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Independent and interdependent concepts of self: a meeting of worlds

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This article argues for a re-evaluation of pedagogical methods to integrate an interdependent concept of self with an independent concept of self in order to enhance teaching and learning. The influence of an African communal or interdependent system in comparison with the dominant independent individual system is investigated by means of interviews with students at the Arts Department. The social-constructivist learning perspective with the concept of communities of practice as a framework is used for the study. Based on the findings, the article advocates teaching and learning methods that are more multiculturally sensitive and that incorporate "other" voices and alternative ways of dialogue in order to improve interaction and information sharing.

Onafhanklike en interafhanklike selfbegrippe: 'n ontmoeting van wêreldes

Hierdie artikel argumenteer vir 'n herevaluering van pedagogiese metodes deur die interafhanklike konsep van self te inkorporeer met die individuele konsep van self om leer en onderrig te bevorder. Deur middel van onderhouds met studente by die Kunstdepartement word die kommunale interafhanklike verwantskap in teenstelling met die tans dominante onafhanklike, meer kompeterende individuele sisteem ondersoek. Die sosiaal-konstruktivistiese leerperspektief word gebruik met die klem op praktykgemeenskappe ("communities of practice") as 'n raamwerk vir die studie. Op basis van die bevindinge word voorstelle vir onderrig-en-leermetodes gemaak wat multikultureel-sensitief is en wat ook ander "stemme" insluit deur alternatiewe metodes van dialoog en interaksie te bevorder.

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My interest in the field of multicultural teaching and learning started with my own experiences of teaching in a multicultural environment; it was also stimulated while organising a community-interaction programme for students, as well as teaching art to youths in Kayamandi (a traditionally black suburb of Stellenbosch) for the past four years. Experiencing these cultural differences helped me realise that there can be some profound multicultural differences within a teaching situation. This prompted me to re-evaluate my own position as a lecturer, since my previous methods of teaching had not necessarily incorporated alternative opinions on teaching. Writing as a white African about black African¹ culture might be viewed as a limitation, but it is exactly this limitation that has motivated me to carry out this research.

Interdependent and independent² qualities exist in all people simultaneously, but one is normally dominant (Brislin 2000: 53). Interdependence and independence are helpful guidelines in the process of interaction between different cultures (Brislin 2000: 61). Other variables such as personality or personal characteristics can also be used to understand cultural differences. Gudykunst (1994: 39, 44) explains that the most useful ways to understand communication between cultures are by differentiating between either interdependent and independent structures or low- and high-context communication structures. Low-context communication uses direct communication

- 1 In this article the term “black Africans” refers to people whose mother tongue is an indigenous language such as isiXhosa or isiZulu. It does not include what the previous regime referred to as “coloured” people. This despite the fact that the current regime defines “black” as people from both “black African” and “coloured” groups; in other words, all people who were disadvantaged by the previous system on the basis of race, “white” in the present regime referring to people who were in an advantaged position in the past. Both black and white people who live in Africa are regarded as Africans but, for the purpose of this article, the terms “black Africans” and “white Africans” are used.
- 2 The concepts “collective” and “individual” are used as alternatives to “interdependent” and “independent”. In African culture the concept “communal” (cf Mwamwenda 1999, Mbiti 1970, Van der Walt 1997, Venter 2004) is often used in literature. The concepts “self-enhancement” and “self-transcendence” instead of “individual” and “collective” have also been used.

whereas high-context communication uses indirect ways of communicating. Indirect communication is more common in interdependent structures, while direct communication tends to be more prevalent in independent cultures. The non- or misrecognition of differences such as interdependent and independent orientations in cultures could be damaging, and the group or individual could develop a demeaning picture of self because of non- or misrecognition (Taylor 1994). The presumption that all cultural orientations have value and need to be taken as equal should serve as the foundation (Taylor 1994: 68).

