

## **Cultural, Institutional and Interpersonal Aspects of "Thinking and Learning Contexts"**

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Nathalie Muller & Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont  
(University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland)

### I. INTRODUCTION

How do the rural Madagascan participants in a training-needs diagnostic program organized by a Swiss Third World Aid Organization apprehend and engage cognitively with that program?

To respond to this question we will take as a given that the the acquisition and use of various types of knowledge are processes which depend upon the particular contexts in which they occur. Our research investigates the links between and among learning, cognitive processes and context (Cole, 1996; Grossen, et al., 1996; Lave, 1991).

Within this perspective, a "context" should not be considered simply as a group of exterior elements (Duranti & Goodman, 1993; Lave & Chaiklin, 1993). Instead, we see context as being the result of an interactive process in which individuals assign meanings and act according to cultural interpretations of the human, symbolic and material elements present interpretations that they themselves have made according to their own criteria and goals. It would therefore seem appropriate to invoke the terms "context making" or "contextualization" (van Oers, 1998).

### II. THE OBJECT OF OUR RESEARCH

Here is a description of the situation we chose to study: A Swiss organization, the Foundation for International Cooperation, based in Bern, CH, specializes in Third World Development Programs. They have designed a program which helps farmers to make manifest what sorts of training they need: it is thus not a "training program," but rather a sort of "pre-requisite to training programs" or "training needs diagnostic program", which is the object of our research. The program is called "The Agricultural Training Needs Diagnostic Program. (DP)" The idea is to ensure that the training ultimately provided corresponds to the actual needs of the region.

All the activities linked to the DP are introduced and lead by a member of the village community who has been trained for the occasion. This person's task is to get the farmers to recount, reflect upon, and analyze their experience and knowledge, suggest solutions to their problems, and finally come to realize just what sorts of training they need. Different sorts of tools facilitate this process. For example, the inhabitants draw a map of the region, which helps to bring out the major themes to be discussed; various graphic representations summarizing the subjects of discussion are employed; matrices are drawn in order to help choose among the various options; etc. These activities take place in a classroom or a community house, but there are also field trips during which crops, livestock and infrastructures are studied. It is this overall "thinking and learning context", otherwise known as the DP, which we will examine in this study.

The region where we worked is called Betsileo, and is located in a densely populated region of the high plateaus of Madagascar (see map). 70% of the population is supported by agriculture in Madagascar. The principle crop is rice, which is farmed in terraced paddies. The principle problems facing the population are demographic pressure, decreases in farmable land due to erosion, construction, etc, low profitability, transportation problems, political stagnation, etc. This leads to increased poverty, low schooling rates, environmental problems and the like (EDM, 1999; Lapierre, 1992).

The first of this study's two authors stayed six months on - site, following the project both from the perspective of the Swiss members of the organisation and from that of the farmers. With the Swiss, she participated in planning sessions, and with the farmers she took part in village life, worked in the fields, etc. Observation and interviews recorded on audio and video tape constituted her data-gathering methods. In this paper we will analyse the records of these interviews.

### III GENERAL HYPOTHESES

Our hypothesis is that the psychosocial processes that may be observed during the DP interactions reflect to some extent the interpretative activity of the individuals participating in the activity. This entails a process of referentiation involving three interconnected types of context (Cole, 1996; , Säljö & Wyndhamn, 1993):

- the institutional context
- the interindividual context
- the cultural context.

These three contexts play two roles: First, within the normative framework, by imposing constraints upon the cognitive meaning-construction processes; second, as providers of

coherence, by permitting the inclusion of a given meaning within fields of related meanings (van Oers, 1998). It is also possible that subjects "play around" with these contexts, re-inventing them as a function of other stakes and goals and even perhaps using them as ways of thinking. (Grossen & Perret-Clermond, 1992).

We start therefore from a basically constructionist perspective (Gergen, 1985) according to which contexts represent groups of material and symbolic elements whose meanings are culturally and socially shared. This allows for a common interpretation of reality and provides a framework for action. But contexts are also elements whose very meanings are negotiated in the here and now of interaction.

