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Pedagogy for Development:
Some Reflections on Method

Colette Harris
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IDS Institute of
Development Studies

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Summary

An increasing emphasis on learning as engine of change has led to the evolution of new informal approaches to education. By means of a presentation of a case study of a rural development project in southern Tajikistan implemented by a local NGO, this paper discusses the use of discovery-based pedagogical methods for trans-formative learning, the goal of which is to create a process to support participants in developing tools for critical reflective thinking aimed at producing social change.

The project worked with populations recently returned home following a civil war, bewildered by the collapse of Soviet socialism, and in the throes of a typhoid epidemic. In relation to this last, a simple intervention helped one village's inhabitants reverse the spiral of infection and stop the epidemic in their community.

Gender training with both men and women focusing on deconstructing elements of gender identities made a significant contribution to producing social change, especially since we took into consideration age-based power differences, which in the gerontocratic setting of Tajikistan are essential elements in gender identities.

Transformative learning theories developed in the west by Jack Mezirow and colleagues are compared with the approach of the NGO in terms of their useful-ness for such projects as the Tajik one, and cultural issues involved in applying western paradigms to southern education projects are discussed.

The paper concludes that to be most effective, informal education should be carried out in a culturally sensitive manner responsive to the distinct learning patterns of specific social groups, including gender-based learning differences. For people to be able to make real change in practice a critical mass of the population needs to be incorporated into the project and this also means working with all segments of the population – girls and boys as well as men and women of different ages.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Pedagogy for development

The aim of development is to produce positive social change. While many projects look to satisfy material needs, there is an increasing emphasis on learning as the engine for change. This has led to the evolution of varying styles of informal and non-formal education alongside formal schooling, and growing interrogation of both the aim and the character of education (Rogers 2004). An important question here is whether the teaching methodology should be the same for everyone or whether it is preferable to tailor it for different categories of student (Taylor *et al.* 2006).

One of the most crucial issues in regard to pedagogy is that of power – for instance, power over values and the nature of knowledge. Who, for example, has the power to decide what will be taught and how? What is the relationship between learning approaches imported by development practitioners and local ways of learning? Do practitioners critically examine how far their pedagogical methods resemble racialist and chauvinist styles originally developed to impose cultural hegemony (Freire 1990), to 'legitimise [the] privilege [of the ruling classes] and to perpetuate the oppression and marginalisation of certain groups by socialising them to accept their conditions and the status quo as natural' (Assié-Lumumba 2001: 2)? Do they accept such approaches, or are they consciously trying to distance themselves from them? What about gender and other social categories of difference? Should educational projects use distinct methodologies for working with men and women or for working with different cultural groups or would that be yet another means of perpetuating sexism and Eurocentrism? How people deal with these questions and many more is crucial for the consequences of learning projects.

As Assié-Lumumba suggests, education systems have long formed one axel of social control. Since at least as far back as the Spanish conquests in the Americas in the sixteenth century, systems have been devised for domesticating the 'natives' (Rogers 1980), for incorporating them into colonial value systems, usually with the aim of simultaneously destroying the local ones. One very powerful way of doing this has been through religion and religious education (*cf.* Chabaya and Gudhlanga 2001).

In Europe mass secular education was a late nineteenth-century development. Until the industrial revolution made literacy vital for the workplace, education of the British working classes, for instance, was seen by the elite as highly undesirable and likely to incite insurgency (Hurt 1979). Nowadays, secular education has become the linchpin of social development in the west. This has given rise to experiments around formal schooling but also to the evolution of new methods of informal education, particularly in view of the current interest in 'lifelong learning'. In December 1999 the Parliamentary Assembly of the European Council made a recommendation that non-formal education be recognised as an important component of such learning. While there is no set definition of the term non-formal education and thus no precise distinction between this and informal learning, both take place outside standard school systems (Rogers 2004: 1ff). They

thus encompass the kinds of educational projects carried out through development projects in the south as well as by means of adult education programmes in the west.

Here, evening courses can be found on a wide variety of subjects. Most of these simply teach a specific skill, such as car maintenance or French. However, the idea has arisen that adult education should move beyond such instrumental pedagogy to support students to transform their worldviews through the development of critical or reflective thinking processes. This has also become the concern of a number of practitioners implementing adult education programmes in the south. The question then arises as to how those working in the south might profit from methods developed for the west. A further issue for future reflection is whether the opposite could be true, that is, whether western populations might benefit from paying attention to issues raised and methodologies used in connection with education for the global south.

In this paper, I focus my discussion of these issues through an analysis of an intervention carried out in Tajikistan by a local NGO working in Khatlon province in the village of Bairaqi Surkh.[1] I examine the pedagogical approach used, compare it with that of the Soviet system, and discuss the issues raised for NGO staff in working with this approach. I further consider what projects in the south could take from adult education theories from the west, particularly those aimed at transformative learning, which I hold to be an important goal for southern education projects too. Finally, I address the question of how to make pedagogy culturally appropriate. First, however, I present a brief introduction to Tajikistan, a setting with which few readers will be familiar.

1.2 Tajikistan

Tajikistan is a small Central Asian republic, with a largely Sunni Muslim population, bordering Afghanistan in the south and China in the east. Its peoples speak Persian languages and are culturally very close to the linguistically similar Afghans and Iranians.[2] Until attaining independence in September 1991, it was part of the Soviet Union.

Soon afterwards a jockeying for power among elites led to a civil war (1992–97). This further damaged the already weak economy of this poorest of Soviet republics. Hundreds of thousands of people, the majority from the Qurghonteppa region of the southern province of Khatlon, became internally displaced or fled across the border, mainly to Afghanistan. On their return home, they found a weak government unable to pay pensions, family allowances, or even the wages of its state employees. Since almost all enterprises were state owned, this virtually brought the country's economy to a standstill and had a very deleterious effect on social services such as education and health care. Under the aegis of the inter-

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1   Not its real name, which I have changed to protect the privacy of its inhabitants.

2   See Harris (2004, 2006) for a longer history of the republic and a detailed discussion of its culture.

national financial institutions, prices of basic commodities and services shot up just at the time that incomes dwindled almost to vanishing point. In the late 1990s a number of epidemics occurred. Malaria became endemic in the south and many thousands were affected by typhoid.

Starting in April 1997, I became involved in the development of a health education project in Khatlon Province[3] that originated in a demand by rural women for help to access family planning services. The project's success encouraged the staff to establish an NGO they called Ghamkhori, or Concern. The organisation provided health services and non-formal education sessions to support the population to improve their lives after the near collapse of the economy and the devastation of the material and social infrastructures.

2 Learning for change – a story from Bairaqi Surkh

It was early February, 1999. With a group of facilitators from Ghamkhori I entered for the first time the village of Bairaqi Surkh. We were rather apprehensive since this area was said to be extremely religious, and we did not know how we might be received.

As we came down the road, we saw groups of men standing around in the street, clearly occupied in passionate debate. One of the male facilitators asked what was going on. He was told the village was in the throes of a typhoid epidemic. A large number of households were affected and there had been quite a few deaths. The men were convinced that Allah was punishing them for some sin and were wondering how to deal with this.

Having been warned in advance about the epidemic, we had come prepared. So we asked the men if they were interested in discussing this issue. They eagerly agreed. We then asked them to help us assemble as many village inhabitants as possible in four different groups – men, boys, women, and girls. We soon had four good-sized groups, to each of whom we gave sets of coloured cards. On each card was represented either a local practice through which typhoid might be contracted or one that would help prevent it. The groups were asked to think about the cards and arrange them in any order that made sense to them.

