

Tiptoeing Through Minefields

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Since 2001, I have been working with Cranfield University's Mine Action team to produce, deliver and evaluate management education courses for the mine action community in Afghanistan. I will attempt to illustrate the unique challenges of teaching western-based management disciplines in a strict Islamic context. In part this will be achieved by using the writings of the Brazilian educationist Paulo Friere, to contextualise issues and create a further understanding of the psychology and mindset required to deal with such a sensitive education issue.

The partnership between Cranfield and the Afghan Mine Action Programme led to the creation of Mine Action Management Academy which was tasked with appointing Afghan teaching personnel and delivering and developing the management education courses. However, in the early days this was not easy as most suitable Afghan educators had fled abroad with no intention of returning.

Thus the Cranfield team took the Afghan educators on a journey of discovery in terms of training them to open their minds to new and participative educational approaches. This journey was a significant effort with the Afghan instructors as they were used to traditional rote learning practices. Breaking the reliance on scripts by Afghan instructors has been a constant challenge and this is still a practice replicated throughout most of the Afghan education system. During the Soviet occupation many of the lecturing staff at Kabul University departed Afghanistan to take up faculty positions in the United States and Europe. The lack of qualified faculty members continues to be a challenge for developing the educational capacity in Afghanistan, particularly as the aim of Cranfield is to help the Afghan mine action community in their capacity building efforts. The ultimate objective being to strategically withdraw from the programme in order to enable the Afghans to control and determine their own mine action educational and training needs.

Friere (1996: 30) would argue that the Afghan mine action community is dealing with what he terms a pedagogy of the oppressed and that only through engagement, struggle and reflection can it at some point in the future create a pedagogy of liberation. To achieve this, the education, training and continuing professional development of the Afghan lecturers has been paramount. The Cranfield team found that the local lecturers could only handle delivering the materials by rote and by reading from a pre-prepared script, whilst the students also expected it as it was traditional and they knew no other way. There was no room for engagement and thus no room for the liberation of their minds or change in mindset. Friere (1996: 45) argues that this is a situation of the students regarding themselves as ignorant and that '...the "professor" is the one who has the knowledge and to whom they should listen'. He goes on to argue that students (such as the Afghan mine action personnel) almost '...never realize that they, too, "know things" and that only by being engaged in a two-way dialogue which engages them through what they know and their experiences can they hope to progress, learn and leading to engaging in critical and liberating dialogue' (Friere, 1996: 45-48).

Friere (1996: 52) goes on to state that a:

‘...careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level, inside or outside school, reveals its fundamentally *narrative* character. This relationship involves a narrating subject (the teacher) and patient listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified....Words are emptied of their concreteness and become hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity’.

In relation to the Afghan lecturers, Friere’s words proved to be prophetic as for the first few management courses, they were set on delivering the materials as Friere had outlined above. This was picked up by the Cranfield team and it was decided that through continuous observation of lessons, quality assurance, one-to-one discussions and master classes this situation would be reversed gradually over a period of years. The team were conscious that there had to be a fine balance struck between introducing western management philosophies and methods and Afghan and Islamic interpretation and delivery of the materials. This would take time as the team did not want to be seen or regarded as the “old colonials” telling the locals what to do and how to do it with complete disregard for their culture, heritage, traditions and devout religious observance. The Afghan people are highly intelligent and resilient people thus this capacity building exercise Cranfield has embarked on requires tact, diplomacy, respect and patience if in the long-term it is to succeed.

However, the team did not want to disadvantage the students attending the courses and have them completing the course and taking back negative views to prospective students. Friere (1996; 52-53) describes this approach as a narration culture. He puts it in the following way:

‘Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into “containers”, into “receptacles” to be “filled” by the teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students are’.

This was a situation the team wanted to avoid not only from the obvious negative pedagogical perspective but also from a mine action perspective. Friere (1996: 53) goes on to argue that:

‘Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the “banking” concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing deposits’.

Thus decisions made by the students who have attended the courses will not only have a bearing on the survival of their colleagues in this hazardous occupation but also have a knock-on impact on future funding of the mine action programme; how they

are perceived by donors and potential donors and how their nation develops educationally and economically. As Friere (1996:53) points out:

‘...in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other’.

This is a crucial point that Friere makes as in relation to the education and training aspect of the Afghan mine action programme, the only constant is change. Change in terms of the political context, donor funding, technological change and how and when personnel are deployed and employed. Thus the Cranfield team wanted to engender in the students a critical and questioning approach that did not merely accept the word of the lecturer. They have to engage with the materials, challenge the philosophies and methods both from their own experiences and cultural perspective in order to develop and mould what they are being taught to fit into how they work and live their lives, particularly the religious aspect.

The team wanted to eradicate the following attitudes and practices as outlined by Friere (1996: 54):

- ‘ (a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- (b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- (c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- (d) the teacher talks and the students listen – meekly;
- (e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
- (f) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply;
- (g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;
- (h) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;
- (i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;
- (j) the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects.

In relation to the management education programmes developed and delivered in Afghanistan the aim of Cranfield was to move to what Friere (1996: 53) describes as ‘...liberation education [and] its drive towards reconciliation’. He goes on to argue that education:

‘...must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students’ (Friere, 1996: 53).

At all times the team has endeavoured to encourage the Afghan lecturers to adapt and modify how they present the materials in relation to their religious beliefs based on their Islamic faith and the unique way Afghan society operates. This has been achieved by showing the lecturers how Islam can be used to get certain key messages

across in the individual lessons. In relation to the lecturers' (and students') devout religious beliefs the Cranfield team have encouraged them to use the *Five Pillars of Islam* (Dawood: 2003). The pillars are:

- *Iman* (Faith)
- *Salah* (Prayer)
- *Zakah* (Alms-Giving)
- *Sawm* (Fasting)
- *Hajj* (Pilgrimage)

The team found that these pillars help the students gain a better understanding of one subject in particular, notably *Managing People in the Workplace*. It encouraged the Afghan lecturers to use the pillars to get across the message of the importance of having values and ethics within the working environment; treating fellow employees with dignity and respect; empowering and trusting individuals with responsibilities and tasks; leading and managing by example; managers being accountable for their actions and decisions within the working environment; understanding the social responsibility managers have and the importance of transparency, particularly in relation to financial matters and having a clear audit trail. The lecturers and the students have been able to identify the links between how they are instructed to behave by the *Koran* and how this relates to actions and behaviour within the workplace.

The Cranfield team have further encouraged the Afghan lecturers to use Afghan Proverbs (Ali: 1969) to further emphasise the key messages coming out of the various modules. Proverbs are an important part of Afghan culture and their use is not only appreciated by the students but further demonstrates that ownership of the materials is being taken by the Afghan lecturers. This has had the effect of increasing their understanding of the materials, which leads to better delivery of the lessons and increases not only their confidence but also helps with the ultimate objective of capacity building.

Thus by tiptoeing through cultural, political, religious minefields, the mine action management education programme is not only overcoming barriers between western donors and Afghan mine action personnel it is helping to free up the minds of both educators and students alike that in some small way will help to rebuild this battered and fractured land they call Afghanistan.

References

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Friere, P. (1996) *Pedagogy of Hope*. Third Edition: London: Penguin.

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