In the first phase of our study we attempt to present these three contexts generally, taking them up individually for the needs of our analysis. Then we'll investigate the two different ways in which these contexts may be viewed: on one hand, as a structuring, limiting framework, or set of constraints, for what's going on in a given situation, and on the other hand as resources which subjects use to establish new ways of thinking.

#### IV. ANALYSIS

##### 1. The Institutional Context

First we will discuss a certain number of representational elements which might be considered as pre-requisites to the creation of a DP program. We'll then examine how these representational elements take on a particular form within the structure of the DP, ie., how they are made concrete. Finally we'll study the ways in which individuals interpret these elements of the context before finally re-inventing them during a joint activity.

##### *a) The representations underlying the conception and development of a DP*

The actual set-up of the DP was conceived essentially by the Swiss/Madagascan team which works on the Tany Sy Ala program organized by the Swiss International Cooperation Foundation. This group conceived of the project in terms of its own institutional and socio-cultural points of reference, as a function, therefore, of a set of representations or images of "aid to developing nations," "training," "knowledge", foreigner / native relations, Madagascan villages, etc. Past experiences in the country also played a role, as did the constraints imposed by sources of funding, since continued money depends on producing observable results.

"Empowerment" is often cited as being one of the essential philosophical bases of the DP situation. It's been considered as a central aspect in the political line of the Swiss

Cooperation for several years. Empowerment means "promoting rural communities' ability to organize themselves in order to better protect their material and cultural interests, to identify their needs in a more realistic way, to define their priorities, to make decisions and to direct development-related actions leading to greater autonomy and a higher level of responsibility" (DDC, 1994, p.12).

Several other key ideas informed the choices made as the DP situation was conceived, and these principles are manifest in the official documents published by the program, as well as in what the program's designers themselves had to say about it. One good example of this concerns the concept of "training." The program we studied appears to place a particular emphasis on training people to act independently, or, in other words, on autonomy. Other sorts of programs don't have this emphasis, and choose to act as providers of financial resources which will facilitate "development."

Another underlying concept we were able to detect in the mindset of the organizers of the DP was the desire to inculcate a market-based approach to economic activity. Ideas such as "increase production to get surplus cash, which you then invest in infrastructures to further increase production" were current. Other underlying ideas were "long-term development," "developing democracy," and "protecting nature," (which was in fact the original priority of Swiss development action in Madagascar). The DP ethos is also characterized by underlying pedagogical concepts such as emphasizing exchanges among participants in order to show them that they already know a certain amount and can discuss it, and therefore don't always necessarily need outside help.

#### *b) Making These Underlying Principles and Ideas concrete*

These underlying images, representations, ideas and principles show up in tangible ways within the structures of the DP. Here are several examples:

- The overall idea of the DP follows clearly from the notion of empowerment, since instead of imposing, or even suggesting tailor-made training programs, the DP participants articulate their own training needs.

- Rather than have a person from outside the community act as discussion leader, the DP is lead by a member of the village, which underlines the empowerment-related idea that those involved in the DP should themselves take control of the decision-making process.

*c) As we observe the individual and group interactions within the DP, what can we see as regards the way in which the participants take account of, defer to, or resist the constraints imposed by the framework of the DP?*

A good first step would seem to be a look at the ways in which the group leader, who we will call Alex, integrates the constraints linked to his role into his way of talking as he leads the discussion. (It's worth noting that Alex is not a native of the village; however, he's married to the daughter of a rich local landowner and taught in the village primary school for several years. The group chose him as leader both because of his education and for his willingness. He had already participated in other Cooperation training programs and is therefore familiar to and well-liked by the Swiss team.)

I would like now to go into greater detail about one episode of the DP, a discussion in which participants are invited to explore problems linked to the forests. As I mentioned earlier, the DP works in the following way: participants draw a map of the region, and then use it to identify ten issues they consider to be of particular importance for the region. Examples are roads, farming and ranching, etc. For each theme discussed participants attempt to describe the problems and their causes. On the topic of the forests, it's possible to make series of interesting observations relative to Alex. He is the only one of the participants who manifests certain types of verbal behavior, for example:

Alex summarizes the ideas suggested, so that they can be jotted down on the group's poster. For example, "So, one of the causes of the disappearance of the forests is brush fires?"