The theme of self in relation to others is probably the most complex experience of human behaviour. When cultural behaviour is similar, the chances are good that people accept each other's traditions, but when the differences are larger, conflict is often prevalent. Interdependent and independent cultural orientations are one example that could affect behaviour. The strict categorisation of "interdependent" and "independent" could result in stereotyping and cause one to overlook the individual differences of people. The idea that the self is not a fixed concept is consistent with postmodern and poststructuralist theory (Hart 2004). Cultural texts in both a written and a visual format also construct cultural categorisation that influences the notion of self. People are actors within a culture and manipulate, make or ignore cultural rules. Culture is therefore alive and changeable. Traditions do distinguish communities from each other but traditions are adaptable and, for that reason, the social conception of a community is fluid. Accordingly, the perception of the self in interdependent and independent orientations, for example, is changeable and not clearly framed. Taylor (1989) argues that the modernist pursuit of individualism is not fully attainable because the individual is embedded in the context of a society. According to Taylor, the search for individualism is therefore formed in a heroic sense that aims to leap out of the human condition. This article aims to add to the acknowledgement of the complexity of different viewpoints without simplifying it to rigid categories or making judgments on either interdependent or independent ways of existence.

1. Interdependent and independent concepts of self

The term “self-concept” refers to the sum of a complex, organised and dynamic system of learned beliefs, attitudes and opinions that each person holds to be true about his/her personal existence (Purkey 1988). There is a strong relation between the self and others within the social environment. Social comparison in the community plays an important part in the development of self-concept. The self is influenced by valuations of family members, peers and educators. How one believes others to perceive one also develops one’s self-concept. Harter (1999) points out that self-concept is constructed both cognitively and socially. According to Hogg & Abrams (2003: 412), the social identity perspective observes that people define and evaluate themselves in terms of their cultural group, and gives them a social identity. Hogg & Abrams (2003: 412) are of the opinion that self-concept is formed and learned mainly through experience in social interaction and the ingroup develops as part of the self. Self-concept is therefore generated through self and other categorisations.

The Greek-American researcher Triandis (1994: 165) argues that collectivism or interdependence is most prevalent in third-world and developing countries because financial independence often leads to social independence. He refers to countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa that are predominantly interdependently orientated. Van der Walt (1997) remarks that the communal experience could be a result of unemployment, social and residential instability, and poor health. Because of these issues, the individual is more dependent on the rest of the group. This fact points to the possibility of interdependence becoming less prominent when societies become more affluent. Taylor (1989: 305) argues that the development towards individualism in Europe coincides with the development of economic and administrative advances. In the process of seeking an independent voice and freedom of expression, hierarchical order eroded in Europe and made way for the expansion of democracy. South Africa and the context within which this research took place is interesting because, even though the population in South Africa as a whole could be more interdependently orientated, educational institutions in South Africa are predominantly individually orientated because

of past Western dominance. In South Africa the gap between the affluent few and the majority, who are poor, could also explain the need for interdependent structures to survive.

Most studies of interdependent and independent cultural differences have been done in Europe and North America even though approximately 70% of the world's population lives outside those areas (Triandis 1994). Nsamenang (1999: 21) also argues that most research on culture and self has been conducted from a Western perspective and very little from an African viewpoint. This means that, for the rest of the world, generalisation of that data could be problematic. Comparative studies that included cultures outside Europe and North America, such as the study of collectivism versus individualism, contributed to the realisation of a possible partial perspective that influenced research in multiculturalism.