As people began to grasp the sense of the cards, their faces changed. We could see the point at which they began to realise how the disease was typically spread. No longer did they insist on its being a scourge sent by Allah, the only solution being to root out sin. Now they were eager to work out possible pathways of infection. This was particularly noticeable among the men but the women were not far behind and even the children were clearly thinking along the same lines.

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3   The project started out with a small grant from Christian Aid of London. In 1999–2000, it expanded thanks to additional funds provided by the European Union's TACIS LIEN fund.

From the women we learned that as each person had fallen sick their friends had gone to comfort them and they had all drunk tea together. We knew that in Tajikistan it was often considered polite for people all to drink out of the same cup. Another local practice was to kiss sick people on the lips. The discussions suggested the population had started to realise it was very likely that these practices had facilitated the rapid spread of the disease in Bairaqi Surkh. Moreover, since the youngest daughter-in-law in each family was traditionally expected to wait on the sick, this had resulted in large numbers of young pregnant women falling ill, adding to the complications of the disease.

An issue raised particularly by the men was the safety of the drinking water. Since the war had damaged the sanitation infrastructure, the only water source left was the irrigation ditches and it was feared the infection might be coming from there.

That day we got no further than the population working through the cards and drawing their conclusions. Before leaving we asked if they would be interested in our returning to facilitate further sessions. Their acceptance was enthusiastic and we agreed to come back the following week for the formal start of our programme.

On the appointed day, we returned to the village to find quite a different atmosphere. Gone were the groups of anxious men. Instead, we were confronted with a hive of activity. All along the irrigation ditches men were digging. We learned they had decided to clean out the stream beds, hoping thereby to get rid of the infection. One group had gone to the nearest upstream villages to ask them to clean up the water there. Still others were busy going from house to house inspecting latrines and insisting that any found too near the water ditches be closed up and new ones constructed at a safe distance. Fowl had been moved out of the streams to newly constructed ponds.

Women meanwhile had been going round the houses making sure that everyone understood and agreed to follow new methods for water use and cleaning. Nobody was to wash clothes or dishes in the streams nor near enough so that dirty water could drain off into them.

They also suggested keeping young married women away from the sick if there were the slightest chance they might be pregnant, and stopping kissing on the lips and sharing cups. Only one carer should enter an invalid's room. Friends coming to pay their respects could hover in the doorway but not enter the room. All dishes and bedclothes used by the sick should be washed separately from the rest and with disinfectant. The women had sent their husbands to buy this; they were teaching the children to wash their hands with soap after going to the toilet and before eating, and insisting on nobody drinking straight out of the stream. All water was to be boiled.

Within a few weeks there were no new cases of typhoid in that village. Meanwhile, we started working in other villages in the affected region, in each of which the epidemic soon ceased to have much sway.

Some time later Ghamkhori received a letter from the health authorities. They had been surveying all the villages in this region for infectious diseases. At first apparently they had not understood what was going on. One village would have almost no cases of typhoid while the surrounding ones would be full of it. After

questioning the communities the officials eventually realised that the common denominator was the presence of Ghamkhori. In all the villages where the NGO had worked there was no sign of an epidemic, at the most there would be two or three sick people. In all the others, the epidemic remained strong. The Ministry of Health thanked Ghamkhori for its efforts in working with their population. They never asked how these results had been achieved so they could replicate the approach. However, it was good at least to have proof that the methods were bearing fruit. The letter showed that the population not only of Bairaqi Surkh, but also of Ghamkhori's other villages had learned how to prevent typhoid and continued to put this into practice even after the organisation had finished its work there.

3 A hegemonic style of education

The typhoid epidemic was yet another serious blow to a people only recently returned from exile after fleeing from the war, and still living in difficult material circumstances as a result of their homes having been burned and looted in their absence. Moreover, they were also newly experiencing the economic difficulties that exposure to the global capitalist system had brought to the region. This included the loss of free medical services as well as the diminished capacity of the public health system to respond effectively to epidemics. In this situation, it is perhaps unsurprising that the population of Bairaqi Surkh seemed paralysed in their inability to stop their people dying.

Unlike the populations of many villages in the global south, most of the adults in Bairaqi Surkh had received 8–10 years of formal schooling. However, this appeared to have been of little help in dealing with the situation. In part this was due to the authoritarian character of the Soviet state. Through all its institutions, including the school system, it had established an environment that actively discouraged independence. This had helped predispose people to wait for the authorities to act rather than taking the initiative themselves. The war had prevented them from realising the significance of the collapse of the Soviet Union in this respect.

In the late nineteenth century when Tsarist Russia conquered Central Asia, virtually the only education available was religious. It was only after the region's incorporation into the Soviet Union that universal secular schooling was established. However, this was highly authoritarian and deliberately designed to propagate values that in many ways contravened those of the cultures of Central Asia, which they termed inferior and backwards, especially in regard to gender relations (Harris 2004).

In such circumstances, it is hardly surprising if for the majority of the population of Bairaqi Surkh schooling did not have much positive impact beyond equipping them with basic literacy and numeracy. In fact, it seemed to have left them feeling considerably disempowered, a situation similar to that in other settings where a colonial, or neo-colonial, power structure has labelled the locals as backward and attempted to force a particular brand of modernisation on them (*cf.* Kuenzi 2006). Thinking for oneself was discouraged at all levels. Moreover, in poor, remote villages like Bairaqi Surkh, the teaching was often of low quality, the best teachers preferring to work in urban areas. The result was that many students felt alienated and

learned little. For the inhabitants of the Khatlon villages where Ghamkhori worked, their schooling was proving of little help for coping with the complexities of their post-Soviet, post-war world.

The top-down nature of the Soviet education system had done little to provide the population of Bairaqi Surkh and its neighbours with the conceptual tools for grappling with epidemics such as typhoid. They felt disempowered and lacking in both the skills and the emotional state of mind to deal with the new environment they found themselves in, especially so soon after their return from war-time exile.

By the late 1990s the civil war plus the poor economic situation had had very deleterious consequences. The government lacked the resources to chlorinate the drinking water or to repair the damaged piped water and sewerage systems. In urban areas the typhoid epidemic was attributed to sewage entering untreated tap water. In rural areas, piped water systems had in many places been destroyed altogether, leaving agricultural irrigation ditches as the only water source.

In such a situation the only explanation they could find for their predicament was that it was a punishment from Allah. This at least gave shape and meaning to their circumstances and even suggested a way of dealing with them. In other words, what may have seemed like passive acceptance, going along with the often expressed Muslim concept that human beings should give over their will to Allah for Him to provide for them, could alternatively be read as a way of being proactive. That is, it provided an available basis for action – to cast out either the sinners or the sin, or possibly both. By the time of our arrival the men had not got as far as finding a scapegoat. Our intervention and the subsequent actions of the population did not remove the relationship of Allah to the disease in people's minds but it did change the locus of the 'sin' and people's ideas of how to cope with the 'sinners'.

Hygiene was not taught at school although some people said they had heard about it from Soviet health educators. However, these appeared to have been every bit as authoritarian and chauvinistic as the school system. This may explain what appeared to be an association of the concept of hygiene with pressures to adopt Russian culture, and thus the articulation of opposition to it. As one young man said firmly – 'We don't have hygiene in Tajikistan'.

