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Conscientization through the Context of a Book Club: Adults' Experiences of Consciousness-Raising

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Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand lived experiences of consciousness-raising for adults through the context of book clubs. Research about adult participation in book clubs remains scarce. Therefore, this study seeks to highlight how these contexts might promote adult learning and conscientization.

Keywords: book clubs, adult learning, conscientization

Introduction

The following paper presents my ongoing dissertation research which uses a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to explore the consciousness-raising experiences of adults who participate in book clubs. Currently, I am still in the process of data collection and analysis; however, the discoveries that have emerged from the data so far provide insightful information about the ways in which book clubs help create a space for adults to cultivate and develop new perspectives about their world by engaging them in critical reflection and critical dialogue. This paper reveals the current status of book clubs in America, their historical background as environments that fostered critical thinking, communication, and interactions among adults with shared interests and goals, and a preliminary summary of my current discoveries when conducting interviews with book club participants.

Background of the Problem

Although it is not a widely researched topic, statistical findings about book clubs suggest that the number of book clubs throughout the United States is increasing. "Over the past decade, reading groups have become a renewed American pastime. In 1990, there were about 50,000 book clubs in the United States; by the turn of the millennium that number had just about doubled" (Daniels, 2002, p. 3). In a digital age which emphasizes individualized learning over social, communal structures, the traditional concept of face-to-face book clubs has become somewhat antiquated. Once founded on their ability to bring together individuals in a single, physical, collective learning environment, book clubs have evolved into groups that more often meet virtually, in online forums, to discuss readings and examine issues that emerge in the literature they explore. While these online formats enable more widespread participation and communication across geographical and cultural boundaries, the transition from the traditional structure of a book club into a less personal, online format provides a different environment and context for book club members. However, despite these evolutions in structure, there are book clubs that remain faithful to the traditional format of face-to-face meetings and continue to thrive today.

History of Book Clubs

Historically, book clubs have functioned as structures for informal learning. Contemporary American book clubs evolved from reading clubs, scholarly organizations that were situated within the creation of gentlemen's clubs and lyceums during the early 1800s (Kett, 1994). In fact, in 1900 the concept of a book club "signified an association for reprinting scarce

books or fostering the publication of original compositions by members [of library associations]” (Kett, 1994, p. 44). This differs drastically from what we now refer to as book clubs. Therefore, in their infancy book clubs were better known as reading groups, literary groups, or even types of mutual improvement societies. The development of various forms of mutual improvement societies based on literary interests demonstrates the growth in social reading organizations throughout the nineteenth century.

The popularity of reading clubs gradually increased with the formation of knowledge societies, the development of academies, the creation of social libraries, and the movement toward democratization of educational opportunities for women and minorities (Kett, 1994). During the nineteenth century, education broadened in scope to include informal learning environments as supplemental to, or blended with, formal education. The concept of self-instruction, therefore, became more widely recognized as a valuable form of education. Informal learning environments were rooted in critical reading and interactive discussions based on the material read.

Women, in particular, took advantage of these informal learning activities as outlets to engage in dialogue with other individuals who shared similar experiences, social obstacles, and political perspectives. In particular, “the Chautauqua circles were reading clubs, similar in some respects to contemporary women’s clubs” (Kett, 1994, p. 161). The Chautauqua movement, inspired by the development of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC), is perhaps the most prominent example of reading clubs evolving into national, and even international, academic societies that originated as structures reflective of book clubs. “Overall, the Chautauqua movement contributed to the democratization, theory and structure of both adult and university education in the USA” (Scott, 2005, p. 42). The impact of the Chautauqua movement, therefore, left a lasting effect.

Book clubs have come a long way from their origins, and they continue to evolve in their intentions and membership. The historical progression of reading groups and book clubs paved a path for adult education. In addition, these intentional gatherings affirmed the value of less formal learning contexts and helped emphasize the potential for book clubs to function as spaces to foster critical dialogue.

