



A Bhutanese tertiary education consultancy case study: Introducing the institutional zone of proximal development



T.W. Maxwell^{a,*}, Namgay^b

^a School of Education, University of New England, NSW 2351, Australia

^b Teacher Education Unit, Royal Education Council, P.O. Box 1468, Motithang, Thimphu 11001, Bhutan

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Development
Tertiary education
Consultant
Consultancy process
Bhutan

ABSTRACT

This paper identifies an overarching strategy that consultants can use to focus institutional level development work: the institutional zone of proximal development (IZPD). The paper explicates the IZPD concept following Vygotsky (1978). The case study of distance education course development in tertiary education in Bhutan illustrates the six processes within the IZPD that supported successful implementation. Evidence showed that the consultancy had contributed to the institutionalisation of change. Three implications for consultants using the IZPD are presented. The concept of the IZPD is new to the development literature.

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1. Introduction

Consultancies have been a feature of educational development work for more than five decades (see Coombs, 1964) but consultancies vary in their success. It appears that the impact of educational aid to developing countries has been “less effective than it could have been” (Verspoor, 1993, p. 104). Consultancy can be broadly defined as

a process of transferring expertise, knowledge and/or skills from one party (the consultant) to another (the client) with the aim of providing help or solving problems . . . The parameters of the process are described in a contract, and the client pays the consultant (Jacobson et al., 2005, p. 204).

The nature of a consultancy can be thought of as falling within a continuum: the expert emphasising product at one end, through process consultation, to facilitation of empowerment at the other (see also Pasmore, 1988). Depending upon need the consultant may use some combination of these (Maxwell, 1991).

Consultancy in the international sphere implies cultural sensitivity. In this scenario, policy borrowing (Phillips, 2000) and knowledge transfer (Jacobson et al., 2005) need to be handled carefully. Scaffolding the consultancy correctly, or getting the level of sophistication of actions right, is even more difficult when it

takes place in a cultural context quite different from the consultant's own. There is little in the literature about how to get the recommendations right at the *institution* level despite the ever present North/South aid dialogue.

Consultancy based on aid funds is much more complex than harmonising aid to the poverty reduction agenda (Colclough et al., 2010). The difficulties and contestations that hinder the success of international projects associated with aid and consultancy activities has been documented (London, 1993; Verspoor, 1993; Thomas, 1997; Powell, 2001; Moore and Chapman, 2003; King, 2008). In fact, “difficulty” is a theme in producing outcomes in international development projects.

Anecdotally, too many reports are said to make no impression upon the intended behaviours of the audience and/or on the structures/culture of the organisation. The reasons for this apparent lack of outcomes are diverse. One of the key considerations is likely to be the appropriateness of the recommendations for the people who are to implement them. Another is the ownership by counterparts and their inability to follow through. Cross cultural work is demanding and in developing countries resources are limited. In order to alleviate these problems the consultancy itself needs a strategy and complementary processes that maximise the potential for the recommendations to be taken up once the consultants leave. What might the strategy be? What are these processes? Consequently, the purposes of this paper are (1) to provide evidence for a contribution to impact of a consultancy through a case study and then (2) to introduce the concept of the institutional zone of proximal development (IZPD) as a strategy for consultants to adopt as well as (3) to illustrate

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 266527939; fax: +61 266527939.

E-mail addresses: tmaxwell47@gmail.com (T.W. Maxwell), namgay@rec.org.bt (Namgay).

consultancy processes that can work within the IZPD. As a lead into the IZPD concept, we first address the concept of scaffolding.

2. Scaffolding the consultancy

A key task for the consultant is to stimulate growth/change. This generally means a focus on capacity building of people. For Fullan (1991) educational change is a personal learning process that requires support over time as people come to grips with the objective and the subjective realities of the change. Objective realities consist of a focus on materials, practices and beliefs. Subjective realities, Fullan contended, included understanding that there will be idiosyncratic interpretations of change materials, related practices and underpinning beliefs. Fullan says that some pressure for change is needed. But he warns that putting pressure on to achieve change requires support. Pressure without support can lead to resistance and even alienation. On the other hand, if only support is made available, e.g., through the provision of resources without adequate direction (pressure) then waste and aimlessness can occur. Like Fullan Beeby, who worked as a consultant to education systems in the Pacific for many years, believed that education and specific training of the people are critical for making the recommendations of the consultancy work (Beeby, 1966, 1980). These are important ideas for consultants and inform the concept of the IZPD since capacity building at the right level is critical to success.

