

Incorporating relevant cultural art forms and oral traditions into community-based education programs

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Five years ago we presented at the 1st International Conference on Language Development, Language Revitalization and Multilingual Education in Bangkok and our goal was to bring cultural music and the arts into the discussion of language endangerment and revitalization. At this present conference there is much more discussion on the importance of the arts in language development and while we want to continue to stress that for most of the minority groups we've worked with, music, culture, and language are quite inseparable except within our Western specializations and abstractions. Now we would like to move on to "Part 2" where we will focus specifically on expressive culture being integrated into various types of education programs.

Minority music and language endangerment

Cultural changes, such as the introduction of national education programs, can have the unintended consequence of interrupting the intergenerational transmission of minority peoples' cultural knowledge, thereby contributing to the shift or endangerment of cultures and languages. With the increase in nationalization and globalization the languages and music systems of many minority groups are being used in fewer areas of their lives. As people migrate to cities, attend national schools, and become increasingly exposed to national media their language use is shifting more toward majority or national languages.

Joshua Fishman advocates the revitalization and maintenance of weakened or endangered languages by addressing factors that can contribute to reversal of language shift (RLS). Neil Coulter is one of the few researchers who has applied Fishman's ideas to the area of music as he diagnoses the music shift occurring among the Alamlak people of Papua New Guinea (Coulter 2007). Fishman himself conceptualizes language and culture as inseparable as specific cultural meaning is inherent in language and that efforts to revive one must include efforts to revive the other (Fishman 1991). Dennis Malone summarizes Fishman and others in

sociolinguistics saying, “that the loss of the ethnic language profoundly alters the cultural content, if not the boundaries, of an ethnic group” (Malone 1997).

Coulter focuses on reversal of music shift in comparison with reversal of language shift. Fishman stresses the necessity of community ownership of revitalization efforts along with an increase in some form of intergenerational transmission within the family or community institutions. Neither Fishman or Coulter are suggesting turning back the hands of time so that dominant languages and music systems, respectively, are somehow used less or have less influence nor are they suggesting that languages and music systems should be stopped from changing. Fishman, along with most advocates of RLS are referring to the rapid decline of a language where there is the distinct possibility of it being lost completely within either the current generation or near future generations and so they advocate intergenerational continuity. Coulter believes that his research is illustrative of a typical case where other elements, such as visual art, music, dance, and oral storytelling are more likely to precede language in becoming extinct.

In places where there is no multi-lingual education (MLE) or transitional literacy education, young people from minority groups rarely learn to read and write in their own language. This puts them at a distinct educational disadvantage (Malone 1997). In addition if they do happen to do well in school they are often cut off from acquiring social values that are taught by older family members in their mother tongue. For minority cultures where the traditional music is dying and where the young people still primarily use their mother tongue, we have seen many examples of people who have never sung even one song in their first language.

Squeezing the life out of expressive culture

A common approach to endangered cultures, language, music, or oral traditions is to take steps to ‘preserve’ them. Such an approach often essentializes the original language or the traditional music. For language, Fishman not only sees intergenerational transmission as key but he also insists on ‘active use’ in real social contexts as opposed to ‘token use’ or legislated symbolic use. Fishman has elaborated on specific active uses of language that he found are necessary for the reversal of language shift in his Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) (Fishman 1991).

Typically, ethnomusicologists have attempted to preserve endangered music systems by recording and archiving already existing music. Coulter departs from focusing on this type of action as it does little to encourage community ownership and intergenerational transmission of music knowledge, which Fishman insists are necessary to revive active use in real social contexts. To assess the active use of music in its social contexts, Coulter develops a Graded Music Shift Scale based on his research of the Alamlak community in Papua New Guinea.

Applied ethnomusicology tends to focus on archiving music recordings, making them widely available, and arranging ethnic music concerts to expose minority groups to the majority culture as a means of validating minority music cultures. These approaches often ignore the value of creative process and internal communication.

