Seeking Refuge in the Classroom
By Brooke Mackenzie

Abstract

Education for forced migrants is unarguably important for establishing normalcy in an otherwise unstable life. Many Western educational service providers aim to do so through learner-centred pedagogy, whereby content and instruction is shaped around students' interests, goals, and needs. However, by employing this approach, educators may find it challenging to create and maintain the safe learning environment vital for forced migrant students. This article examines how some of the core pillars of learner-centred instruction can inadvertently undermine the critical aims of adult educational programs to establish normalcy for Burmese refugees and migrants along the Thai-Burma border.

Introduction

Education in contexts of protracted conflict and displacement is critical in establishing a sense of normalcy and safety for refugees and migrants assimilating to a foreign environment. According to UNHCR's 2010-2012 Education Strategy, education is not only a basic human right, but helps meet the psychosocial needs of forced migrants by providing normalcy and a sense of routine (UNHCR 2009). This is especially crucial considering the unique situation of forced migrants,[1] including adults, who have experienced physical or emotional trauma. Perry (2006: 25) asserts that 'the key to understanding the long-term impact of trauma on an adult learner is to remember that he or she is often, at baseline, in a state of low-level fear'. Perry (2006) stresses the need for educators to create learning environments that not only provide structure and predictability, but also a sense of safety. This is why dozens of national and international service providers along the Thai-Burma border strive to design quality adult education programs which aim to do just that.

Basing their work on Western best practices in adult education, teachers and curriculum developers along the Thai-Burma border typically adopt a learner-centred approach whereby students' educational goals, learning needs, and personal interests shape pedagogy and content. This approach allows educators to establish a sense of normalcy and safety by creating an environment that acknowledges and respects students' previous learning and experiences. It can also create predictability by placing learner's expectations of the programme, *what* they hope to learn and *how* they expect to do this, at the centre of content and instruction. This approach relies on the assumption that learners feel trusting and safe when disclosing this information. However, bearing in mind that forced migrant students come from places where trust and safety have been compromised, the expectations of learner-centred pedagogy often create a series of challenges that affect learners and educators as they work to achieve positive educational outcomes. In the article that follows I will explore some of these tensions based on my experiences in the past three years as an adult educator, researcher, and curriculum designer along the Thai-Burma border.

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[1] The terms 'forced migrants' and 'refugees and migrants' are used to indicate displaced persons from Burma who may or may not have official refugee status.

Challenges

For Learners

Learner-centred instruction encourages educators to make content relevant to adult learners' goals and interests so that learning is engaging and meaningful to students' lives outside the classroom. This approach to education is so dominant along the Thai-Burma border that there is an entire organisation dedicated solely to creating high quality, locally relevant learning materials that explore Burma-related issues such as politics, ethnic history and human rights. As an educator of adult migrants and refugees, I myself used some of these materials in my classes, in particular utilising a module based on the movie, *Hotel Rwanda*, to explore ethnic conflict, a pertinent topic for Burmese forced migrants. Being extremely careful to explain the premise of the movie and notifying students prior to scenes of intense violence, I was surprised to find one of my students uncontrollably sobbing during a rather unremarkable scene in the movie. It was not until some time later that the student expressed in her learning journal that the freedom of the tourists to escape the violence in Rwanda reminded her of her family's inability to escape such violence in Burma. Furthermore, she remarked that she did not understand the point in showing such a film. Meanwhile, the majority of her classmates noted that movie as one of the most interesting units in the curriculum.

Jenny Horsman (2000: 121), who has researched at length the effects of domestic violence on women's literacy programmes, points out that 'some learners will want the program to be a safe place to tell their stories, others will want it to be a place safe from hearing disturbing stories'. It was apparent that, while many students in my class were engaged in the process of reflecting on their own experiences through those of the Hutus and Tutsis, this particular student did not expect her learning in this programme to take shape as such, compromising not only the programme's predictability for her, but also her sense of safety. One way of addressing this issue would be to remove sensitive content related to students' traumatizing experiences from the curriculum; however, in doing so, educators may be sacrificing other learners' expectations to explore relevant topics and foregoing their sense of predictability.

