"Are you really ready to change?" An actor-oriented perspective on a farmers training setting in Madagascar

Nathalie Muller Mirza · Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont

Abstract Far from following a linear process from its conception to its implementation, an educational design often involves discrepancies between what its promoters intended and what the participants actually do. In this paper, drawing from a sociocultural perspective to learning, we focus our attention precisely on some of the discrepancies observed during the implementation of a training program. We consider these discrepancies not as mistakes or misunderstandings, but rather as indicators of the communicative dimension of any intervention and as "windows" on the processes of change and on learning. The program we have studied here was set up in Madagascar and was sustained by a Swiss cooperation agency addressed to farmers in the field of forestry. In this research, we adopted an *actor-oriented perspective* in order to understand the promoters' and the beneficiaries' interpretation of the design and the way they developed innovative strategies to resolve the difficulties they faced. We chose some "critical incidents" from the data gathered through ethnographical research and show how the whole process of the conception and the implementation of the program was deeply affected by both the power dynamic embedded in the history of the relationship between the Swiss and the Malagasy groups and by their own cultural and institutional constraints. In conclusion, we discuss the significance of an actor-oriented perspective that contributes to a better understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of learning and allows us to relate the here and now micro-phenomena to the larger anthropological, social, and political scenery.

Keywords Learning · Design · Discrepancy · Sociocultural approach · Actor-perspective

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Introduction

Over the last 20 years, in the field of a sociocultural approach to learning, scholars have shared a growing interest in educational designs as opportunities to both understand and to support human learning. Drawing their theoretical framework from Vygotsky and other sociocultural researchers, some of these scholars have contributed to the reflection upon the setting in which and through which "change" (i.e., learning) happens (Cole et al. 2014; Sandoval and Bell 2004). The setting here is seen as a unit of analysis at the crossroads between intrapersonal and collective dimensions. Interestingly, this focus allows scholars to consider learning as occurring within a setting in which it is important to examine "how activities are socially organized" (Ludvigsen et al. 2011). However, there remain divergences and debates regarding the relationships between the design of this setting and the learning processes. In the literature, we can find two models, each of which is implicitly based on representations of the individual, of learning, and of change. The first one could be called the "linear model" of design. In this model, learning is conceived in terms of objectives to be reached by the "beneficiaries" of the design (for example, the students or the participants), objectives defined mainly by the designers (for example, teachers or researchers). In this model, learning is (or should be) the final result of cycles of refinements of various versions of the educational design that is progressively adjusted following the specific features of the environment in which it is implemented. A second model could be called the "co-emergent model," which takes into account the active role of both the designers and the beneficiaries who co-elaborate and co-define the aims of the design. In this model, the design is considered as a transformative and formative experience, where the distance becomes shorter between those who support the learning and those who learn. The linear and classic conception of the design is questioned here.

Without going into too much detail regarding the debate between these two models (see for example, Downing-Wilson et al. 2011; Sutter 2011), we would like to reflect on "learning in setting" from another aspect. It seems to us that both models (in particular the linear one) have difficulty in accounting for the ever-transforming, unanticipated dynamics that arise in any intervention "as contested terrain, full of resistance, reinterpretation, and surprises from the actors below" (Engeström 2011, p. 601) and for the communicative dimensions that constitute any setting.

In order to address these issues, we would like to refer here to a perspective that focuses on the way the actors (mainly the designers or promoters and the so-called beneficiaries of an educational design) contribute to the creation and re-creation of the setting through processes that may entail misunderstandings, discrepancies, and tensions and lead to unexpected outcomes (Perret 1985; Probst et al. 2008). This perspective, developed in the field of sociology of international development (Koponen 2004; Long 2001), was called an "actor-oriented perspective." We will draw upon works adopting this approach together with a sociocultural approach in psychology, because we think that both allow us to describe and analyze in depth how people meet, interpret, engage with others, and make references to other systems of activity in the settings where learning is meant to take place. This perspective sheds light on an important idea: discrepancies between intentions, aims, and the wishes of the designers, and the participants are not only part of the design itself but are also at the core of creative and innovative dynamics.