People are at the heart of change. They also work within the socio-cultural-historical context of the institution. Consultants need to become very familiar with the norms and values as well as the usual practices in the substantive area of the consultancy early on. Specifically, consultants can look for the points of need in order to take the institution to the next level during the consultancy and via the recommendations and follow up work. In effect, scaffolding needs to be such that those in the institution can learn new behaviours and create new structures within which to work. The “scaffold” (Vygotsky, 1978) is a helpful metaphor as it assists the consultant to understand the situation as one consisting of facilitation (a process), rather than transmission (an event), of learning leading to the recommendations. The facilitation means structuring events over time and providing processes consistent with what those in the organisation need to know next, i.e., to learn with support to take the next step towards desired change. Eventually, thinking about scaffolding at the institutional level led us to the IZPD (after Vygotsky, 1978).

3. Introducing the IZPD

The concept of the institutional zone of proximal development extends the Vygotsky (1978) zone of proximal development notion for individuals. In introducing this concept we are thinking similarly to collective self-efficacy (Bandura, 2000; Goddard, 2002; Chan, 2008) and organisational culture (Maxwell and Thomas, 1991; Prosser, 1999; Coyle, 2008). To take the lead from Bandura (1997, p. 469), perceived collective efficacy refers to the “performance capability of a social system as a whole” since the people do not work in isolation but rather work collectively in a social system. Bandura (1997, p. 478) maintained that “perceived collective efficacy is an emergent group level attribute rather than simply the sum of the member’s perceived personal efficacies.”

Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) defines the zone of proximal development as

The distance between the actual development level as determined by the individual problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem

solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.

The IZPD can be thought of as a group level attribute of the institution and is the area between the institutional problem solving level and the level of potential development as determined through collective problem solving under the guidance of, or in collaboration with, more capable peers (after Vygotsky, 1978). Whereas Vygotsky was referring to individual tasks, the IZPD should be thought of as encompassing multiple tasks for a number of people.

4. Consultancy setting

This section provides some background to tertiary education in Bhutan, the consultancy site and the consultancy itself.

4.1. Background

The Kingdom of Bhutan shares its northern border with China (Tibet) along high Himalayan Mountains and its southern border abuts against the plains of north eastern India. Bhutan has, over the last six decades, embarked upon a series of five year planning cycles in order to achieve its goals (RGoB, 1999). Amongst these has been the desire to introduce and maintain a quality education system (see Maxwell, 2007).

Prior to the inauguration of the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) in 2003 ten colleges existed in Bhutan each of which was linked to a Ministry. Nine of these are presently part of the RUB in a federated model (<http://www.rub.edu.bt/>). There have been considerable developments since inauguration amongst which has been the publication of RUB’s (2006) *The Wheel of Academic Law*. *The Wheel* sets out significant benchmarks, academic standards and outcomes for RUB’s institutes and colleges. RUB’s *Wheel* also recommends a largely student-centred approach to pedagogy. In practice much of the pedagogy is of the transmission (vessel filling) type (Gyamtsso and Maxwell, 2012). This tension needs to be understood in terms of the cultural background of Bhutan’s largely Buddhist population (Rennie and Mason, 2007), lecturers’ personal histories of education largely developed from Indian influence in schools and universities, and resources constraints such as lack of library materials and large classes. It is important to note that Bhutan, and so RUB colleges and institutes, did not have access to sufficient Internet bandwidth at the time of the consultancy. Only in recent years has the tentative use of the Internet via Moodle begun. Print materials and residential schools have been the basis of distance education in the college.

4.2. The college

The climate in Bhutan at the time of the project was one of introspection, i.e., some concern was being expressed about the quality of school education (Dorji, 2005). The college where the consultancy project took place has long associations with the Ministry of Education and works closely with the other College of Education to educate teachers. It has six pre- and in-service programmes. In 2008 the student population was more than 650 across the six pre-service programmes with several hundred more in-service students. In 2006 there were about 40 academics although this has expanded in recent times to over 50 one quarter of whom are women.

Students and academic staff differed markedly in their profiles (Maxwell et al., 2008, pp. 10–14). The students of the distance education in-service programme all had a decade or more of experience as teachers but had, at the most, a two-year formal

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