Taylor (1989) discusses, from a European point of view, the changing frameworks that have developed towards internalisation and individualisation of the self. Themes such as self-autonomy, self-expression and personal voice have become evident. Nwoye (2004) remarks that, in comparison with the interdependent system, the Western individualistic orientation takes the first-person standpoint and includes the power of self-reflectivity. In contrast with Nwoye's argument, Markus & Kitayama (2003) contend that in independent cultures self-enhancement overshadows self-criticism. In their view, self-criticism and self-analysis are more prominent in the interdependent systems and specifically in eastern countries which they have studied. Self-improvement thus takes place through introspection and self-criticism. This indicates possible variations within orientations of, for instance, eastern and African or American and European views of interdependence and independence. From within each orientation the other could seem inferior. From an individualistic point of view, interdependence could be perceived as a weakness and from the interdependence viewpoint as unfeeling (Taylor 1989). These differences in viewpoints, according to Taylor (1989: 40), are based on "ethnocentrism and fail to appreciate the nature of the cultural gap".

The changing environment of people moving from rural to urban areas and, concomitant with that, possible changes in how behaviour is interpreted and mobilised, are aspects that influence inter- or independent cultures. Interdependent cultures are in a process of change because of urbanisation and modernisation. Ziehl (2002) argues that many black South Africans have adopted certain Western traditions. By contrast, Russell (2004) argues that traditional kinship continues in urban areas in South Africa in a similar way, with neighbours and friends as the extended family. *Ubuntu*³ or communalism, according to Russell (2004), is still valid despite urbanisation. Even though there could be a conscious willingness to transform, ingrained behaviour often functions on a deeper level and takes time to become the norm.

Western capitalism could have a uniform effect on other cultures, which are further spread by globalisation. Gudykunst (1994: 38) emphasises the importance of the affect of the media and television, in particular, on changes in cultural behaviour. Maake (1992) specifically examines the linguistic and imperialistic domination of English in comparison with the other official languages in South Africa. Black African languages, like other indigenous languages, have to bow to English as the dominating global language. Brand (2004: 27) argues for the inclusion of African languages in the educational curriculum. According to him, languages are not “neutral and interchangeable” and cannot be separated from knowledge and culture.

Triandis (1994: 2) explains collectivism or interdependence as orientations that “organise their subjective cultures around one or more collectives, such as the family [... or] tribe” and independent culture as a culture that “structure[s] social experience around autonomous individuals”. Triandis (1994: 164) further differentiates between two types of collective, namely the horizontal collective, where interdependence and oneness is emphasised, and the vertical collective, where serving the group is important. Sedikes & Gregg (2003: 115-6) refer to previous studies of interdependent east and independent west, and summarise the differences as “interpersonal harmony, group cohesion and social duty” in the interdependent east and “separate identity, private fulfilment and autonomy” in the west.

3 Translated literally, *ubuntu* means “humanness” (Van der Walt 1997: 33).

Mwamwenda (1999: 14) encapsulates the African concept of self as predominantly interdependent and communal, as opposed to independent and individualistic. He emphasises specifically the extended black African family or kinship structure. Mwamwenda (1999: 1) refers to a talk given in 1988 by Ezekiel Mphahlele at the University of Transkei in which the latter argued that black Africans have three factors in common, namely belief in ancestry, belief in the existence of a Supreme Being and an extended-family structure. Boykin *et al* (1997) highlight two more aspects, namely oral tradition and expressive rhythmic movement. Mwamwenda (1999: 14) states that the black African perception of self in a community can be described as predominantly interdependent rather than independent and individualistic. Mbiti (1970: 14) articulates this notion by stating, "I am because we are and, since we are, therefore I am." Van der Walt (1997: 33) refers to Mbigi & Maree who remark that "[t]he cardinal belief of ubuntu is that man can only be man through others".

In interdependent cultures the person mainly forms his/her identity as a human being as a member of that community (Brislin 2000: 53). In these cultures the group is regarded as an extension of the self, while in an individual culture the focus is on individual development. Life and thoughts in a predominantly interdependent system manifest within the context of a community, where emphasis is on common purpose and social responsibility. In an interdependent system, community has preference over the individual, with social responsibility towards others taking priority. Harmony and respect in the ingroup community are of vital importance. For the group to support their ingroup members the individual has to be loyal to the group, put the group first, co-operate and "contribute with no reciprocity" (Brislin 2000: 58). Obedience and modesty are taught in order to keep harmony in the group. If the individual's ability is shown it could put strain on the interdependent group. The saying "the nail that sticks up gets hammered down" is often used in interdependent cultures. The goal of the individual is downplayed in comparison to that of the group. Entering the ingroup of a collective is often more difficult, and the relationships in such a context are often deeper than those in an independent culture.