With this main descriptive and analytical objective, we will examine a specific setting: a training program implemented by a Swiss cooperation agency for farmers in Madagascar with the aim of developing new competences and practices in the field of forestry and agricultural management (Muller Mirza 2005). This example, in our eyes, is an interesting illustration of

the way an educational design is both an object of transformation and an opportunity to change for all the actors ("promoters," "beneficiaries," teachers, researchers, administrators, etc.) involved[1].

Adopting an actor-oriented perspective requires a theoretical and methodological apparatus that we will present first and discuss. Then we will organize the presentation of the data in the following way. We will provide some elements relating to the broad context of the training setting: this program was set up in Madagascar by a Swiss cooperation agency in the 1990s and was aimed at helping the local farmers cope with ecological issues like the deforestation and impoverishment of the soil. The program was based on the idea that training can be efficient—i.e., with the result of improving the participants' practices—under the condition that the training fulfills the specific needs of the learners in their daily activities of cultivating rice or cattle farms. However, this ambitious program, which implied many changes from the perspectives of the actors involved (in this case the Swiss promoters and the Malagasy participants), faced difficulties in the process of design and implementation: its final form was not at all the one intended in the beginning. In order to observe the processes of change and their circumstances, we will describe and analyze some events we extracted from our data. We consider these events as "critical," in the sense that they entailed a kind of rupture from what was intended and represented a difficult challenge for the actors. We then will show how the actors tried to understand and resolve these difficulties. Initially, we will take the designers' perspective. Secondly, we will give the floor to the participants and see, from their point of view, how the program was interpreted and how it affected their own system of activity.

We think that this approach, which focuses on the discrepancies and reconfigurations of the design rather than on the evaluation of the expected outcomes, can provide important insight into the learning processes and their individual and collective dimensions.

Before entering into the description and analysis of the processes underlying the program, let us provide some elements related to the theoretical and methodological approach we used.

Theoretical framework

Our approach draws its roots from a sociocultural perspective of human development as situated in various contexts, such as those of education (Grossen 2009, 2010; Ludvigsen et al. 2011; Muller Mirza and Perret-Clermont 2009; Perret-Clermont 2011), of workplaces (Cole 2009; Clot and Kostulski 2011; Engeström 2011; Mäkitalo and Säljö 2002, 2009), and of international development interventions (Long 2004; Koponen 2004). One of the common points of the scholars following this perspective is their interest in examining concrete human activities within relational and institutional contexts. They assume that what occurs in the microenvironment is affected by larger contexts, both at community and global levels (Säljö 1991). However, from this perspective, neither individual nor collective dimensions represent a static reality; each affects the other via its participants' interpretations (Tartas et al. 2010; Tartas & Muller Mirza 2007). This perspective also implies including cultural and historical

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[1] In our own work, we have been involved as researchers and/or promoters in other contexts, and our observations lead us to account for some similar processes, as, to name a few examples: in the frame of a project of "horizontal" training in France, where the promoters intended to set up situations of transmission of scientific knowledge towards non-scientific people (Muller Mirza 2014; Muller and Perret-Clermont 1999); of a regional development project supported by new technologies in isolated Alpine valleys in Switzerland (Marro Clément and Perret-Clermont 2000); of argumentative pedagogical settings in schools (Bonvin 2006; Muller Mirza 2012; Muller Mirza and Perret-Clermont 2008, 2009); of a project of prevention of HIV in Malawi (Rémy 2012); or of the introduction of new technologies in a technical school (Perret and Perret-Clermont 2011).

aspects that become relevant for understanding the activities that participants perform in situ. The implication of this position is that "social structures, patterns or milieus are not taken for granted, but studied as phenomena that are emerging within practices" (Ludvigsen et al. 2011, p. 4).

Some researchers in sociology, interested in cooperative interventions in the frame of international development policies, share some of these concerns. They claim that an "intervention is an on-going transformational process that is constantly re-shaped by its own internal organizational and political dynamic and by the specific conditions it encounters or itself creates" (Long 2001, p. 27). The studies made in this field of research (i.e., Long 1992, 2001, 2004) show that what is conceived as the goals of the program by the promoters is often perceived very differently by the other actors involved. From this perspective, an intervention is considered as an arena in which social actors meet with their own viewpoints, knowledge, issues, and strategies, within a power field.