In addition, the abstract approach to school science lessons seemed to have made it difficult for many students to connect what they were learning to their own realities. For instance, when Ghamkhori started work in Khatlon, their discussions with the population, as well as the large numbers of children and adults who became sick with hygiene-related diseases and the number of latrines positioned on the edge of drinking water sources, suggested that despite learning about germ theory in biology lessons, little had been understood of the concept. This was perhaps in part because it appeared to contradict local value systems according to which running water did not bear diseases, since water was cleansed as it turned over; and moreover it was generally believed that if something looked clean then it was likely to *be* so.

Thus, the Soviet state's top-down approach to pedagogy seemed not to have produced the desired effect for the populations of Bairaqi Surkh and the other

Khatlon villages where Ghamkhori has worked. Much of the content of the school curriculum seemed irrelevant to them so that their schooling appeared to have been of little benefit.

4 Ghamkhori's approach

Products of the authoritarian Soviet system themselves, Ghamkhori staff had to adapt and synthesise pedagogical methods from quite different paradigms in order to produce the methodology used in Bairaqi Surkh. It took several years of experimentation to come up with this and in order to do so the staff had to be willing to transform not only their teaching styles but themselves and their world views. As we shall see later on, the most important influence on their personal transformation came from our gender training, which among other things had a significant impact on their understanding of, and ability to grapple with, power relations. However, learning facilitation techniques ran it a close second.

4.1 Facilitation and facilitators

Ghamkhori staff and I worked together to develop our pedagogic methodology. The facilitators were all professional teachers with at least five years of experience in the Soviet system. They had learned the requisite authoritarian style at teachers' training college and subsequently applied it in their working lives. They were thus used unquestioningly to wielding power over their students. In order to become successful facilitators, they had to make radical changes to their approaches both to teaching and to their relationships with students. One of the most crucial elements here was learning to respect everyone, irrespective of age or educational level, in order to enhance students' belief in their own capacities.

Facilitation is at the heart of the learning approach described in this paper. The role of facilitators here is to bring groups together and help them understand the exercises to be performed, while keeping themselves peripheral to the discussion process. On the one hand their work is made easier since they do not have to lead the show, provide all the information and/or ask questions all the time. On the other hand, it is made considerably harder by the fact that the role of the facilitator here is to stimulate, to drop in a tricky question to bring people out of their comfort zones, get them out of balance, stir them up, and thus act as a stimulus for the development of new ways of thinking. To work out what question to ask requires quick thinking and a good understanding of approaches that encourage reflection.[4]

In order for facilitators to be able to do this, they need themselves to have under-gone a similar form of transformation. If they are still in the same conceptual space as the community members they will work with, they are unlikely to be able to help them move beyond this. However, unless they start out from the same space

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4   For a discussion around such questions see Harris (2006a).

and move consciously out of it (without condemning those who remain there), they are unlikely to be able to empathise or be accepted as sufficiently culturally similar to their students to be experienced as insiders (Srinivasan 1992). This last point is vital for dealing with tricky cultural issues, particularly those around gender identities[5] and power relations.

It is most probably because of its close connections with such critical issues that gender training has been one of the most powerful, in fact usually *the* most powerful motor for change in both Ghamkhori's and my own work. Gender identities and norms are so deeply embedded in cultures that questioning them inevitably leads to questioning much that has hitherto been accepted as natural and normal, including many issues around morality and religion, as well as around the right of certain members of society to set themselves up as superior. It was working through gender-related issues that brought the staff of Ghamkhori to start interrogating their own norms and thus to realise how little they differed from those by which their project participants lived. This helped them understand that the differences in education levels previously seen by the facilitators as separating them from the communities they worked with mattered far less than the fact that they all lived by the same social rules.

This realisation changed their attitudes towards their students and brought them to empathise rather than to sympathise with or pity them. Feelings of empathy are crucial in community development. Empathy is the opposite of 'othering', since it allows one to deal with other people's pain as if it were one's own and thus to be sensitive to how it is produced and the kinds of changes necessary to minimise it (Belenky and Stanton 2000). For Ghamkhori staff empathy with project participants and the skills to awaken this in others has been very important. Additional important issues have been facilitators taking a critical view of their own setting, being aware of power relations both within the community, and between themselves and the community, and taking these into account in the way they work (*cf.* Srinivasan 1992).

Even after Ghamkhori's teachers had learned good facilitation skills, project participants put obstacles in the way of their exercising these. This was because at first they found it difficult to act as a group of equals rather than as acolytes sitting at the feet of the master. Both their school education and their upbringing had prepared them to see the latter as the most appropriate behaviour, making it difficult for them to engage in collaborative processes with someone whom they conceptualised as a teacher. For many it took weeks of getting accustomed to the situation before they were able to relax and speak up, and even so the compulsion to put their teachers on a pedestal never completely left all of them, as continues to be true of the villages where Ghamkhori works today (*cf.* Srinivasan 1992).

Using facilitators as near as possible to the same age as the adults they work with helps mitigate this, especially for the men. However, the inevitable age difference makes it more difficult to work in this way with teenage boys. In one village where

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5   See Harris (2004) for a definition of what I mean by gender identities and their significance in the Tajik context.

the facilitator started out by asking their opinions rather than by presenting them with information, the youngsters were so taken aback they started to laugh and jeer, chanting 'teacher doesn't know, teacher doesn't know!'.

Trying to change the attitudes of the younger women and girls in this respect has been particularly complex. Because few of those who have not yet reached mother-in-law status – that is, who are not yet classified as senior women – have ever been in a position where they were listened to, it takes a great deal of time and work for them to imagine themselves capable of having a voice. Thus, they need considerable encouragement to overcome feelings of powerlessness, low self esteem, and lack of confidence, and to develop enough self trust to be able to participate actively in the discussion sessions (*cf.* Belenky *et al.* 1997; Belenky and Stanton 2000; Srinivasan 1992).

Where possible, Ghamkhori's staff continue to work part-time in the positions they held before joining the NGO. Gradually they apply the new approaches and techniques they have learned to their work outside the organisation. Most of them report that this results in an immense improvement in their professional relationships, and this has been confirmed by their students. The same thing also happens in the village schools after Ghamkhori staff teach facilitation techniques to their counterparts there.

4.2 The importance of matching facilitators and participants

It has been enormously powerful in this respect that Ghamkhori uses facilitators from as near as possible the same socio-economic and cultural background as the populations they deal with. Although the facilitators do not come from the actual villages where they work, many of them live nearby. In fact, given the intimate nature of the work around gender and sexuality, it may be more productive *not* to draw facilitators from the same villages as their participants. Experience from other settings has shown that people are more open to discussing private issues with someone from outside the community who is not related to them nor part of the same social circle – that is, with those who will have little opportunity to spread gossip within the community (Wolf 1996: 15).

As a result of their commitment to working on gender issues, Ghamkhori employs equal numbers of male and female facilitators. However, while with the youngest village groups near gender parity may be reached, it never happens that as many adult men as women participate in the programme. Typically, in each village about a hundred each of women, boys and girls work directly with the project, and anything from 40–70 men. This is a result of the significant imbalance in numbers. Not only did far more men than women lose their lives during the civil war, but labour migration now takes the majority of men under 60 out of the community for months or even years at a time. Nevertheless, Ghamkhori makes special efforts to reach as many men as possible, since staff are convinced that project impact depends on this. Women on their own cannot make such far reaching changes as when both sexes work together. This is particularly true for gender issues. In fact, Ghamkhori puts such stress on work with men that it runs special additional programmes with a particular focus on the rights of women and children, domestic

and community violence, and STDs/HIV, for male-dominated organisations, such as the army, the fire brigade, the KGB, and the police.