Success in interdependent cultures rests on the support of others in the ingroup, and one would often rely on this support in order to survive. The advantage is that interdependent cultures have emotional support in the ingroup in the case of personal failures. Gudykunst (1994: 42-3) argues that in an interdependent structure, shame and unpleasant emotions can be diminished. The danger is that people could be psychologically strained when away from their group (Brislin 2000: 54). Sedikes & Gregg (2003: 116) refer to a study by Sedikes *et al* (2002) who argue that in interdependent cultures the “relationship closeness constrains self-enhancement”. In comparison with an interdependent structure, the independent cultures rest mostly on competition. This promotes individual achievement and pushes the individual to perform better and to be more innovative than others. It does, however, create stressful environments. In a competitive environment there is a greater psychological distance between people, and the individual is expected to cope alone (Brislin 2000: 56). Hernández (1989: 60) argues that a competitive environment only benefits the winners while most of the group suffers feelings of failure. He further argues that competitive situations could affect general satisfaction with life in the way in which one experiences failure most of the time. Hernández (1989: 63) contends that the average and low performers gain from co-operative structures which do not exist at the expense of high achievers.

Interdependent cultures are often surprised by the informal rules of independent cultures. The interdependent group is mostly hierarchical and this power relation is not often questioned. Triandis (1994: 170) remarks that interdependent cultures give “little feedback on how they experience social situations”. Respect for the hierarchy and for age and gender, in particular, is kept intact, resulting in keeping ritualistic politeness and protocol, which often demands longer interactions. Power sharing, as practised in an African community, tends to be unequal, with elders being regarded as the main source of wisdom, endowed with the ability to make decisions on behalf of the community as a whole. In interdependent cultures there is a concern for “virtuous action”, for instance action that is appropriate to the situation to honour harmony; actions are mostly defined by the

group even if the individual person does not agree with them (Triandis 1994: 168-9). People in the interdependent ingroup are more willing to conform and mutual face-saving is performed to prevent embarrassment. In contrast with the interdependent orientation, the independent focus more on attaining justice for the individual than focusing on the survival of the group. Gudykunst (1994: 45) argues that in independent cultures there is little room for ambiguity, and attempts are usually made to avoid vagueness.

2. Methodology

2.1 Theoretical framework

The theoretical basis of the research is the social-constructivist learning theory. Social constructivism has its roots in the work of Dewey (1968) and Kuhn (1962) and is based on the theories of Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky argues that collective meaning develops through negotiation and leads to the development of shared knowledge. The social environment therefore shapes the perception of self. Learning also occurs in what Vygotsky refers to as the zone of proximal development (ZPD). In other words, building on existing experience leads to better and more active participation in the learning process. Psychological research into human behaviour confirms that every mental occurrence is embedded in contexts defined by geographical, historical and socio-cultural structures. Social interactions within the social-constructivist learning environment are an essential part of the learning experience and contribute to the improvement of cognition.

Lave & Wenger (1991) have put forward the idea of collective learning and introduced the concept of “communities of practice”. For a community of practice to function, it needs to generate and appropriate a shared repertoire of ideas, commitments and memories. Communities of learning have been recognised as ideal learning environments. Wenger (1998) confirms their importance by saying that learning, rather than being an entirely individual endeavour, is fundamentally a social phenomenon. In this context, learning refers to participation in a specific social environment, rather than to the

gathering of information by any specific individual. Wenger (1998) adds that knowledge is not owned by an individual but is rather a developing property of a particular group, and such interaction is thought to enhance the development of cognition. Communities of learning also consider how communities support social interaction within the learning environment as an essential part of the learning experience. The advantage offered by a community of learning lies in the psychosocial support of others, which could result in a process of facilitation or scaffolding.