Scholars like Clot (2009), Cole (2009) or Engeström (2011), and Engeström et al. (2014), who are interested in learning and development in the context of workplaces, have developed a conception of human activity that can be of particular interest in our study. They shed light on the crucial distinction between "prescribed work" (the task that is given to practitioners to perform) and "real work" (what practitioners actually do to perform a given task). They observed that "real work" is never exactly what is prescribed. If this distinction is not a surprise in itself, the authors focused on the fact that the process of performing the prescribed task involves an interpretative activity from the actors who are continuously "arbitrating," making choices between a range of possibilities in order to fulfill their own aims and the ones of the community, and finding new solutions (Béguin 2007; Clot 2009). Therefore, work activity is always a "compromise" and a creative activity, which brings together individual decisions and collective goals (Clot and Kostulski 2011). From this perspective, the discrepancies between what was intended and what is done are not the indicators of mistakes or misunderstandings, but rather help forge the interpretative and meaning-making processes of the workers (Engeström 2011).

These studies lead us to consider a design of intervention not as a linear process but rather as (1) an objective interpreted by individuals and groups situated in different systems of activity, (2) a process that develops through discrepancies and contradictions, and (3) a potential source of change.

From the point of view of the researchers, it seems therefore important to examine the perspectives of the actors involved and to analyze the tensions that occurred.

Methodological framework

This approach, oriented towards the perspectives of the actors, entails methodological difficulties (how to get access to these "perspectives?" And how to account for them?) and requires specific tools. In our research, we chose a historical ethnography research method in order to get access to the everyday practices of the actors and the way they live, give meaning, meet, communicate, and engage in activities. A participant observation method allowed us to develop an understanding of the culture "from the inside out." It involved gaining entry into the communities, selecting gatekeepers and key informants, participating in as many different activities as we were allowed by the community members, having formal interviews and informal conversations, and keeping structured field notes and a personal diary (Kawulich 2005). Two particular principles were at the basis of our methodological framework, each of them implying some choices in terms of data collection and methods of analysis: the "principle of symmetry" and the focus on "critical incidents."

The "principle of symmetry"

An "actor-oriented" analysis entailed observing and gathering data from the two groups, in our case the promoters and the beneficiaries, without implying that one was more "natural" or "true" or "rational" than the other (see for instance Latour 1993, who developed the principle of "generalized symmetry" in the field of the actor-network theory in the sociology of sciences).

In fact, following this "principle of symmetry," the first author made observations while participating in various everyday life activities with the promoters and with the beneficiaries of the program.

The data were collected during several months over a period of 3 years (between 1999 and 2001). The researcher spent time in Bern (Switzerland) and in Madagascar. Her fieldwork consisted of following, on the one hand, a group of promoters of the training program in Bern and in Madagascar. She learned some vocabulary of the international development culture, collected documents written by the Swiss organization (published documents or internal work papers[2]). She also collected audio and video recordings of sessions, interviews, and everyday activities of the members of the Swiss group. And on the other hand, she followed some of the beneficiaries of the program, a group of farmers living in a small village called Tanjombita, located in the Betsileo area. She learned a little of the local Malagasy language, participated in the everyday activities (rice farming, cooking, and chatting with women and children in the village) as well as in the training sessions organized by the Malagasy together with the Swiss agency. She audio and video recorded sessions and interviewed the farmers. She worked closely with a Malagasy interpreter who participated actively in the research field. She also kept a field diary.

The "critical incidents"

In order to be able to understand the dynamics of changes in the process of designing and implementing the training program, we focused on specific events that we have called "critical incidents."[3] These events, extracted from our data (interviews, written documents, and observations of everyday activities), are characterized by the fact that (1) they involved a discrepancy between what was intended and what occurred, a breakdown in the "routine" of the activity, something that the actors themselves described as an obstacle or a difficulty, and (2) they led to the development of unplanned activities that generally helped solve and reduce the breakdown.

In the analysis below, we will proceed in the following way: for both perspectives, that of the promoters and that of the beneficiaries, first of all, we will provide a description of the critical incident based on the field records. In some cases, for the perspective of the promoters in particular, we will describe the way the actors have tried to overcome the difficulty that arose. Finally, we will discuss the transformations entailed.

Before analyzing the actors' perspectives, let us describe some features of the general context of the training program set up by the Swiss organization in Madagascar.