Book Clubs in Scholarship

In academia, book clubs have largely escaped scholarly attention, or as Long (2003) states, they have “slipped through disciplinary cracks to find themselves in a scholarly no-man’s land” (p. x). Book clubs have traditionally been associated with amateur or uninformed readers who gather to discuss popular fiction. With the exception of a handful of scholars who recognize the contributions these contexts can make to a number of fields, the clubs have not been credited as valuable structures that can illustrate advantageous insights. However, as they slowly gain attention, the few scholars who acknowledge the significance of book clubs have discovered that the clubs can enlighten us about a variety of points: literary engagement (Goldberg, 2012; Bonner & Tarner, 1999; Addington, 2001; Twomey, 2007), collective reading and group dynamics (Childress & Friedkin, 2012), human interactions and connections, (Sedo, 2004; Odracic, 2007; Long, 1992, 2003; St. Pierre, 1995; Kelley, 2007; Sisson, 1996), and teaching and learning pedagogies (Ooi & Liew, 2011; Southwood, 2012; Polleck, 2010; Sawatzky, 2011) just to name a few. Thus, there is a crucial need to spotlight book clubs as significant social structures that contribute to society and adult learning in a number of ways, and also to reveal data that indicates these seldom studied groups are actually quite prevalent and relevant adult learning environments in the United States.

Sadly, book reading in the United States is reportedly on a general decline. The Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA), conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts states, “The percentage of Americans who read at least one book of fiction or nonfiction in the previous 12 months (outside of work or school requirements) decreased from the early 1990s to 2008” (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2008). This decrease was from 61% in 1992, to 54% in 2008. (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2008, Findings and Trends section, para. 1). Inarguably, technological advances that have limited or even eliminated the need for book reading are attributable to this change. In an age where information and reading materials are easily accessible through the Internet, the demand for immediate information reduces the need to peruse a book to gain knowledge. Furthermore, Americans are bombarded with a variety of easily portable, electronic entertainment options, which have often replaced the role of a traditional, paper book.

Interestingly, however, a change in reading habits does not seem to have significantly impacted book club participation. Based on the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, “anecdotal evidence suggests book clubs (discussion groups) are currently a popular phenomenon, but data about Americans’ participation in them are scarce. A 2005 study found that 6% of American adults who read for pleasure and primarily in English, or 3.4% of all adults, participated in book clubs” (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2008, Findings and Trends section, para. 3). Furthermore, according to the 2010 United States Census Bureau report on leisure activities, 2.5% of adults surveyed had participated in a book club within the last twelve months, with 1.2% reporting to have participated once a month (“Adult Participation,” 2012, Table 1240). The report does not provide a specific definition of a book club, so the assumption remains that it follows a general definition of a book club as an organized group of individuals gathered to read and discuss literature. While these figures may seem small and there are obvious discrepancies since research efforts to examine book club participation are limited, the data does suggest that book clubs remain very much alive in contemporary society. The continued existence of book clubs supports the idea that they serve a purpose to help adults become informed about, and discuss, different literature.

Conscientization and Reading for Awareness

Paulo Freire (1996) writes, “World and human beings do not exist apart from each other, they exist in constant interaction” (p. 33). He further claims that in order for humans to enact change in the world and how they are situated in it, they must practice praxis, which includes an equal emphasis on reflection and action (Freire, 1996). Strongly supportive of dialogue as a means of promoting praxis, Freire (1996) claims that “only through communication can human life hold meaning” (p. 58). Freire (1996) suggests that dialogue also promotes the emergence of the oppressed from a state of oppression. He writes, “Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people...Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself...Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation” (p. 70). Freire (1996) relates these ideas of liberation to critical thinking and literacy through his concept of conscientizacao, or conscientization. “Conscientizacao is the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of emergence” (Freire, 1996, p. 90). He states, “Since the basic condition for conscientization is that its agent must be a subject (that is, a conscious being), conscientization, like education, is specifically and exclusively a human process. It is as conscious beings that men are not only *in* the world, but *with* the world, together with other men” (Freire, 2000, p. 39). An awareness, or consciousness,

of how one is situated in our various social circumstances is therefore promoted by the development of one's perceptions, and likewise, advances such development through further exposure to situations that highlight social conditions.

Freire's (1996) representation of critical dialogue, through his concept of liberatory education, is the most relevant illustration of the connection between critical dialogue and literacy. "Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1996, p. 60). Therefore, the creation of one's conscious awareness is not established through force, but rather through the sharing of information, ideas, and perspectives as reflective and dialogical practices. I relate this sharing of ideas and subsequent awareness-building to the interactions that occur in the context of a book club.