He "jump-starts" the discussion when necessary by reminding the participants of what's already been said: "Someone mentioned that young plants are rare."

He asks participants if they have anything else to add. For example, "Any other ideas?"

He moves quickly on to the next question if the discussion of a given issue stalls: "Let's move right on to the next problem."

He interrupts discussions that aren't getting anywhere, and reminds participants of the rules when he considers them to have been broken. For example, "We've got to play by the rules here: raise your hand if you have something to say because if everyone talks at once it'll be a waste of time. And try to keep it short." (Muller & Jonarisona, 1998).

It's fair to say that Alex makes sure the framework is respected: he keeps in mind the session's goals, its limits (time, for example), and the specific rules for speaking in the group.

In another context, that of therapy, some researchers have hypothesized that the rules governing the therapy session, rules which are established and sanctioned by the therapist him or herself, may contribute to the establishment of therapeutic processes and facilitate the personal development of the patient. (Emiliani & Bastianoni, 1992) If we apply, *mutatis mutandis*, this hypothesis to our own problem, which involves the exchange of knowledge and thinking together as a group, it seems plausible that Alex may help the participants to develop original analyses of the situations discussed.

Here we made two general observations:

- First, there were several episodes where villagers share experiences and knowledge among themselves, for example about composting or medicinal plants. They also suggested solutions to the problems discussed, for example the cultivation of seedlings to compensate for the disappearance of the forests. It would seem that the DP discussions did actually lead to changes in the participants' practices. Participants applied what they'd learned in the sessions to their farming, and were able to improve the growth-rate of certain crops, for example. One of the participants spoke of the DP's practical results as follows:

"During the field trips we tried to look at things on three different levels: the physical level, the economic level and the social level. I was most interested in the economic level, especially when they asked one question: 'if you look at things from an economic perspective, can this rice-farm feed a family?' Having been through the DP, from now on I'm not going to farm just for fun, but instead I'll try better techniques, both old and new, and most important of all I'm going to calculate my production in terms of demand, opportunities to sell, and seed supply. Before I just figured that I'd eat whatever I grew, but now I'm going to think about efficiency and profits". (Joseph, May 1999, Tanjombita)

- However, we also observed episodes where Alex seemed to be himself caught up in the constraints imposed by his role and appeared to concentrate more on the rules than on the contents of the discussion.

## 2. The inter-individual context

The DP situation was conceived as a function of the designers' specific objectives, and those of the institution they work for. The DP is then "offered" to people who, after numerous negotiations among the those involved, will "live" it: i.e., they'll use

it, re-create it, etc, all in terms of their own goals and the relations among those present. The DP situation is thus not just a topos where individuals reflect upon and respond to various problems, but also a social situation in which processes of identity-related positioning, confrontation, and consensus will emerge.

An example:

Again, during the discussion of problems related to the forests and their causes, a man of about 30 years of age showed up in the room and rather brusquely took over the discussion. This man, who we'll call Tom, expressed his perspective on the issue and tended to address his remarks both directly and indirectly at another man, Maurice. Tom's tone was rather sharp, even aggressive. For example, at one point he said, "Put down your pens, you don't know how to write, you don't know how to talk, you don't know how to express yourselves!"

Until this point in the discussion the participants had talked in turn, concentrating on the theme at hand and avoiding references to particular people. At this point that changed, so it would seem appropriate to explore this moment in the discussion.

Just who are these two people? It turns out that Tom comes from a large family of landowners, and he's the president of the farmers' group which organizes the DP. As for Maurice, he too is a landowner, but he doesn't have as much acreage as Tom, and his house is much smaller. Within the farmers' group Maurice is quite active, and runs a subgroup. Tom, meanwhile, has squandered much of his family's assets, and has never been active within the farmers' group he theoretically runs. It would seem, in fact, that he's been rather loose in his handling of the group's money. Maurice finally spoke up about this, threatening to resign from the group unless Tom did.