For Educators

The common learner-centred solution to address the situation described above would be to elicit students' expectations of the programme and what constitutes a safe learning environment through storytelling (Lucey *et al.* 2000). To implement this strategy effectively, Weinstein (2004) emphasises the importance of building communities of learners and practitioners that create opportunities for sharing stories and experiences and provide support for their analysis of such situations. This concept of *community* requires an environment of safety, trust and peer acceptance (Beder and Medina 2001). Therefore, establishing safety in the classroom is not only an outcome, but also requisite to this solution. This, however, becomes problematic when considering individual's varying definitions of safety.

To explore potential tensions between differing conceptions of safety, I conducted action-research[2] with 24 adult refugee and migrant students representing nine different ethnic groups from Burma and four Western teachers of a well-established higher education programme on the Thai-Burma border. The results of this work reveal that the students and teachers involved held differing definitions of a safe learning environment. Using a case study activity whereby a fictional student, Mai, arrives to class late and obviously distressed, we explored students' and teachers' perceptions of how the teacher could make this student feel safe or unsafe. Many

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[2] Action-research in the field of teaching is a reflective process of addressing an immediate issue in the classroom. The study cited in this article is in compliance with World Education's Human Subjects Review Board.

teachers and students agreed upon certain reactions as facilitating a safe environment; however, some students perceived the very same reaction as contributing to an unsafe environment. For example, most teachers and students felt that Mai should share her reasons for being late. However, some students felt Mai should control her feelings. One student explained, 'I think even [if] she shares, they will look down on her. She has to encourage herself'. In this same scenario, many students felt that the teacher should ask Mai about why she was late. Other students disagreed. One student rationalised, 'Sometimes if somebody gets a problem, we can see it through their face. Sometimes it's better not to talk. If we ask questions, then sometimes, she starts to cry'.

Naturally, divergent definitions of a safe learning environment are to be expected, especially when considering the wide breadth of cultures and life experiences present in this classroom; however, these variations become significant when considering the goal of establishing a predictable learning environment for forced migrant students. Predictability in this sense is created by consistent behaviour and consistent norms of interaction (Perry 2006). However, if teachers, abiding by principles of learner-centred instruction, are attentive to a learner's emotional needs at a particular moment, their interactions may appear inconsistent to other learners. For example, it was not uncommon for me as an educator to adjust my teaching behaviour to meet the needs of lower-level learners by checking in with them more frequently or building their confidence by creating opportunities for them to share and participate during class. This adaptation in my teaching did not go unnoticed by other students, and one student in particular became extremely upset by it, interpreting my behaviour as evidence of favouritism. This example highlights a common pitfall inherent in using learner-centred pedagogy to adapt to individual learners' emotional and educational needs, as this may be misconstrued as inconsistency and unpredictability in the classroom.

Conclusion

While learner-centred pedagogy is revered as best practice in adult education by noted researchers in the field (Knowles 1980; Knowles 1984), it is important to consider the implications of its principles when applied to the education of forced migrants. In the case of the Thai-Burma border, integration of these practices into curriculum, instruction, and classroom management is common, but often leads to a number of tensions that have the ability to impact the experience of refugee and migrant learners. Just as much has been done in the way of questioning the use of Western psychotherapeutic approaches as an intervention for forced migrants' mental health (Ager, as cited in Mercer, Ager and Ruwanpura 2004), so should be done with the application of Western pedagogical approaches in these same contexts. By exploring these inadvertent dangers of liberally adopted learner-centred approaches, we can better protect and serve this particular population.

In order to navigate around the tensions illustrated in this article, it is important to develop a variety of tools and strategies that can be employed at both the classroom and programmatic levels. One strategy I have utilised in forced-migrant classrooms, as exemplified in the cited action research, is the use of case studies. Case studies allow educators to gain a clearer understanding of learners' expectations of safety and normalcy in the classroom, while maintaining a safe distance from exposing learners' personal stories before a classroom community has been established. At the programmatic level, educational service providers can better prepare teachers for working with forced migrant students through pre-service training focused on identifying indicators of extraordinary stress in the classroom. Many teachers run the risk of misinterpreting common signs of stress, such as disassociation, as boredom or lack of motivation in the classroom (Horsman 2004; Perry 2006). Drawing teachers' attention to these signs prior to the programme, coupled with practical techniques such as case studies, can only

help to ensure that vulnerable populations of adult learners receive the professional support and quality education they deserve.

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