Design of the Study

Although scholars have examined book clubs as informal learning environments and contexts for adults to seek social networks and engage in critical dialogue, very little is known about how book clubs function as spaces for adults to deliberately engage in these actions. The purpose of my study is to understand lived experiences of consciousness-raising for adults through the context of book clubs. To address the gap in the literature, my research is guided by the following question: What is the lived experience of Conscientization, or consciousness-raising, in the context of book clubs?

My study takes the form of a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist epistemology. I apply a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology in order to explore the ways in which book club members experience consciousness-raising in the context of a book club. I draw upon the perspectives of Gadamer (1975) and Van Manen (2014), as they build upon Heidegger's (1996) philosophies about phenomenology, to inform the structure and design of the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary method of data collection I utilize for my study is to conduct three sixty to ninety minute, semi-structured interviews with each of the participants. These interviews take place either face-to-face or via Skype or FaceTime. The first interview allows the participants to discuss their overall experiences in book clubs. The second interview provides the opportunity to more deeply explore the participants' consciousness-raising experiences within a book club. The third interview allows me to further ask the participants how their consciousness-raising experiences in a book club caused them to view the world differently. According to Merriam (2009), "Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data... it is the process of making meaning" (pp. 175-176). The procedures I use to analyze the data collected during my study include the following steps: transcribing the interviews, organizing the transcriptions into an easily accessible data inventory (Merriam, 2009, p. 174), and using Van Manen's (1990) interpretive phenomenological methodology to recognize themes in the data.

Although I am still in the process of collecting and analyzing data, the information I have gathered so far presents the following broad discoveries: (a) The participants indicate their reasons for joining a book club were to share ideas and conversations with like-minded individuals while also challenging themselves to read texts that they thought might be "out of their comfort zones;" (b) Participants have found that accountability, flexibility, and open-mindedness/diversity of thought are important characteristics of a successful book club; (c) Participants have had consciousness-raising or awareness-raising experiences that often result from exposure to perspectives that differ from or challenge their own; (d) While participants initially felt resistance to these different or challenging perspectives, particularly when they

opposed or threatened the participants' way of thinking about personal and social issues, they indicate that as a result of deeper thought (critical thinking) and discussion (critical dialogue) they often found that these differing perspectives were valid and merited closer consideration on their part (consciousness-raising); and (e) Participants report being more open or flexible to differing perspectives upon being made aware of their existence and value. They indicate that they either considered reevaluating or acted upon changing their own perspectives as a result of their awareness.

Conclusion

Having examined the evolution of adult participation in book clubs in America, the looming question of why book clubs should matter still remains. Their quiet presence and subtle influences on the lives of Americans are precisely the reasons why academics have largely neglected to investigate book clubs in great depth. Book clubs have not led to social uprisings, they are not categorized as groups that significantly impact the realm of literacy and reading, and there is insignificant evidence suggesting they have forged new paths in regard to the way people interact with literature. However, the fact that book clubs have endured throughout history, despite dramatic social changes, political forces, and scholarly derision strongly suggests that these structures fill a void which nothing else can.

Southwood (2012) claims, "Reading is not a passive process, it involves problem-solving, active prediction (guessing), searching and an ability to use past knowledge and experience to make sense of what we are reading (p. 37). When adults engage in book clubs, they become active participants in these processes, learning how to navigate the texts, their interpretations and perspectives of the ideas presented through the literature, and their relationships with other book club members. In order to gain a better understanding of how book clubs can contribute to our knowledge of adult learning and literacy practices, scholars must acknowledge the valuable information these structures can offer and conduct deep, meaningful investigations of book clubs as environments that foster adults' engagement with literature.

Voluntary in nature, reflective of informal learning contexts, and designed to promote a social exploration of literature, book clubs can offer insights about adult learning with regard to literacy practices, as well as individual and group meaning-making. Book clubs can inform adult learning theories about how adults learn from their interactions with one another in informal, social contexts and the literacy practices they follow as members of these groups. Book clubs indicate not only that reading can be a social convention instead of an individual experience, but also that reading for meaning necessitates active engagement and critical thinking.

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