4.3 Effects on the community

As a general rule, when the NGO first arrives in a village, staff start by holding a preliminary meeting where they explain how Ghamkhori works, to see who is interested in joining in. If sufficient people want to do so they are asked to divide into groups and set a convenient time for weekly meetings. These groups are selected on the basis of age and for young adults marital status also, since the married and unmarried have quite different preoccupations.

The next step is for each group to devise its own timetable, choosing both the topics and the order. Although these form the starting point, they almost invariably change later on. Once participants become comfortable with the methodology and start to trust their facilitators, they typically raise more delicate issues, especially around sex or the trickier sides of social and family relations. Sex education, for instance, into which we in Ghamkhori introduce discussions on the importance of mutual respect and of female pleasure, including an explanation of the function of the clitoris, is regularly demanded by teenagers about to embark on matrimony but also figures in the timetables of quite a few married groups.

Ghamkhori works in each village for some 6–8 months. Each village is visited one day a week and each group receives a one to one-and-a-half hour session on each occasion. The majority of Ghamkhori participants usually attend a high percentage of weekly sessions. While almost none of the adults will be present every week for the duration of the project in their village, a significant number come almost every time and many at least 2–3 times a month. We have even had people rush back from trips outside the village in order not to miss a session. On the whole, young people and children often participate in virtually all the sessions, and women attend more frequently than men simply because the latter tend to spend less time in the village.

In order to hold everyone's interest the facilitators take care to keep their approach appealing, varied, and appropriate for the topics concerned. To this end, they make use of many different methods, such as role plays and dramas, focus group discussions, newspaper articles, games, competitions, and sports. What these all have in common is the fact that they are centred around participants' own knowledge, ideas and opinions rather than around those of the facilitator. Experience has shown that this enhances feelings of self worth. While at the beginning women and young people of both sexes often express bewilderment at being asked rather than told, at their opinions actually being listened to and taken into consideration, gradually this makes them feel more confident and better able to trust themselves and their ability to think things through. It even helps them rethink issues around their cultural heritage, something the negative attitudes of the Soviet regime prevented from happening earlier. In fact, it turns out that the emotional gains from Ghamkhori's approach encourage learning and the expression of ideas every bit as much as the intellectual ones. Indeed, it could be said that it is the combination of 'hearts and minds developing in tandem' (Belenky *et al.* 1997: 16) that make the learning so rich and powerful.

The session in Bairaqi Surkh described above was a great example to all concerned of what could be achieved when people were supported to work out their own solutions to problems that greatly concerned them. The intervention occurred just as the villagers were beginning to give up hope, when the death toll was mounting, and virtually every family had been affected. The scale of the epidemic had overwhelmed the health authorities who had apparently provided no guidance at all.

The cards used were taken from an illustrated booklet produced by the International Federation of the Red Cross and written in Tajik. The transmission paths of typhoid were explained and illustrated through the local context. The first half of the booklet contained drawings of women washing plates in a stream, ducks floating in the stream, people shaking hands after coming from the toilet, latrines by the edge of streams emitting waste, people drinking from the same cup, and other similar scenes. The second half showed women washing their dishes using a bucket and tipping the water out far from the stream, people washing their hands after leaving the toilet, streams empty of livestock, latrines well away from drinking water sources, and people drinking each from their own cup.

Ghamkhori acquired a number of these booklets, excised the text, cut out each illustration and pasted it on a separate card. These were then given to participants to arrange in any order they felt appropriate and to use to tell their own stories. This allowed them to 'discover' the causes of the disease for themselves. They could of course have read the booklet in its original form, with the issue spelled out explicitly in words, and the pictures appearing in a pre-arranged order. However, that would have been telling them what the solution was rather than allowing them to work it out. Considering the fact that the booklets were widely distributed to people in the affected areas with relatively little impact on the epidemic, it would seem that it was the discovery-based approach that worked, not the provision of information around hygiene issues – in fact, since the text had been removed, Ghamkhori's participants were given considerably less information than those who read the complete booklets.

The ideas that arose from their discussions and led to the decisions described in the story at the beginning of this paper originated with the participants, not the NGO staff. It was a group of older women, for instance, who decided that, for the duration of the epidemic at least, people should renounce kissing sick friends on the mouth and drinking from the same cup. It was they who undertook to explain these issues to their fellow villagers and encourage compliance. Nevertheless, it was the Ghamkhori approach that brought them to make such changes to their practices.

4.4 The importance of gender training

Bairaqi Surkh is just one of a large number of villages where Ghamkhori's project has significantly affected the population over the ten years of its existence. Evaluations of Ghamkhori's work suggest that the gender work is in many ways the most significant and has the greatest impact, particularly in regard to changing power relations. Typically, during the months of the project's duration in a

community, the less powerful visibly gain in confidence and report an increase in how far their opinions and ideas are listened to and taken into consideration; this occurs particularly within the family but also within the larger community. Around 60 per cent of participants make significant efforts to make changes in their attitudes towards gender issues and these report considerable improvements in family environment, the greatest impact being felt in families where several members participate in the project. For instance, during Ghamkhori's end-of-project assessment in Bairaqi Surkh a majority of men, women, youths and children reported a reduction in violence in the home and improved family relations. They also claimed to feel better equipped to deal with the problems they were facing, both strategically and practically.

I do not know whether participation in itself has increased the status of subaltern members, as it has done in similar projects in the south (Friedrich 2004). However, the increasing articulacy achieved in particular by women gives them greater voice in family decision-making even where this does not gain them entrance to formal family councils. Young people benefit by learning to articulate their needs to their parents and to ask for the right to participate in decision-making regarding their own futures, something that would previously have been unthinkable. Most of this has been due to the gender training.

The reason our gender work has produced such a strong impact is because of our particular approach, including our emphasis on the incorporation of males. We do not start from the viewpoint that men are the more privileged sex and the issue at stake is women's rights. Rather we begin from the proposition that both men and women are disadvantaged by current gender systems and that both could therefore benefit from changing them. The result is that many of the men involved have been persuaded to analyse their own gender positioning and a significant number have even decided to make changes to help both themselves and others with whom they interact, including women and young people. They are the more willing to do this because rather than framing gender issues in terms of blaming men for women's inferior positioning we explore the effects of social pressures on the community as a whole. In addition, we avoid the difficulty so many southern organisations have struggled with of translating the term gender into local languages (*cf. Attwood et al.* 2004). Although the term is used within the NGO, and possible Tajik translations of it have been discussed, we decided it would only complicate matters to use the word in the field. Instead, Ghamkhori staff use common local terminology to introduce gender-related *concepts*, in particular around notions of what it means to be a man or a woman, a girl or a boy. This allows us to focus on gender systems as we support participants to analyse the constituent elements of the way gender identities are defined in their communities. Deconstructing them makes it possible to deal separately with the most salient characteristics, something that has proved of enormous value in our goal of producing social change. This has been crucial for our aim of bringing participants to address issues around the rights of all members of the population to participate in decision making, to have access to education and jobs, and above all to be treated with respect. Here we dissect not only the male/female power relationship but also the multiple sets of gender identities implicated in a gerontocratic society such as that of Tajikistan, where age is as significant a factor in power relations as sex.

