human rights that provide the normative core to the development process.

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