Here it would seem that Tom attempts to use the DP situation to re-assert the authority he feels he's in danger of losing. Tom uses the discussion space to be seen, to show what he knows, and to make himself seem important. He wants to regain the control of his image within the village.

The DP situation functions as a framework whose uses are open to the interpretation of the various participants: they take advantage of the situation to reflect, take action and the like, but also at times to maintain, re-negotiate, or re-inforce their position within the group. The participants' actions during the DP depend upon what they know of each other, for example their respective social positions within the group. Personal goals also play a role here, of course. Example are the desire to establish oneself within the group, show everyone that you know what you're doing, etc. The framework provided will inevitably be transformed into a sort of stage where the group's conflicts, alliances and indeed all its various dynamics will be played out.

Other than this phenomenon, which is certainly also present in other contexts and cultures, where one often observes that people bring their own identity-related issues and problems into the framework offered them, we saw some things that did in fact seem specific to Madagascan culture (even if they resemble other systems of interpretation). It appears that the individual conflicts that we saw, for example, in the episode involving Maurice and Tom are anchored in a much larger system representing a specific vision of the world. In this world-view individual identity is defined essentially in terms of one's place within the familial system. I would like now to speak about some of the basic aspects of Madagascan culture.

### 3. The cultural context

One of the central concepts of this culture is *fihavanana*. This term is tough to translate, but it refers to the emotional links among family members. It's also used, however, to refer to emotional links between people who have no family ties when their relations involve mutual confidence and the complete absence of any desire to do wrong to the other person. Such links are sanctioned by the ancestors of those involved, and are thus directly linked to the cosmic dimension of family ties. In fact, the *fihavanana* ethos (Ottino, 1998) is the wordly manifestation of *lahatra*, the normative order that governs every animate and inanimate thing in the world. (According to Ottino, *fihavanana* ensures not just ethical relations but also an orderly and predictable universe by conforming to *lahatra*.) In the Madagascan world-view *lahatra* at once determines men's actions and in some respects depends on the men themselves. This is because certain types of human behavior can as it were "mess up" the cosmic order. For this reason, it seems that the day-to-day life of Madagascans is characterized by constant anxiety, since their actions may have unlooked - for and highly problematic consequences (Flacourt, 1996).

Family ties, sanctioned by the *fihavanana* ethos, constitute a network of interdependence involving the individual within the family group, her sex, her age, and her relation to her ancestors. It would exceed the scope of my presentation today to attempt to describe this system in any detail, but it's worth remembering, for example, just how important the relation of an individual to his ancestors is. One's position within the geneology is a criterion which socially situates a person.

A moment in our DP situation that's worth returning to was when Tom began speaking up and his comments started to undermine the generally positive ambiance that had until then predominated among the other participants. Tom flouted the DP's rules by talking at length, commenting on the ideas other participants had suggested, talking without raising his hand, addressing Maurice directly, and indirectly provoking him.



Now, what did Alex, who'd been such a zealous and competent discussion leader up til that point, do here? Basically, nothing: Alex said very little as tension rose in the group. Two elements may help to explain this.

- First, one of the basic rules governing all conversation is that of conflict avoidance (Dahl, 1993). Generally speaking, direct confrontation is avoided where possible. The group members all share this code, which is linked to the idea of respect for other people, an idea which itself is certainly linked to the fear of undermining the social, and thus cosmic, order, as I mentioned earlier. (Bloch, 1975; Dahl, 1993; Keenan, 1975)

- Another element is worth noting: Alex and Tom are related to each other. Alex married one of Tom's sisters. They are thus linked via *fihavanana*, which theoretically should ensure mutual loyalty, respect, confidence, and help. In such circumstances Alex, who is socially "inferior" to Tom since his marriage to Tom's sister was what allowed him to "climb" socially, finds it difficult to call Tom to order (Dubois, 1979). One might even suspect that one of Tom's motivations in behaving as he does is to remind the group that in terms of the village's own social structure Alex's new status as discussion leader isn't really legitimate.