We have also learned not to take people at face value, since we have realised that the ways in which people present themselves may vary significantly with audience and context. For instance, until they feel comfortable with their facilitators, young women and girls often act quite submissively, only later allowing Ghamkhori staff and their fellow villagers to see their more assertive sides. In other words, it is dangerous to assume that the outward trappings of submission or domination actually match people's self images and it is vital to realise that there tends to be a considerable gap between attempts to live up to gender ideals and people's self experience.[6] A failure to understand this is likely to result in misunderstanding the dynamics occurring beneath the social surface and thus to diminish the effective-ness of working on gender issues.

Since gender is so deeply embedded in social order, it becomes an essential element in our habits of mind. It is therefore not surprising that in the case of Ghamkhori our gender training has been the element that has gone farthest in producing change. This may account for why when staff were asked to complete a self-assessment exercise in which they were to reflect on what they had gained and the inner changes that had occurred both personally and professionally since joining the organisation, without exception they all cited the gender training as having had the greatest impact both on their personal lives and their professional development.

This was the result of having NGO staff carrying out a critical inquiry into the gender identities and practices of their own communities (*cf.* Porter and Smyth 1998) and not just doing gender analyses of issues affecting participant communi-ties. This is in part to discourage the patronising attitudes often found with NGO staff, as with many other educated people, that suggest their own gender identities are unproblematic and it is only 'poor, uneducated target populations' who suffer from gender-related difficulties. Asking staff critically to examine their own gender identities, the ways they conduct their family relations and raise their children, and the meaning of all this for their personal lifestyles, starts them questioning a whole range of previously accepted norms. This is a vital element in their learning to work effectively on these issues, since it is only by first learning to be critical of their own norms that the NGO staff can subsequently help project participants to be critical of theirs.

In Ghamkhori, this proved so influential that one of the hitherto most conservative of our male staff spontaneously devised and carried out his own research project on gender issues among his friends and family and then carried the results back to the organisation. They were such a revelation to him that they completely transformed the way he treated others. He became one of the strongest champions not only of women's rights and men's obligations to treat them properly but also of men's rights to move beyond the narrow versions of masculinity current in his particular social group and of the obligations of the elders to allow this to occur. It is this belief that he and his male colleagues now bring with them into their village work that has been the greatest impetus for bringing their rural participants to interro-gate their own gender identities. In fact, in this respect Ghamkhori's male staff are

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6   Such multiple presentations are discussed in detail in Harris (2004, 2006).

often more in favour of producing gender-related social change than the females. This seems to stem from the difficulties the latter foresee for the women they work with in being able to stimulate change from their lower power positions. It also appears to relate directly to the obstacles female staff have encountered in their own lives in creating opportunities for positive change.

4.5 Overall project impact

Ghamkhori also carries out political education on issues related to elections and local government. It supports the communities it works in to develop steering committees where male and female leaders address issues to improve village life. Examples include the provision of public transportation, negotiating with the electricity company for better services, constructing schools, working with families to reduce incidents of domestic violence, encouraging them to allow daughters to enter tertiary education, discouraging them from forcing them into unwanted marriages, and helping young people gain scholarships for further study. Ghamkhori further supports these committees to band together into regional committees powerful enough to negotiate with local governments and other appropriate institutions on relevant issues. These committees also represent Ghamkhori's main contact with the population after it finishes its active period in each village.

Ghamkhori's monitoring and evaluation at the end of each village intervention, as well as one and two years later, invariably show significant changes in attitudes and practices. In virtually all cases, the communities are so enthusiastic about the NGO's work that they try to prevent the organisation from leaving, while people from nearby communities who have attended sessions plead with the staff to bring the project to their villages as well. The result is a long waiting list of villages wishing to participate in the project.

Ghamkhori's work not only helps transform the community environment but also results in changes at the level of self-presentation and social relations. Participants typically claim to have improved their ability to analyse situations and make informed decisions about them, as well as to act on these. For instance, they say that while problems such as the typhoid epidemic used to seem unintelligible and almost insurmountable and their only solution was to blame them on sin and look for a scapegoat to put things right, they now think in terms of figuring out the underlying causes of such problems and finding practical solutions.

While all this shows much that is positive, Ghamkhori's facilitators could go considerably further towards encouraging participants to take ownership of the project in their particular village. This would facilitate the NGO's departure at the end of their months in the village, as well as providing a much stronger basis for sustainability. However, such an approach is not only difficult; it is also threatening. Even discussing it makes the staff feel insecure, fearful of losing their power and eventually their jobs in an environment where the likelihood of finding another one anything like as well remunerated is very small. Thus, an opportunity for greater transformation is being missed.

Taking on board successful methods used in other educational projects could also help increase Ghamkhori's impact. One potentially relevant body of literature has

been produced by practitioners of the transformative learning school of adult education in the United States. In the following section I discuss this school and explore how far its approach fits Ghamkhori's work and which elements they could usefully adopt.

5 Transformative learning paradigms

Jack Mezirow, one of the foremost theorists of this kind of transformative education, suggests that students do best with learner-centred pedagogies using materials reflecting their own experiences, where they are given opportunities to work in small groups and to draw their own conclusions by discovering ideas for themselves, the educator acting as facilitator rather than as teacher (Mezirow 1997: 10–11). 'Transformative learning … is the process of effecting change in a *frame of reference*',[7] or in other words a 'structure … of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition,' and 'are composed of two dimensions: *habits of mind* and *a point of view*'.[8] The former comprises the cultural framework or lens through which we understand the world, is the result of long-term development in a specific socio-cultural setting and changes in it happen only with difficulty, while the latter is the product of this lens in regard to a particular issue and may change rapidly depending on context and contact with others. People can transform themselves by means of critical reflection on the assumptions on which both of these are based (Mezirow 1997: 5ff) and they are most likely to want to do this in the wake of a 'disorienting dilemma' (Mezirow 1981: 7 in Jarvis 2004: 131), such as for instance our typhoid epidemic or at a more fundamental level the post-Soviet environment in general.

Nevertheless, as Belenky and Stanton point out not everyone is in an equal position to take advantage of opportunities for learning; people in lower power positions, such as the disadvantaged women in the United States with whom they worked, need special encouragement in order to be able to effect changes in their frames of reference. It is not as easy for them as Mezirow makes out, and it is essential that facilitators understand that different groups may need quite different approaches to learning (Belenky and Stanton 2000). This is even more important in the global south, where learners may have had no exposure to formal education. They may feel even less sure of themselves and thus less able to take advantage of educational opportunities than the women in the United States with whom Belenky and her colleagues worked. Learner-centred educational methodologies developed for the south are careful to take this into consideration (Archer 2007; Srinivasan 1992). Ghamkhori's methodology is particularly aimed at supporting the learning processes of the least self-confident and least exposed to formal schooling, who are generally the female participants.

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7   Emphasis in the original.

8   Emphasis in the original.

As a result, by the end of Ghamkhori's work in Bairaqi Surkh, far deeper changes had occurred in the population than simply their taking on different points of view. Certain aspects of the framework through which they understood the world did indeed change significantly as they learned to reflect critically on some aspects of their environment at least.