The general context: a Swiss *empowerment*-driven" training program in Madagascar

Madagascar is among the poorest countries in the world. Poverty has even increased over the last three decades. More than 70 % of the population is supported by agriculture. The principal

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[2] The whole corpus consists of 11 texts written between 1993 and 1999 by the Swiss organizations, from the conception to the implementation of the training program (see Muller Mirza 2005 for a detailed analysis).
[3] See for example, Flanagan (1954).

crop is rice, which is farmed in terraced paddies. Farmers (especially smallholders) are the poorest group in the country. In order to be able to produce rice, the Malagasy farmers regularly use the practice of slash-and-burn agriculture (*tavy*, in Malagasy language). It means to cut and burn some acres of forest and then to plant rice in its place. After a year or two of production, the field is left fallow for 4 to 6 years before the process is repeated. After two or three such cycles, the soil is deprived of nutrients, leading to erosion problems. For a country that relies on agricultural production, the loss of this soil is very costly (Wild Madagascar 2014).

Among the countries that are partners for development cooperation with Madagascar, Switzerland has been active since 1961, particularly in the field of improving natural resources management and in forestry training programs. However, in the 1990s, the results of such programs and a new political context, marked by economic crises, led the Swiss cooperation agency to reorient its main activities. While the Swiss agency until then had supported projects in connection with national schools, it moved towards the non-governmental organizations and civil society and towards supporting training programs directly with the local communities (Cabalzar 2011). Since 1993, the Swiss agency has set up programs which were meant to answer the "needs" of the people in the field, to help them become more "autonomous," following the notion of "empowerment."

The term "empowerment" was at that time (in the 1990s) widely used by the Swiss agency and was part of a broader discourse on the importance of replacing the top-down strategy with a collaborative and participative model meant to be radically new. Since the 1970s, a vast movement of interest emerged around this term in various domains of intervention. It encountered a great deal of attention since it promoted the minority and oppressed people's point of view and implied a radical criticism of the model of vertical development (Cantelli 2013; Simon 1994). It fostered the idea that people and groups develop, learn, and organize themselves better if they take control of their own destinies and find solutions that fit their specific needs and that relate to their knowledge and capacities. In the field of adult training and international development, "empowerment" became a notion that was at the origin of new kinds of interventions. This term, however, is at the core of debates. Some authors thought that it lost its transformative power as it became "a vague and wrongly consensual concept, which assimilated the power to the individual and economic choices, depoliticized the collective power perceived as harmonious, and was instrumental in legitimizing the policy and the existing top-down programs" (Calves 2009, p. 30, our translation).

In 1993, at the time the new program in Madagascar was set up, the following definition of "empowerment" prevailed within the Swiss agency:

> To increase the capacity of local communities to get organized in order to better defend their interests (material and cultural), to identify their needs more realistically, to define priorities, to make joint decisions and to lead actions of development, in the sense of a higher level of autonomy and responsibility (Swiss agency for Development and Cooperation 1994, our translation[4]).

The new program set up in Madagascar was quite ambitious as it implied changing many of its activities. Its public changed: the Swiss program did not collaborate with the national educational institutions anymore but with farmers in local communities; the way to conceive

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[4] The quotation in French: « Augmenter la capacité des communautés de base à s'organiser pour mieux défendre leurs intérêts (matériels et culturels), à identifier plus réalistement leurs besoins, à définir des priorités, à prendre des décisions concertées et à mener des actions de développement, dans le sens d'une plus grande autonomie (pouvoir de négociation accru) et d'un plus haut niveau de responsabilité ».

and design training programs changed as well: it was no longer a matter of designing training to be directly implemented in the field, but training designed with and by the farmers themselves, according to their own needs.

Thus, this Swiss program in Madagascar was not meant to follow a linear process from its design to its implementation, but beyond that, it met with unexpected reorientations. It is precisely the dynamics of these reconfigurations that we will analyze from the perspectives of first the promoters and then the farmers.

The training program from the perspective of the promoters

How did the Swiss promoters of this ambitious program design and implement it in the field? What kinds of issues and difficulties did they face? How did they try to resolve these difficulties? How did these issues and resolutions enter in the process of transformation of the program itself?

The training program was characterized by an iterative and exploratory dynamic, and the promoters were used to confront various issues. However, some of these led them to make radical changes. In the following, we will focus our attention on two main issues explicitly mentioned in the written documents or during interviews. The first one was to choose the people and local associations with whom they could work and collaborate. The other difficulty they faced was identifying what they called "training needs." These two difficulties shared a common feature: they both involved deep transformations of the program.

