Creating Private Spaces to Learn Public Participation

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Abstract: *Conceptions of private and public inform educational research and planning for labour market transitions in a small resource-based town in British Columbia. Laid-off forestry workers, women on social-assistance and underemployed youth seek inclusion in a community dialogue on educational planning, yet require support to participate*.

Introduction

Conceptions of private and public space provide access to understanding problems related to educational planning for non-traditional learners. Resource industry workers, women on social assistance returning to the workplace, and youth entering the labour market are placing demands on post-secondary institutions to assist them with these transitions. Often frustrated by entry criteria, financial costs, time constraints, the expectations of a formal learning environment, and teaching and assessment approaches, these "non-traditional learners" may also be further hobbled by negative images of themselves as learners. Their quiet voices are not often heard or counted in the contours of policy debate and program planning decision-making. Recovering private spaces for these new learners to formulate their views increases opportunities for learning to participate in a public space.

The Research

Educational Needs and the Transitional Labour Market

As part of a community-based education and training needs assessment I interviewed many educational and business leaders, as well as non-traditional learners, in the town of Squamish, British Columbia. Unemployed forestry workers, women on social assistance and youth marginally involved in the labour market, were asked about their views on education and training priorities for the community. Their responses were insightful and often poignantly stated. They called for greater access to programs and greater relevance of programs to their labour market concerns. Finding 'the right person' to help them

through the maze of services, programs, and courses was important.

One woman cautioned that "if the person in charge is not supportive, results can be devastating." They identified the need for a "bridge" to college and other sponsored programs, and a "bridge" from the courses back to the working world. How people were treated in the "system" was also of real concern; many expressed feelings of unworthiness as a result of a discussion with "experts" in the system. Newly unemployed forestry workers in a labour market transition program talked about feeling "forced to pick a course of study right away, but feeling too "upset and confused, [and not knowing] what to choose – or what we were qualified for". Another participant added: "Sometimes it takes a few months exploring options to change the mind set and see the possibilities. We need time – and support."

The participants welcomed the opportunity to share their views with me. Literacy limitations, English language, and shyness were among the reasons cited for not speaking up to the "experts" in the community. They believed that their voices were not strong enough nor informed enough to contribute to decisions being made about what programs to develop and offer in the community. Lack of a private space for formulating these views and learning to articulate them in a public setting further disadvantaged these learners, placing their interests in the margins.

Conceptions of Private and Public Space

Public Space

According to Arendt (1958), the public and the private are interdependent. Private space is a space

that protects, nurtures, and makes the individual fit to appear in the public realm. The public sphere is a common space in which the members of society meet, through a variety of media, to discuss matters of common interest and to be able to form a common mind about those matters (Taylor, 1995). This space is, however, inequitable – for the participants, inequities resulted from their lack of communicative competence, and their lack of input into the formulation of the questions to be debated (Habermas, 1989). Public debate is also hindered by not only an inequity in participation, but also by the quality of discourse. Acting within the public sphere requires learning the procedures or norms of 'deliberative communication'. As well, access to the public sphere is often restricted, for not just the economically and socially disadvantaged, but also for those who feel "afraid and uninformed about forces they cannot identify" (Greene, 1978).

Private Space

The nest is an apt metaphor f or a discussion about private space. The nest has particular virtues: it is hidden and sheltered, "it is a good, warm home, it is even life giving...since it continues to shelter the bird that has come out of the egg. It also serves as a sort of downy coverlet for the baby bird until its quite naked skin grows it own down" (Bachelard, 1958/1964, p. 92). The nest is built with the body of the bird, who, through much effort, pressing and tightening the materials, fits its body into the nest perfectly. In the same way, a private space is created intentionally through its members' own discussion and work, shaping the space to fit their own needs and requirements. Private spaces where this work may be located include, for example, a community-based action research project, a labour market transition program, or a basic academic upgrading course. More than a location, the notion of private space is useful for conceptualizing how

issues of privacy and personal integrity are explored and how doing so reduces the possibility of coercion in the public space (Moon, 1994).

Conclusion

The post-secondary policy debate on non-traditional learners is incomplete without the participation of non-traditional learners. But for these learners to participate as equals and to benefit reciprocally in such a debate, they not only need opportunities for "giving good reasons in public" (Benhabib, 1992), they need access to good information, the ability to share and analyze this information, and to communicate their understanding to others. A public sphere, where debate and deliberation can flourish, depends on private spaces where preparation for participation is fostered.

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