Mezirow insists that critical reflection around both one's own and other people's assumptions is essential for effecting personal transformation and for the ability to engage in problem solving with others. Both of these dimensions are essential for successful adaptation to change: 'Transformative learning [helps] the individual become a more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her own values, meanings, and purposes rather than to uncritically act on those of others' (Mezirow 1997: 5, 10–11). However, according to Belenky and Stanton, while developing autonomous thought processes may be desirable, for the less powerful this is far harder than Mezirow suggests (2000). Again, the same is true for the less educated inhabitants of the global south (Srinivasan 1992), as we found in Tajikistan. This is why it is so important to give everyone a chance by tailoring approaches to fit different learning styles (Welbourne 2007).

Through Ghamkhori's interventions, their Bairaqi Surkh participants did move some way towards becoming more reflective and more critical thinkers. For instance, when their new ideas or practices were challenged, many of them were able to use the skills they had acquired to justify their standpoints. However, while they learnt group problem solving, it is not clear how deep their reflectivity concerning personal assumptions or those of others went, or even whether they were able consciously to reflect on these at all. One reason for this may be that Ghamkhori did not pay sufficient attention to the different learning needs of individuals within each group.

Despite this, everyday practices in Bairaqi Surkh were changed in many respects by people's intellectual discoveries over the duration of the project and some at least of these lasted. For instance, even after the typhoid epidemic lost its grip on the village, Ghamkhori's participants kept the habits of body they had learned in relation to hygiene. While they did not change their belief that Allah was the fount of all that happened on earth as in heaven, their actions in regard to the typhoid epidemic, among other things, did challenge what had appeared to have been a basic belief or habit of mind for many people in Tajikistan – that people should not be pro-active on their own behalf but wait for Him to provide.

The population also became somewhat more open than previously in regard to gender issues, permitting their daughters more access to the outside world, for instance, and allowing women and young people greater voice in decision making. However, although there did seem to be an acknowledgement that the less powerful in the social hierarchy had more rights than they had hitherto been granted, this had not changed the fundamental assumption that adult men were in charge. Even though many women had gained in power to the point that they were able to speak out on issues on which they had hitherto maintained silence, they clearly remained less powerful than their menfolk. The idea of family honour depending on public perception of their daughters' purity still existed but it was no longer taken for granted as natural and unquestionable. Rather it had become a subject of discussion both in family circles and among the men in the mosque, and

it took on new forms as it was acknowledged that there might be other ways of achieving this than simply shutting the girls away from all possible contact with the opposite sex. Young people had also made considerable changes in outlook and behaviour. However, even though they had learned to express their opinions in front of their parents this was limited in scope and heavily influenced both by traditional deference and material dependence.

Thus, while definite changes in habits of mind and a certain level of critical reflection were observable, it is difficult to say how deep they went and how much the majority of the population were now capable of explicit, conscious, critical reflection on their own position in the world. Even though some of the assumptions they had grown up with had been successfully challenged, much of this had occurred implicitly and remained largely unarticulated.

In other words, the population had started to negotiate their 'own values, meanings and purposes' (Mezirow 1997: 11) but it is unclear both how far this went and how long it lasted after the end of the project. On subsequent evaluations, it was noted that the most faithful participants did seem not only to remember, but also to make use of, what they had learned and they insisted their lives were considerably the better for Ghamkhori's intervention. However, in the course of a few short visits we could not fully assess how far this went. Nor was it possible to enough people to estimate what proportion of participants this applied to.

Mezirow suggests the importance of adults reflecting critically on the value systems they developed as children and young people, and deciding whether or not these make sense for them as adults (1998). One component of this is that people should reflect on how they come to the decisions they make and how they know what they know (Brookfield 2000). These issues raise a number of complex cultural implications that I will deal with later. Here I want to bring up something else – the distinction between whether people should learn to act as autonomous individuals or whether what should be prioritised is collaborative action among members of collectives.

Mezirow's passage is ambiguous, referring as it does at one point to individuals and at another to problem solving groups. It is unclear how he conceptualises these groups – whether they are formed for the period of study or are in some way related to transformative processes in the community. Moreover, he frames the learners as culturally neutral but, as a white American academic working in his own country, it seems likely that he intends this transformation to occur within the framework of the individualistic atomised middle class white society that tends to be the unmarked setting assumed by scholars from that social group.

This is a very different setting from that of our Tajik village, where the unit is not the individual but the family, and where even heads of family are not expected to act autonomously but rather to ensure their family conforms to community norms. In this respect, the Soviet ideal of communalism that brought communities to work together at the behest of the authorities reinforced Tajik custom whereby elders along with religious leaders made decisions and the community at large ensured their implementation (Harris 2004).

In Bairaqi Surkh, Ghamkhori's intervention was able to support the community to act in an inclusive and participatory manner. The fact that they tackled the typhoid

epidemic collectively does not mean, of course, that thought processes were exclusively collectively developed and had merely a collective impact. In fact they influenced people in a very personal manner, and one that was dependent on many attributes, including those of their power positions within their collectives (*cf.* Taylor *et al.* 2006: 20ff). Thus, issues of who was preferentially invited into spaces where power was most clearly administered within the village (male elders), who was invisibly involved in collective decision-making in spaces where they were not usually invited (women), dimensions of hidden or disguised power where people concealed their inappropriate power (women and youth) or conversely their lack of it (adult males) behind notional gender-appropriate masks[9] all made particular impacts on the personal dimensions of learning (see Gaventa 2006). All these were also related to the extent to which the Ghamkhori project was able to support the population towards transformation.

Edmund O'Sullivan (*et al.* 2002), defines transformative learning less instrumentally and more holistically than Mezirow. For O'Sullivan this:

> involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our ways of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our-body-awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and personal joy.
>
> (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2002: xvii, in Hussein 2006: 369)

Did Ghamkhori's intervention serve to support the population of Bairaqi Surkh to achieve such a shift? This is not at all easy to answer. In some sense, people did experience changes in consciousness. They moved to a profoundly different way of dealing with many of the issues that confronted them and they changed a number of their social relations in order to do so. However, it is unclear how deep and how structural was the shift and whether there has been a real modification in such things as their 'sense of possibilities for social justice and personal joy'.

As we have seen, in regard to gender the alterations, although perceptible, did not appear to go very deep. It is thus not possible to say that a complete shift took place; however, a partial one undoubtedly did and it involved a certain level of change in the way people conceived their places in the world. For instance, men started to believe they did not have the right to ride roughshod over the entire family and always get their own way irrespective of the wishes and needs of other members. They may not have changed their ideas to consider younger and older, males and females as equals, but they did grant the less powerful more rights to express themselves and listened to them more carefully than before. In this respect, they had made a significant step towards envisioning alternatives to their former authoritarian and hierarchical lifestyles and towards social justice. In addition, leaders learned to articulate their community's needs to the outside world, including for

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9   See Harris (2004).

instance to local government agents, the electricity company, and the directors of the collective farm, rather than remaining passive towards such entities as in the Soviet past.

By their own admission, and the observations of Ghamkhori staff, the majority of the participants were considerably happier than when the NGO first entered their village. This was due in part to the warmer family relations mentioned above and in part to the understanding they had gained of approaches to tackling a large number of the problems they were encountering in their everyday lives and which hitherto, like the typhoid for instance, had appeared frighteningly inexplicable and thus impossible to solve effectively. Moreover, they were better equipped to work through and deal with new problems as they arose.