Critical incident 1: who are our "partners?"

The reorientation of the activities of the Swiss agency in Madagascar was rooted in two main observations formulated by the promoters: the first one was that the degradation of the forest resources had increased in the country and secondly that the government's actions seemed to slow down the development of local initiatives rather than promoting them. These observations led the Swiss agency to try to work with what they called the "local communities"—and, therefore, groups such as the farmers' associations—by developing a "participatory approach." This approach was meant precisely to identify the "partners" with whom they would work. In order to set up the basis of the collaboration, they organized meetings and workshops with different groups (farmers, local training organizations). The accounts they wrote highlighted, however, an unexpected issue: the members of the Swiss agency observed that these groups behaved more as applicants rather than as "partners." Here is an extract from a document written by the Swiss agency that illustrates what the promoters observed:

> One of the most difficult things to obtain is certainly a real partnership. Some "partners" indeed see in the [Swiss program] only an investor. In relations with other partners, the position of the [Swiss program] can appear as dominant and also falsify the game of the partnership (…). It is probably one of the major challenges for the [Swiss program] (Annual report, 1996, p. 95c, our translation[5]).

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[5] The quotation in French: "Une des relations les plus difficiles à obtenir est certainement celle d'un véritable partenariat. Certains « PARTENAIRES » ne voient en effet en le [programme suisse] qu'un bailleur de fonds. Dans des relations avec d'autres PARTENAIRES, la position du [programme Suisse] en tant que principal bailleur peut apparaître comme dominante et fausser aussi le jeu du partenariat (…). C'est probablement un des défis majeurs pour le [programme Suisse]" (Rapport annuel, 1996, p. 95c).

The difficulty experienced by the promoters to set up a "real partnership" with the local farmers' communities was mentioned many times in the Swiss agency's written documents in which the team underlined how a relationship takes time to be established. The question of the "partnership" is related to the importance of the quality of the relationship that shapes any project and intervention in the field of education (Marro Clément and Perret-Clermont 2000). However, the question of the quality of the collaboration, raised by the promoters, highlighted also the asymmetrical dimension of the relationship.

The promoters seemed to be aware of the power dynamics that shaped the process of implementation of the program and tried different strategies to avoid them. The issue of the relationship turned out to be at the center of new actions aimed at making the beneficiaries "real partners," according to the Swiss agency's definition.

Critical incident 2: what is a "training need?"

Another salient difficulty for the promoters was related to their identification of the farmers' needs.

We should keep in mind that the main aim of the training program was to offer training sessions that would be chosen and adapted to closely fit the farmers' needs, taking into account the difficulties they faced every day. In the eyes of the promoters, the contents of the training and the farmers' needs must coincide in order to make the training more efficient. This implied that the trainers were not in charge anymore of defining the content of the training, as they had previously done, but the trainees themselves had to identify their needs and hence suggest the kind of training they needed. The training needs had therefore to be formulated and clearly expressed. But what is a "training need?" From the perspective of the promoters, the identification of the farmers' needs was thought at first as only a preliminary and minor part of the process of the program: it was a question of "only" asking the representatives of the farmers' associations to choose the needs they felt were relevant from a list proposed to them. But then the promoters came to recognize that the needs marked on these lists were not connected to the reality of the farmers. The identification of these needs, far from being a simple stage, became a central part of the process.

In order to include this new element in the setting up of the training program, promoters and farmers' associations designed together a particular setting devoted to the identification of the farmers' difficulties and their needs for training. They named it the *Farmer Diagnosis*.

The promoters thus implemented the *Farmer Diagnosis*, which, from their point of view, had to answer the double necessity of identifying the training needs of the beneficiaries and of embodying the "participative" and "new" principle of "empowerment." It was decided that the *Farmer Diagnosis* would not be moderated by an external expert in agronomy, but by a member of the local community, a farmer who had been trained for that purpose by the program's promoters. The *Farmer Diagnosis* would last 3 to 6 days in each village with the participants (the farmers) fulfilling several types of collective activities: drawing a map of the area listing the farming activities, noting their observations and discussions around these sites of production, analyzing the production processes, etc.