Interestingly, we observed that it's another person who spoke up at this point to call Tom to order: Sylvain, the DP's "secretary." Sylvain's social position in the group is marginal, both symbolically and spatially. He the descendant of slaves, and such people still are considered as different more than a century after slavery's abolition. For example, the descendants of freemen won't marry the descendants of slaves. One important aspect of this social difference is that slaves don't have ancestors: they are "nameless."

So how is it that it's Sylvain who intervenes when Tom gets out of hand? One hypothesis might be that the DP situation has allowed Sylvain to acquire a sort of status. As Secretary, he has rights and privileges that he doesn't usually have. He may feel somehow legitimated by his new status, and finally has nothing to lose, since if Tom succeeds in destroying the DP framework he'll be back to where he was before, ie, without any status at all. Seen in this context, his confronting Tom seems less surprising.

## V. CONCLUSION

In this paper we have worked from the hypothesis that the psychosocial dynamics we observed during the DP situation might be analyzed and understood if we remembered that

- 1) the participants engage in interpretative acts in order to make sense of what they're experiencing, and also in order to situate themselves relative to it.
- 2) This interpretative act involves a referentiation process relative to three contexts: the institutional, interindividual and the cultural.

While analyzing the recordings we observed that these three contexts play different roles for the participants.

a) They provide a framework for action. We saw, for example, that the organizers of the DP made use of the objectives and philosophical principles specific to their institution on a practical level, as they set up the DP. We also saw that Alex made use of the role of discussion leader as it had been conceived within the DP: he literally "acted out" his role, while of course re-inventing it constantly as a function of what was going on at a given time.

b) These contexts provide a framework relative to which subjects may position themselves in terms of their own identity. We saw, for example, that Sylvain, who normally would be socially marginal, was able to "re-design" his identity in terms of the status he had within the DP situation. We also saw that the DP framework, like any other, is used as a sort of stage upon which are social conflicts, alliances and the like are continually played out.

c) These contexts provide a framework for thinking. It appeared that at times the existence of limits and rules, like those involving time and speaking procedures that Alex enforced as leader, allowed the participants to establish processes of knowledge-transmission. This in turn had a discernable, concrete influence on day-to-day life.

Context must not be considered as simply a group of pre-defined behavioral and attitudinal elements. Rather, it is constantly re-interpreted in terms of personal and interpersonal stakes and issues as people interact with each other. "Context is therefore not a purely external factor. Since it's interpreted and represented by the individual, it is at once 'inside' and 'outside,' at once a part of internal and external reality." (Grossen & Perret-Clermont, 1992, p 118)

We can thus conclude with the following hypothesis (which will of course need to be explored and compared with empirical evidence): it looks as if the DP situation induces

certain problems on the level of referentiation. One gets the impression that the participants were unsure as to just what types of contexts they needed to make reference to in order to speak and act within the DP. Does one refer to the cultural context? In this case, as we saw, Alex's status as leader isn't really legitimate, because of his familial status and possibly also his age. Or should one base one's speech and actions on the institutional context? This would in some respects make Alex's leadership more legitimate, and would even legitimate Sylvain's confrontational approach to Tom, an approach which could not normally be legitimated according to the cultural contextual criteria of age, sex and origin.

It may be in just such ambivalent situations, where referentiation is problematized, that new spaces for thought emerge. And the sorts of ideas that in turn emerge from these spaces may well turn out, unsurprisingly, to be highly original, and to represent a break with the "habitual" and the "obvious".

Nathalie MULLER  
Dept of Psychology  
University of Neuchâtel  
Espace L.A.gassiz 1  
2000 Neuchâtel (Switzerland)  
tél: --41.32/720.83.32  
email: Nathalie.Muller@lettres.unine.ch

Prof. Anne-Nelly PERRET-CLERMONT  
Dept of Psychology  
University of Neuchâtel  
Espace L.A.gassiz 1  
2000 Neuchâtel (Switzerland)  
tél: --41.32/720.83.32  
Anne-Nelly.Perret-Clermont@lettres.unine.ch

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