Outcomes-based education (OBE) was introduced in South Africa in 1997. OBE points to a variety of practices, such as contextualised, student-centred, collaborative and interactive learning, which correlate with the social-constructivist learning theory. The OBE system has the ability to be more accommodating of multicultural teaching because it includes contextualised, student-centred and collaborative learning, forcing educators to contextualise the content of the learning material, which is aimed at the individual learner. OBE also promotes critical thinking skills, problem-solving and self-empowerment. Recently several researchers such as Kamwangamalu (1999) and Venter (2004) have claimed that ubuntu, which includes the interdependent value systems, can be utilised more to enhance educational practices in South Africa.

Even though the OBE system in South Africa has brought alternative approaches to teaching, the acceptance and implementation of the system have been slow, and the previous system of learning is still prevalent. According to Barnett (2008), there is a curriculum within a curriculum. What is on paper and how that plays out in everyday actions could be different. Even though the education system policies and laws of apartheid in South Africa have been discredited on paper, the perceptions in people's minds do not automatically change at the same time. Gudykunst (1994: 39) points out that it takes effort not to fall back on one's old traditions and behaviour even when one is aware of cultural differences.

2.2 Method

The research entailed the collection of information by means of in-depth interviews with a group of five black African students and one black African lecturer. The five students interviewed were from different backgrounds moving from rural to urban areas. All students attended “black” primary schools with their own language as language of instruction, but went on to dual-medium secondary schools where either English or Afrikaans was the language of instruction. Lumkile (all fictional names) grew up in Zimbabwe and speaks isiShona. Zainu grew up in Newcastle and speaks isiZulu. Zuzi grew up in the Eastern Cape and speaks isiXhosa. Tebogo and Buyiswa also speak isiXhosa but grew up in Langa and Kayelitsha. Mlobo Jadezweni is an isiXhosa lecturer at the Department of African Languages at Stellenbosch University.

The results as extracted from the in-depth interviews were qualitative in nature. The choice of the research method was informed by the nature of the research in general. The in-depth interviews were beneficial in allowing unexpected and new information to be disclosed, which informed further and deeper investigations. The data was recorded digitally with the permission of the participants.

One of the limitations of the research was that the author is a white African investigating an aspect of black African culture. To compensate for this limitation, a black colleague was invited to participate in the interviews to check and examine the clues and codes in the language of the black African students. The colleague’s role was not only that of an observer but also that of a participant in analysing the recorded interviews to help identify information that could lead to further investigations. Taking into consideration the aim of the study the data was scanned and sorted into the categories that had emerged.

3. Results and discussion

The findings confirm that interdependent or extended family structures were part of all the participating students’ upbringing even though they were not living in a strongly interdependent structure

at the time of the survey. Zainu had the following to say about her family structure:

We lived with my grandmother, my mother, two sisters, brother and my uncle and his wife. Before, other cousins lived there as well [...] My grandmother was my mother; I lived with her most of my life. She closed the gap so that we did not feel the separation between my mother and father.

The data also confirms that there is a high degree of interdependence on other people. Zainu also said, "My strength lies in looking after my sisters and brothers at home. When I came here, I realised I have to look after myself". When Zainu's dependence on her family was broken she experienced such trauma that she attributed those circumstances to her failing the year. This confirms what Brislin (2000: 54) warns of, namely that in interdependent groups the individual could be psychologically strained when away from his/her group. Buyiswa said: "I am the first-born. It drives me because I will look after them [sisters and brother] one day". The use of terminology such as "brothers" and "sisters" when referring to people who are not part of an immediate family supports the notion of the existence of a broad interdependent structure. Interdependence on ancestors was also stressed as a means of emotional support in the interview with Jadezweni (2007).⁴