First of all, archiving of music freezes it in time and as with a shift from oral to written literature these frozen samples of music are reproduced for totally new contexts while improvisation and spontaneity become less valued. In addition, archiving gives the impression of preserving the culture when in fact it may take away from actually focusing on the creative process (composing of new songs) and from creating of the social spaces where that creative process can occur. Brian Schrag gives a strong example of the unsustainability of such a project that was started by the Cameroonian government (Schrag 2005).

Secondly, ethnic music concerts often have little to do with reinforcing internal music communication within a culture, as outsiders become the intended audience. This surely has unintended consequences on how the culture's music develops or possibly ceases to develop. Approaches should be evaluated as to whether they will contribute to the revitalization of the creative process and musical forms that communicate effectively and relevantly within the language group itself. For such conditions to exist, community ownership of the initiative would be essential.

Another approach people especially in development and government agencies sometimes take to preserve a culture is tourism. In Coulter's setting, performances specifically for tourists were a recent development. This involved the performing of a traditional flute ensemble but this type of performance was definitely at the level of "token use" as addressed by Fishman. Such activities commodify the traditional music and have little value for meaningfully sustaining the cultural use of oral traditions. For the most part cultural preservation efforts ignore the creative process of making new stories, poems and songs, ignore the means of transmitting those processes from one

generation to the next, and ignore the internal communicative value of music in natural cultural contexts.

Beyond Preservation: Creative Adaptation Provides Sustainable Revitalization

Community-based formal and non-formal education programs can provide opportunities for community members to make creative use of available resources and current contexts while creating new space for the use of traditional and/or hybrid art forms, thereby facilitating the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and thus contributing to culture and language revitalization.

A desire to keep a music system “pure” or “authentic” can sometimes be counterproductive for revitalizing efforts. In many groups that we have observed, it seems more likely that “multi-musicality” (like multilingualism) or hybrid forms of traditional music could help revitalize creativity and provide meaningful songs that are able to communicate with the current generation. These new forms have the potential to revitalize culturally relevant creativity among the next generation (Coulter 2007). New adaptations are a part of any living music system and at times of great and rapid change adaptations may be needed more than ever. We have observed situations, however, where more dominant music styles are in use and where it is doubtful that any meaningful communication is taking place, as few people understand the language being sung and there is little emotional connection to the sounds. This usually occurs when the purposes are symbolic and community members do not expect to understand the text. Such uses of other music systems can hardly be compared with music that communicates deep emotions and cultural specific texts.

Incorporating relevant cultural art forms and oral traditions into community-based education programs (i.e., Multilingual Education) can provide opportunities for ethnolinguistic communities to adapt, revitalize, and sustain their culture and language as they engage in creative “active uses” for internal communication as opposed to “token uses” in which the arts and oral traditions are treated solely as commodities for economic development or as symbolic representation for tourism and national recognition.

Some Examples

Interruption of Intergenerational Transmission

We have many examples we could share about minority groups from all over Asia but the context of the Tampuan people of Cambodia is rather typical. Many of the young people are socially and emotionally connected to their traditional music but, for the most part, they have not learned how to perform it, much less create in it. In the past, young people learned songs while going to work in the fields and they had to initiate learning it from their elders. So much has changed in the way of formal education, new roads, radio, Khmer businesses and government influence, tourism, and even the presence of NGOs. Possibly the biggest changes are related to the shift from orality to literacy and from a Tampuan egalitarian society to more of a Khmer hierarchical society, at least for many of the young people.

Community based Adaptation: new methods of Intergenerational Transmission

What is not typical about the Tampuan is the amount of encouragement they have had from NGOs along with community based decisions many have made to adapt new methods for the intergenerational transmission of their music and culture. Some of the youth have researched their own culture making use of their literacy skills and available technology. They have written down many of their songs, written books about their music, and recorded some of it on video, audiocassette, and even Minidisk. The opportunities to interact and learn from an older generation most likely brought social benefits that would be difficult to measure. The technology they used in the process was based on their assessment of their current resources and not special grants for expensive new equipment or specialized technical training.

When one group was asked how they could promote their culture based on their current resources they explored many creative ideas. One idea was to use their traditional songs as ring tones on their cell phones. Most villages have formed cultural groups where young people learn about their music and other traditions. At one point, a group of young people were offered funding to have snooker halls built in Ban Lung, the capital of Ratanakiri, and they refused it as they concluded that such activity would not be helpful for their goals of promoting Tampuan culture.