Taking the Mezirow and O'Sullivan definitions together, we are left with the question of how far critical thinking and reflection are necessary to produce the shift in consciousness mentioned above. If this entails changing our 'understanding of ourselves and our self-locations', how is this understanding produced? How much is it instrumental – that is, how much does it entail merely the incorporation of tools for critical thinking – and how much holistic – that is, encompassing every facet of our being?

Patricia Cranton, another key theorist in this field, suggests that critical thinking is an integral component of transformative learning and that a fundamental aim of both is to challenge ideologies hitherto accepted as normal and natural (Cranton 2005). To some extent this is what happened in Bairaqi Surkh but the changes that occurred were not as sweeping as what she and the other writers seem to be looking for.

Thus, while Ghamkhori's participants do typically start to query some of their traditions, they do not attempt rigorously to question whether the values they learned as children are valid for their lives as adults (*cf.* Brookfield 2000). Indeed, this is a very tricky issue, since it clearly involves critiquing one's own culture.

None of the theorists cited above addresses the issue of cultural difference and the implications of this for learning and transformation. John Dirkx, another transformative learning scholar, does consider different cultures but from the viewpoint that experiences of an alien culture allow people to view their own culture in a different light (Cranton 2006). He does not deal with the issue of what it means for people from different cultural backgrounds to participate in this kind of pedagogy.

Stephen Brookfield, a white British scholar currently residing in the US, has recently started to address the question of racism within the production of knowledge and educational methodologies. However, in the work of his that I have seen he limits this to issues around African American representation, ignoring the question of other cultural groups and the entire issue of post-colonialism. At the same time he seemingly unquestioningly identifies African-American production of alternative paradigms in critical thinking purely with male thought, bringing in Lucius Outlaw and Cornell West, for instance, while ignoring bell hooks (Brookfield 2003). Thus, despite mentioning the importance of incorporating issues on gender, he appears blind to this in his own work. Nowhere that I have found to date does he address

issues of feminist thought, either white or African American or the differences between feminist/female critical thought processes and masculinist/male ones.

This is something that worries Belenky and her colleagues in relation to the work of the transformative learning school. In their own pedagogical projects they have found that even the group of white women with low educational levels with whom they worked felt disempowered by schooling that privileged males. It took a great deal of hard work on the part of these women, supported by Belenky and her group, to overcome this and see themselves as valid decision-makers and leaders. This was even harder for non-white women, who had to be able to move past their invisibility as women in regard to questions of race and culture as well as to deal with their 'racial' invisibility emanating from white feminists (Belenky *et al.* 1986, 1997; Belenky and Stanton 2000). In other words, the school system in the United States has many of the same elements that disempowered members of minority ethnic groups who attended Soviet schools, with similar results. The same is true for post-colonial societies in the rest of the world.

5.1 Culturally appropriate pedagogies

In regard to Africa, the Sierra Leonean scholar, Filomena Steady, has argued that 'for the most part [pedagogic] methodology [developed by the Europeans and the West in general] has had a negative influence and disruptive effect on African systems of knowledge, science, technology, art, production, reproduction, etc.' Assié-Lumumba claims that formal education has in many ways exploited and marginalised Africans, and in particular African women, more than it has helped them. This is because it privileges neither women's ways of knowing and learning nor African cultures and knowledge production (Assié-Lumumba 1997, 2001). This issue of different kinds of knowledge production and different cultural needs for knowledge is an important one and one that most western educational theorists have ignored.

As Assié-Lumumba, Filomina Steady and other African women scholars point out, neither knowledge produced by women nor the ways in which women produce it, are properly valued (Assié-Lumumba 2001). Colonial and post-colonial education systems are based on hegemonic pedagogical concepts, whereby 'real knowledge' is generated by scholars publishing in refereed journals or the equivalent. In other words, the only acceptable forms of knowledge are those given a stamp of approval by a hierarchical system that sees little value outside masculinist western-oriented scholarship. Meanwhile, in many southern settings formal education systems only too often limit themselves to near rote teaching rather than employ-ing culturally sensitive methodologies aiming to support students to develop reflec-tive critical thinking.

Chester Bowers suggests that Mezirow's approach, in which people are asked to challenge their own ideology, is tantamount to asking them to challenge their own culture (2005). According to his criteria, by going into Bairaqi Surkh and using western devised methodologies to get the population to question their socio-cul-tural assumptions, Ghamkhori's facilitators were attempting to achieve what the Soviet regime had failed to do – that is, to draw the population into modernity. This

was all the subtler and more persuasive because it was not obviously imposed from above and because (unlike the Soviets) Ghamkhori worked from within the culture.

No doubt to a certain extent this is true. Ghamkhori staff try to support participants to deal with their current situation, one that no longer resembles their traditional milieu, and they do so largely using modern criteria, such as a focus on hygiene. They also attempt to reduce inequalities, particularly those resulting from the traditional gender/age system. However, Ghamkhori's gender work is based less on outside ideas of what should encompass male/female relationships than on issues raised by the subaltern of the communities where they work – that is, by women, youth, and children – in relation to their treatment by the more powerful, particularly adult men. These tend to centre on desires to participate more directly in family decision-making and to eliminate such problems as domestic violence. Rather than telling them what to do, Ghamkhori staff support participants to work out ways in which they can tackle these issues themselves. Thus, their work occupies a space part way between the culturally integrated approach promoted by Bowers and the westernised, culturally blind ones he criticises (2005).

Bowers claims that global capitalist penetration has compelled peoples throughout the south to transform their lifestyles by destroying their material and political environments and forcing them to adapt to new, and often highly unwelcome, circumstances. He also accuses educational theorists and practitioners such as Freire and his followers, of playing a negative role by deliberately ignoring local knowledge passed on down the generations and substituting Marxism and other western ideologies that ultimately encourage the acceptance of modernistic capitalist outlooks and the destruction of local cultures (2005).

I wonder whether this is actually the case. It seems to me that while this may well speak to the issues of many small tribal groups who have recently been moved off their lands or whose local environment has been severely damaged (Ginzburg 2006), most of the rest of the world has been under modernising influences, whether capitalist or socialist, for so long there is no going back. Moreover, the destruction of their traditional material and even mental environment has gone too far for intergenerational teaching to do much to help most populations in the global south tackle the issues they currently face.

This is certainly the case in Tajikistan. Here the material changes put into place under the Soviet regime, including nationalising the land and forcing the peasants into collective and state farms, radically transformed lifestyles. Now, the collapse of the Soviet system and the concomitant economic problems have destroyed Soviet-period livelihood patterns, and the inability of the government to establish a functioning economic infrastructure has prevented the development of successful substitutes. It has also made health care prohibitively expensive for the majority and seriously damaged the education system. However, the circumstances of life today are so different from those of pre-Soviet times that it would make no sense at all to try to return to previous lifestyles. Moreover, pre-Soviet traditions upheld much the same power relations as current ones do and were therefore highly unfavourable to the subaltern (*cf.* Harris 2004, 2006).

As regards Ghamkhori, no doubt it would improve their work to make more use of local concepts as well as to adopt a more culturally sensitive pedagogy. It would

also be useful to see what staff could learn from participatory learning and action approaches used in other settings, not only from the transformative pedagogy of Mezirow and his colleagues but also from southern educational projects (*cf.* Abah 2004; Patel 2004; Srinivasan 1992). Nevertheless, despite its weak points I believe the NGO's work has provided people in Bairaqi Surkh and elsewhere with useful tools for improving their ability to tackle their difficult and complex circumstances and that it continues to do so.