Harmony was raised in the interviews a few times and all the students considered it a positive attribute. Tebogo remarked, "We should be more brotherly and sisterly". Lumkile stated, "Harmony in the group is very important. People are patient. Look at the [Shona] people in Zimbabwe; they are patient". To enable the ingroup to function interdependently the harmony should be maintained. This can be illustrated by the analogy that if one person stands out from the group the person would be "pushed down". With competition the harmony is disturbed. Lumkile remarked that in his culture they use the saying "good things come to those who wait" but he has realised that at the university he has to grasp the opportunity, otherwise someone else will. Where the group helped each other in order to

4 M Jadezweni, personal interview, 20 January 2007, Stellenbosch.

retain harmony the individual learned to stand back and not grab opportunities but wait for his/her chance in the group. Triandis (1994) mentions that appropriate action is expected in the interdependent orientation, which does not serve the individual's needs but the group's future existence. Lumkile confirmed this by saying that he saw one of his classmates breaking down in the examination and he went to help her despite his own work that was not finished. Tebogo remarked that he would help to a certain extent, but he was not sure whether the same would be done for him in that situation.

All the students agreed that respect is highly valued in their culture. Lumkile remarked, "Western culture is manners, while Shona culture is respect and consideration to others". All students found it difficult to call the lecturers by their names. Zainu commented: "We grew up never to call a person by name; I have struggled in the beginning because lecturers are called by name". Afrikaans students also experienced the same difficulties in calling lecturers by their first name because of the way older people are addressed in the Afrikaans language, according to their culture. Gudykunst (1994: 39, 44) refers to the low- and high-context communication structure. High-context communication structures, which are more common in interdependent cultures, use indirect ways of communicating. Calling someone by name would be a direct way of communicating and in so doing students would overstep their place in the hierarchy by disrespectful behaviour. Lumkile stated: "White families say things point-blank; we [Shona people] speak on someone's behalf, not directly". In the interviews respect for the elderly and keeping a hierarchy were strongly emphasised. Buyiswa mentioned that respect for elders is very important in his culture, and said: "You should show respect to men who have been through initiation. If a man is 60 and did not go through initiation, he will not be as respected as someone who did go through initiation".

The students spontaneously mentioned the difficulties experienced in adapting to their new learning environment. They argued that while all students in their first year experience difficulties in adapting, being a black African makes it more difficult. Zainu remarked: "I have to adapt because I am the only black student in the

class". Zainu's comment on this kind of situation was the following: "Being black is too much in my face; I am first seen as a black Zulu woman then as an individual. My fellow students already have an expectation of what I am". Lumkile's attitude was positive: "I do not see it as adapting; I see it as a chance to learn something new or find a gap to meet others halfway". Tebogo mentioned: "To survive I had to adapt to a western environment". This confirms that black African students experience differences and difficulties in the present learning context, and that by accommodating some of their cultural traditions the process could be eased.

The interviewees argued that some old traditions were no longer valid, but they were all concerned about certain cultural traditions that appeared to be dying out. Jadezweni (2007) warns that, in the case of African culture, some of the *ubuntu* or communal aspects are irrelevant to an urban person because of the different exposure and surroundings that such a person might experience. Although Jadezweni (2007) stressed that there could be embedded cultural behaviour that is not simply changed by moving to an urban area. Buyiswa said, "I have to know the basics of my culture if my children ask me one day". She also remarked: "I think the interest in my own culture might come back [in future]". Lumkile mentioned: "I am losing it [my culture] and in a way losing myself and forgetting a lot about myself". Buyiswa remarked: "In the township you think 'This culture is cool' and question your own culture, such as why one has to pay lobola". Lumkile's point of view was that black African culture is all about respect for others and for nature. Zainu and Zuzi mentioned that the most regrettable loss was the loss of respect for others and elders. Zainu remarked that the examples young people currently see on television cause disrespect. She added: "Young people grow up with television and do not know about their culture anymore". Zuzi noted that the use of *muti*⁵ from a *sangoma* or traditional healer to cure HIV/Aids is an example of traditions that could be replaced.