The point is, that choices are being made by individuals and small groups of community members to use modern resources for the purpose of revitalizing their culture as opposed to allowing those changes to marginalize their cultural identities. Some people (maybe even most young people) are making other choices but the revitalizing choices of a few are having ripple effects within their communities.

Development of the vision - keeping the fire burning

Another related language group in Cambodia, the Brao, developed various types of written instructional material about specific health issues, including AIDS prevention and cleanliness/sanitation in the home. Some of these materials, however, were never distributed. The national teachers who developed the materials avoided teaching on some of the topics.

We went to work with the nationals to look together at ways they could effectively and appropriately communicate some of this health information. We discovered that the topics that were not being taught were sensitive or taboo areas of discussion within the cultural context. These same topics, however, may be addressed in songs. Many groups throughout Asia have taboos against verbal discussion of certain topics. But singing or dancing them can be totally acceptable.

The Brao composed several new songs with instructions about these topics. One song, in gong song style, addressed the issues connected to AIDS. The song integrated the main points of the previously developed material.

“When the Brao hear this AIDS song,” they said, “they will understand about the dangers of AIDS, about the issues connected to it, and about how to prevent the disease.” These nationals were pleased with their creation and felt that it would be very well received by the people in the villages. They used this song to educate the members of their language group. Not only did the adults in the community embrace the song and the concepts within, but even the youth and children know the song. It is still sung to this day, several years later, and used as a powerful communication and education tool about AIDS prevention.

Language communities in similar circumstances may be able to actively use the traditional ways of passing on information to introduce new innovations that will be helpful for people within their community. This community-based approach of composing new songs that address specific needs within the community context, offers an internal communication approach that shows value of the intergenerational participation in cultural art forms, but even more than this, offers education in reference to a new critical cultural concern: AIDS. This concern is addressed NOT through an external foreign innovation, but through the community members’ adaptation of their own traditional cultural approach to the innovation and through

their own creative choices for communicating the information appropriately and meaningfully.

One of the literacy specialists working with the Brao said that because of the effectiveness of this AIDS song, now, whenever the Brao hit a challenging topic, a new innovation that is challenging to communicate, or a complex concept that is difficult to remember the Brao compose a song that addresses those issues.

MLE and Revitalization: A winning combination

One MLE program is being developed, combining Mon nationals with Thai teachers. Mon culture is still musically alive but many of the younger people are disconnected from the traditional art forms.

In a workshop exploring the use of their traditional art forms within this MLE program they identified 12 different Mon cultural art forms. They looked at ways to use these within their evolving curriculum.

The participants developed poems, songs, and dances to parallel the curriculum topics. The poems and song texts use the traditional poetic forms. The song melodies access both the traditional Mon melodies and also new melodies in the Mon melodic language. In the traditional Mon dance style, each dance movement carries a specific meaning. Although, they can also access and use comfortably other language groups' poetic, musical, and dance styles, the Mon teachers chose to utilize their traditional art forms for this particular set of curriculum.

Intergenerational transmission was explored through 1) helping youth research and analyze some of the traditional poetic forms; 2) older, experienced musicians assisting in the process of allowing youth to try to compose new poems in their own mother tongue and 3) youth, paired with experienced musicians and dancers, developing the songs for the curriculum.