Concluding comments on the critical incidents

These critical incidents have led us to reconsider critically the classical understanding of educational designs as a linear path from their conception towards their implementation.

Our attention was also drawn to two other elements: the effort and energy the promoters had to spend in order to build adequate interpersonal relationships for the project and the unavoidable asymmetry of power. The promoters wanted to install a "participative" approach at the core of their program in order to change the previous "top-down" system. The main idea was to replace the provider-receiver relationship with a "partnership." However, setting this up produced a paradoxical situation: the fact of assigning the role of "partners" to the beneficiaries was in itself a classical top-down decision! Once again, those in possession of the financial resources decided what stance the locals should take.

The training program from the perspective of the beneficiaries

The Malagasy farmers, and in particular in the Betsileo area, are well known for their modesty, discretion, and tendency to avoid interpersonal conflicts. When communicating, it is essential for the Malagasy that the dignity of all parties remains intact (Dahl 1993). Therefore, it was not surprising that the farmers gave no explicit negative feedback on the program. However, some events suggest that they were wondering what meaning it had.

Our analysis of the promoters' perspective has pointed to the fact that the Swiss group had to deal with issues involving negotiating and building a relationship with their Malagasy partners. Interestingly, one of the greatest difficulties for the beneficiaries was also related to the identity and the "real goals" of the promoters. Their second difficulty was related to the unexpected and undesired changes induced by the *Farmer Diagnosis*. Three critical incidents will illustrate these issues.

Critical incident 1: "who are you, the promoters, and are you ready to change?"

The first critical incident we would like to discuss occurred at the end of a session organized by the Swiss program that aimed at discussing the organization and the main features of a *Farmer Diagnosis*. A large group of representatives of local farmers' associations took part in this meeting. Workshops were set up in order to brainstorm and discuss specific issues. During the last collective discussion to which promoters and farmers were invited, a young farmer questioned the assembly: "You the 'experts', do you really need us? What made you change your mind? And how is it that you decide now to hand over the power to the farmers? Are you really ready to change?"

The question asked by the young man is particularly poignant as it mirrors back the promoters' question related to the possibility of building a "partnership." Here, in a radical move, the farmer reversed the promoters' position: it is up to them, the promoters, to change their attitude and beliefs (Muller Mirza 2008).

Critical incident 2: "are you going to spoil my lands?"

We are now in the small village of Tanjombita, a Malagasy village on the top of a hill surrounded by gardens and rice fields. It is the first day of the *Farmer Diagnosis* organized here and led by a villager called Augustin. One of the first activities is dedicated to visiting the different production sites of the village (cattle, rice fields, manioc, etc.). A small group of participants—among them is the researcher—discuss under the leadership of Augustin on the side of a field. Its owner, an old man, is sitting close to the group. At one point, he starts asking the organizer questions. A heated discussion takes place. It reveals that the old man is afraid

that his lands will be taken from him as what happened during the colonial period of Madagascar under the French occupation.[6]

It seems that in the context of this *Farmer Diagnosis,* the simple presence of a foreigner in the group brought back bad memories related to past experiences, still vivid in this community.

Critical incident 3: an angry man of high rank

During the second day of the *Farmer Diagnosis*, discussions took place in the classroom of the school in the village of Tanjombita. Participants are now acquainted with how the program works. The group of participants (about 20 people, including women) had discussed peacefully on different topics and had made proposals. At some point, however, this interactive routine suddenly came to a halt: Thomas, an inhabitant of the village, entered the hall and spoke loudly, using the first person (going against the traditional local norm of politeness of using "we" when addressing others). He contradicted his fellow farmers and even criticized them, saying for example: "Stop writing I say! You are unable to write, you are unable to discuss, you are unable to express yourselves!"

Thomas, the person who interrupted the discussions with these strong statements, was drunk when he arrived in the room. He was known for this kind of behavior. However, for us as observers, this excess of alcohol had opened a possibility of understanding how the *Farmer Diagnosis* was perceived by the participants. In the local hierarchy, everyone knew Thomas was a member of a higher ranking family than Augustin's and this justified his right to speak out to the community. Thomas' outburst aimed at reminding Augustin, the animator, and the other villagers (and indirectly also the promoters, even if they were physically absent) that, according to the local codes, the status of Augustin as leader of the *Farmer Diagnosis* was not legitimate.