5 *Muti* is the isiZulu word for traditional African medicine.

Buyiswa mentioned that he had a township identity rather than a Xhosa one because he had attended a “coloured” school. He explained: “I have lost much of my Xhosa culture because I went to a ‘coloured’ high school. All the culture was lost to me”. He also said: “My generation is confused; I feel lost”. This student also pointed out that languages in the townships were changing because of the fusion of cultures. He also stated that the English or Afrikaans used at the university is different from that used in the township and that it was difficult to get used to the ‘new’ language at the university.

Students are able to adapt to a new environment but often with much difficulty. They often have to repeat a year because of these problems. Zainu remarked that a person learns to adjust and that “the ‘rules’ in classroom are different than those when at home”. This could also affect self-esteem because it confirms the stereotype of black students struggling to succeed academically.

Jadezweni (2007) mentions that the learning process needs to be placed in context for black students. In contextualised learning, content is related to previous experiences, such as life experiences, fears and prejudices. This concept refers to the social-constructivist learning theory of taking into consideration students’ background and the environment in which they grew up. Prior experience exerts an influence on the generation of meaning; we cannot divorce our learning from our lives. It is impossible to assimilate new knowledge without having some structure developed from previous knowledge on which to build.

Communication and learning in an interdependent system mostly take place orally. Lumkile observed: “My mother talked a lot to us about life when we worked in the fields”. For example, the initiation process which is still practised is based on oral learning. Buyiswa remarked: “With the initiation process, elder men talked to us and gave us guidelines for life”. The choice between oral or written learning also depends on the literacy level of the parent or guardian. In comparison, the independent learning environment focuses on written assignments but also includes oral discussions which could be traced back to the Socratic method of learning by way of discussions.

Motivation could be improved by stressing both group and individual goals. Lumkile mentioned: "It is good to be independent but the class must have a common goal" and Buyiswa felt that they should come together with one aim. Zainu commented: "We are here for the same aim: to design. That made me feel like I am part of the group even though I was the only black person in the class". Tebogo remarked: "A group built everyone's strengths". Boykin *et al* (1997), in their study on collectivism, found that black African students are superior in co-operative learning. This agrees with Buyiswa's comments: "You can see yourself in a group, your strengths and weaknesses" and "A group built everyone's strengths". Lumkile pointed out: "I like group work; we come together to make one good idea". Jadedzweni (2007) confirms that black African students do better in group work than white African students. However, Jadedzweni's (2007) opinion regarding group discussions as opposed to group work sheds light on a different aspect of group work: because of African politeness, black students in general wait to be prompted before taking part in a group discussion.

The OBE system also endorses the notion of group work. The use of we instead of I further links with group work, where the responsibility to succeed rests not on the individual alone but on everybody within the group. The strongly interdependent structure could prompt the need for a common goal as expressed by the students in the interviews. Although working in groups develops certain skills, the responsibility to finish a task should rest with everyone. The remark from Zainu: "If we use the word 'we' [when doing projects] it means you are not on your own, you get help from others" should not mean a shifting of responsibility to finish a task, but should imply that each person takes responsibility for their part in finishing the task.

The students who were interviewed found the university learning environment to be more competitive and aimed at the individual than the learning environment in their interdependent background. They felt that their home environment was less competitive and stressful. Hernandez (1989) argues that competition, which results in one or a few winners, benefits only some, whereas co-operative group work could benefit everyone. Creativity within a Western environment is

normally associated with individualism and independence, which is stressed in the current Visual Arts course of the university.