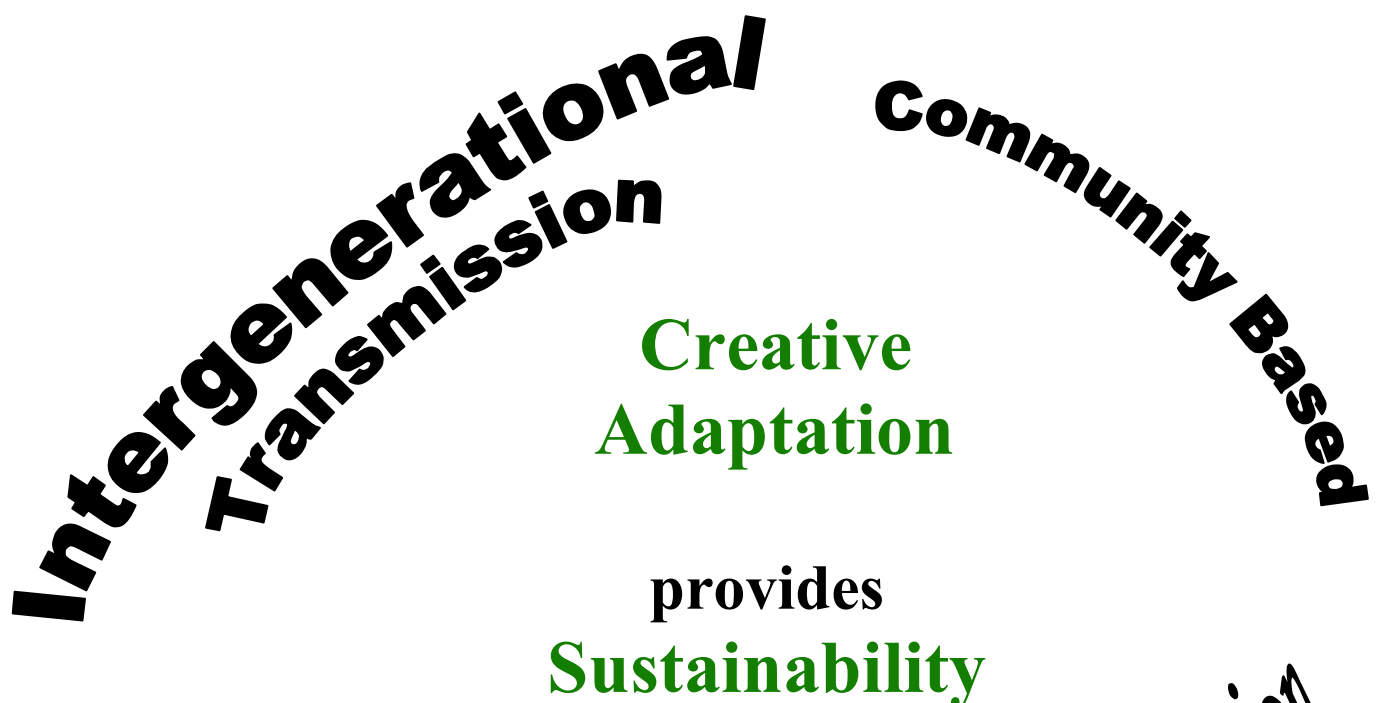
At the end of the first day, one young Mon woman teacher reported, "I was resistive to exploring my own cultural art forms. I couldn't envision our Mon art forms as part of our education program. During the first day, as I heard the music and saw dancers dance and as we discussed the richness of our many art forms, I began to feel the passion grow within me. I danced our Mon dances for the first time, I composed a poem in Mon and in Mon poetic style for the first time, I felt the desire to see my culture esteemed and taught about to our children. I have the fire burning within me for this."

Conclusion: Beyond Preservation...on to Revitalization

We have seen that certain processes need to occur for a preservation project to have life and for communities to be able to adapt to the changes that come with modernization and nationalization or globalization. We emphasize “process” rather than “outcomes.” Processes are where the life of a community takes place whereas outcomes cannot be predicted and will vary among communities, nations, and regions.

The motivation, when community based, makes use of the community’s language, culture, and art forms. These rich resources when accessed can allow for adaptation of how community-determined essential aspects of the culture will be transmitted between generations. Active uses of songs and art forms engage communities in direct relationship to their needs as opposed to imposed token uses, which are less integrated with the needs of the community. Active uses revitalize and create new space for the living processes of creating new poems, dances, songs, and other cultural expressions. Active uses imply that there will be internal communication within communities that meet real needs that can, in turn, breathe new life into those communities’ expressive cultures. Community based formal and non-formal education programs have potential for the integration of expressive culture in ways that can provide necessary opportunities for moving beyond cultural preservation and on to revitalization.

Beyond Preservation...on to Revitalization



Resources

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