While the *Farmer Diagnosis* setting was conceived and defined by the promoters as a place where the villagers could discuss "freely," and analyze their own reality among themselves, Thomas' intervention shed light on two things: (1) the community is not homogeneous, and the relationship between its members is far from being harmonious; (2) the community is hierarchized, and the participants are situated in a system of power related to their history and cosmogony.

Concluding comments on the critical incidents

Initially, the *Farmer Diagnosis* was intended by the Swiss promoters to allow the farmers to define their needs. Our observations showed, however, that the farmers have interpreted the Swiss program in different ways, in relation to both the internal dynamics of the local community (its hierarchical structure related to a specific cosmogony and representations of the world) and the intergroup relations between the community and the foreigners.

The last two critical incidents that occurred could have meant the end of the program, or at least could have caused a total discouragement of the participants. However, unexpectedly, most of the participants succeeded in overcoming these difficulties. They managed to benefit from the many opportunities they were given: they exchanged their own knowledge, discussed and compared their practices, used, and adapted the tools given to analyze their local farming activities. By doing so, the farmers interpreted the *Farmer Diagnosis* as an opportunity to

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[6] The French colonized Madagascar after they invaded in 1894. In 1896, France officially annexed Madagascar as a colony and later unified the country under a single government. On June 26, 1960, Madagascar gained independence (Wild Madagascar 2014).

exchange ideas in a "peer-to-peer" training environment, without waiting for training programs coming from the Swiss agency.

General discussion

In this contribution, from an actor-oriented sociocultural perspective, we have examined the social and cognitive dynamics that "populate" the implementation of a training program and observed a reconfiguration of the initial educational design. The analysis of some "critical incidents" that affected the implementation process of this training program in Madagascar sustained by a Swiss cooperation agency has shown that this implementation could not follow a linear path: the discrepancies between what was planned and what actually occurred caused important changes.

By taking into account the perspectives of both the promoters and the beneficiaries of this program, we think that we have shed some light not only on the fact that the same intent (for instance, the intent to promote an autonomous and bottom-up development of local communities) was interpreted in quite different ways by the different partners involved in the program and led to unforeseen reactions. We have also observed that the whole process of conception and implementation of such an educational program was deeply affected by the power dynamics embedded in the history of the relationships between the promoters and the beneficiaries and also by the traditions and constraints specific to each group.

Our data also reveal the importance of the *relationships* between the promoters and the beneficiaries. "Who are you?" "Who I am in your eyes?" and "Are you ready to change?" appear to be a main concern for both promoters and beneficiaries. We have seen, for example, that the Swiss team spent time and energy in order to establish a "partnership" (supposed to be symmetrical!) and that the Malagasy farmers could not make sense of the Swiss intents and were wondering what was the real meaning of the promoters' undertakings. For both sides, it seems of the utmost importance to build a relationship based on mutual respect and confidence, and they knew that it would require time and various strategies. This relationship was difficult to establish, since it was embedded in history (in this case, the history of colonialism and other negative experiences of international development programs involving foreigners and Malagasy farmers) and in asymmetrical power dynamics.

We have observed the paradoxical effects of the so-called notion of empowerment: while the Swiss pretended to promote the "autonomy" of the local communities, they were in fact assigning them to roles that they had not chosen.

In order to better understand and sustain human learning, it seems important to conduct detailed observations from the perspectives of the actors. These perspectives have to be observed and reconstructed within their precise cultural, social, and historical context and by carefully taking into account the features of the educational design itself.

Implementing a training program means implementing a change. It is likely to affect all sorts of realities: interpersonal relationships, power games, social hierarchies, and daily practices. It might recall past memories and elicit images of the future. Furthermore, implementing a "participative" model of training implies reaching an agreement on many points, among which are: cultural and professional differences, modalities of collaboration, changing each others' practices, etc. Interestingly, observing a participative training program also requires that the researchers themselves change their practices in order to be ready to observe changes.

Taking an actor-oriented perspective is an exciting adventure. It leads us, as researchers, to unexpected findings, to discover other worldviews and hence garner an understanding of what

is at stake in an educational setting. This approach can bring rich insights into the complexity of the social (and not only cognitive) activity of learning. It helps to relate the *here and now* micro-phenomena to the larger anthropological, social, and political scenery.

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