4. Conclusion

The different viewpoints regarding the interdependent and independent concepts of self could be helpful aspects to consider when teaching a multicultural group of students. The following guidelines regarding the interdependent and independent orientations in multicultural teaching and learning are suggested.

Differences should be regarded as strength and not as an obstacle. Acknowledging cultural differences as a positive attribute and recognition of cultural knowledge that students bring with them could also be used to strengthen cultural identity (Masoga 2005). The embarrassment of not being from a non-Western culture should be addressed by emphasizing the value of difference. The perseverance of difference should be stressed to avoid unifying ideas that could lead to less creative environments. The unknown could be regarded as something to be discovered and not as a threat, in particular in a post-apartheid context where the other was viewed as threatening.

Incorporating the study of all local cultural groups into a curriculum could be valuable in understanding the self in context with others. Directly addressing concepts such as ethnocentrism, stereotyping and prejudice could open up areas that are often not discussed. In a visual communication design environment, knowing about different cultures — and therefore about target markets — is essential if one wishes to communicate effectively. This could take place in the form of experiential or practical learning instead of only theoretical learning. The learning is not about the other but with the other and it takes place on an emotional and embodied level. The learning should be intentional, not accidental, and a reflective process should be built in to assess one's own growth. Markus & Kitayama (2003) point out that self-criticism or self-reflection could be revealed differently in interdependent and independent orientations. The obvious association of self-criticism with individualism might not be valid, especially if it is overshadowed by highly self-enhancing tendencies.

Teaching a group of students from both an interdependent and an independent orientation requires acknowledging local knowledge that is familiar to both groups in the class and then moving to regional and global knowledge. Design examples from both the local community and elsewhere could be used to encourage cultural pride and acknowledgement. A more familiar learning environment and considering the traditions of all cultural groups could enhance the sense of connectedness and belonging. This could result in inclusive educational methods and efficient student-centred teaching and learning.

The sense of social responsibility is prominent in interdependent societies. A sense of responsibility could be developed without compromising innovation or individual development. Working with local communities could improve the appreciation of local knowledge that exists outside the university environment. Working in groups develops a sense of teamwork. Individualism could also advance within the group, which relates to what students can expect in their future workplace and social life. Incorporating aspects of an interdependent system into an independent, individualistic system could result in creativity in conjunction with social responsibility.

Communication in an interdependent and independent culture often differs and both should be considered. When a person from an interdependent background has to adapt in an independent environment, s/he needs to develop skills in public speaking because the individual voice has not been strongly developed in an interdependent environment. In an educational environment the interdependent person should be encouraged to put the self forward because the predominantly interdependent learner is normally modest about her/his own ability (Brislin 2000: 60). The ideal learning situation would be if all groups communicate bilingually to enable better understanding of cultural traditions. Language and culture are interlinked. Verbal and written communication in a classroom, as well as for assessment purposes, could be employed to accommodate both the interdependent and the independent orientations.

A student who has moved from a rural (interdependent) to an urban (independent) environment could find the adjustment difficult. The division between the parents from an interdependent

family structure and the student adapting in a more individual environment could become bigger, and the stable environment of the interdependent family structure could also become fragile. If the majority of students in a classroom were from an independent background the student from an interdependent structure would most likely submit to the dominant orientation. The minority group is often prepared to 'meet the other halfway', but the dominant group often views their behaviour as the norm. A learning space for both interdependent and independent students should be created in order to accommodate instead of leaving it to one that is dominant.

Many of the concerns addressed above might not be relevant in future because of the strong influence of urbanisation and domination of modernisation. But how deeply rooted cultural differences are that influence education, social and political life, will become clearer as cultures interact deliberately to learn from each other. This interaction should start from an intrinsically equal basis (Taylor 1994) of recognition and appreciation of diversity of race or ethnicity but more important of value systems, and developing a sensitivity of diverse histories without a need to reduce existing histories, that could result in a meeting of different but equal worlds.

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