6 Conclusion

The population of Bairaqi Surkh perceived the learning they were doing in Ghamkhori's project as a positive experience. Whether this was because of their desperate need to find solutions to their problems, because the context had delinked it from Soviet attempts to transform their culture and staff explicitly worked from within Islam rather than attempting to destroy participants' religious beliefs, because the learning style suited them, or simply because they were engaging in the process voluntarily, this kind of study did not seem to be associated in their minds with the negative aspects of their formal schooling.

The women Belenky and her co-authors worked with found the elements associated with masculinist learning styles alienating. They rejected the types of logic and analysis taught, especially the way these were impersonalised and objectified, as well as the authoritarian manner in which the knowledge of experts was elevated above that of the students (Belenky *et al.* 1986, 1997; Belenky and Stanton 2000). In Bairaqi Surkh, the population did not explicitly, or seemingly even consciously, do this. On the contrary, outwardly they looked for authoritarian teaching. However, at another level, it seemed clear that Ghamkhori's approach in positioning them as experts in their own learning, integrating their personal experiences into the process, and validating their culture rather than endlessly condemning it as had been the norm under the Soviet regime, was crucial in making this experience qualitatively different from previous ones. In all this, the emotional aspects of learning were at least as important as the intellectual ones. The gender aspects were inseparable from this, especially important being the way women of all ages and younger men were encouraged to see their own knowledge and experiences as being just as valid as those of older males, something hitherto unheard of.

Despite my criticism of Mezirow and the other western theorists, a great deal that is relevant to the south can be learned from their work. For instance, one important point is what brings people to decide they need to make changes when this is likely to contravene longstanding customs. Here Mezirow's disorienting dilemma is crucial to the issue of the circumstances under which populations are likely to be open to participation in projects that bring them to question their own cultures. Understanding this allows us to see that one very significant reason for the difference in impact between Ghamkhori's work and the Soviet education project was the existence of the disorienting circumstances surrounding the collapse of the socialist system. This opened up space for learning around issues that had previously been irrelevant because either they were not a problem or they were managed by

the state. It was the coming together of all these factors that opened the population of Bairaqi Surkh to the necessity of acquiring ways of coping with the complex and terrifying new circumstance into which they had been plunged.

This does not mean that they thought of their learning experiences with Ghamkhori as adult education, or as part of a lifelong learning experience of the kind discussed in western theory (e.g. Jarvis 2004). Rather it looked as if they were grasping at a way of saving themselves from potential drowning in an uncharted and shark-filled ocean. The desperation with which inhabitants of neighbouring villages came to beg the NGO to include them in their project supports this view.

While the situation of Tajikistan in the 1990s was particularly difficult owing to the rapid and sharp changes that had taken place, many southern populations also find themselves in situations where their previous knowledge, skills, and worldviews are greatly challenged by exposure to global capitalism. In other words, many of them also face disorienting dilemmas that can serve as entry points for learner-centred education projects of the kind discussed here.

In these circumstances, making pedagogy an integral component of development has tremendous potential for producing a positive impact. However, as all of us involved with this know, it is extraordinarily hard to do well and in a sensitive manner. In order for participants to become truly engaged, it is vital to adapt both the content of the programme and the manner of carrying out facilitation to the needs of each group one works with. This makes it difficult if not impossible simply to follow pre-developed modules, because of the necessity of responding as each session evolves rather than following a prescribed plan or set of questions. It is also counter-productive to use a set curriculum, since each group needs to study what interests them. Even if development practitioners perceive the tackling of certain issues as crucial – hygiene and the use of oral rehydration in settings where mortality from diarrhoeal diseases is high, for instance – it should be realised that people will only learn if their interest is engaged, if the subject matter is important to them, as it was in the case of the typhoid epidemic discussed above. This means that topics a facilitating team considers essential will need to be positioned within subjects their particular participant group finds important in order to be taken on board. All this complicates things for facilitators and forces them to be perpetually on their toes.

The results of participatory educational endeavours can at times appear extraordinarily positive, as they did in Bairaqi Surkh, when as a result of a few hours of reflective dialogue, the population organised themselves to clear out typhoid from their village. Nevertheless, it is unlikely such a one-off intervention would go very deep without being backed up by a long term intervention. Moreover, it is vital to continue to interrogate the very mission of such development. Is Bowers (2005) perhaps not right in suggesting that most forms of secular education today tend to reproduce scientifically based, neoliberal capitalist-oriented value systems and approaches to knowledge production and thus are essentially preparing students to fit in the current global worldviews? If our aims here are to support populations to maximise their advantages within these systems, then an approach such as that of Ghamkhori may work very well. If our aims, however, are to go further, to adopt the goal of supporting populations to challenge global capitalism and emancipate themselves from its destructive grasp, as has been suggested by some development

practitioners (Manji and O'Coill 2002: 14) then we need to consider how to give participants far greater scope to reframe the entire workings of educational projects and not merely to influence the content and timetable, as Ghamkhori currently does.

However, we must also realise that participants may not wish to challenge the current world order or be in a position even to consider doing so. It is the job of facilitators not to push people to take up certain positions but rather to provide them with tools for analysing their situation. Then it will be up to the participants to use them as they see fit. The important thing here is to take care not to endorse negative components of the current situation, such as consumerism, imbalances in gendered power relations, or submission to authoritarianism.

In my own attempts at developing pedagogy aimed at producing social change, the following elements have proved effective: It is crucial to keep in mind the fact that it is not possession of information itself that produces changes but rather the means used to impart it. That is, it is not so much *what* one learns that matters as *how* one learns it. Discovery based learning encourages people to *adopt* new ideas, while merely listening may make no discernible impact on either practices or attitudes (Srinivasan 1992). This also speaks to the importance of the facilitation process, which means keeping in mind the fact that the most essential task of this process is to open up spaces for critical reflection.

People learn best when the subject matter is relevant to their interests, when they find themselves in an emotionally positive environment, with a facilitation method suited to their particular learning styles, and when what they are learning does not contradict their basic world view (Sibbons 1998: 42). They also learn best in an environment where they are not made to feel inferior (Belenky *et al.* 1997; Belenky and Stanton 2000) and where they are supported to develop internal power, as well as power to achieve something and collaborative power (Veneklasen and Miller 2002). It helps significantly here to use facilitators from similar socio-economic and cultural backgrounds to the participants, as long as they do not try to make themselves look superior but dress in the same way, sit with their students as equals, and speak the same language or dialect.

Lastly, it is vital for the success of a project aiming at producing social change to reach a critical mass of the population in each community where it works, in order to reduce social pressures to revert to the norms. Therefore, it is important to incorporate people from all segments — men and women, boys and girls and, if possible, temporal and spiritual leaders also — thus, enabling the entire community to work together. The trickle down approach whereby information is provided to one group who are then expected to pass it on to the rest can only work in a very limited way at best, precisely because it is not exposure to information but the process of learning that produces change. Dividing the population into groups by age and sex not only achieves the greatest possible active participation, but also complies with social norms in many southern communities, where power relations are strongly age-related as well as gendered. Using the kind of gender training discussed above — training that incorporates men and boys as much as women and girls and focuses on deconstructing the constraints of the local gender system — has tremendous potential for producing social change.

In my own work, as in the work of Ghamkhori, it has been the combination of all the above – that is, the development of critical thinking and gender analysis together – that has produced significant levels of positive social change.

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