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Recommended Citation

Margo, Karen M. (2002). "Exploring Teaching Roles and Responsibilities in Adult Literacy Education: Do Teachers See Themselves as Transformative Educators?," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2002/papers/41>

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Exploring Teaching Roles and Responsibilities in Adult Literacy Education: Do Teachers See Themselves as Transformative Educators?

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Abstract: This qualitative study compared English and ESL teachers' perspectives of teaching and learning with the role of the adult educator and the process of learning, most notably described by Jack Mezirow in his theory of transformational learning and Paulo Freire in his critical theory of adult education. Significant parallels between some of the teachers' intentions, views of learning, and curriculum orientation were consistent with the role of the educator and the process of learning described in transformative theories of adult learning. The teachers in this study also held many reservations about the role of the teacher as a change agent.

Theoretical Framework and Background of the Study

Transformational learning has become a focal point of theoretical and practical study in adult education over the last twenty years. Transformative learning involves a process where individuals reflectively transform existing beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and emotional reactions that may limit their ability to achieve their personal and intellectual potential. A fundamental shift takes place in the way individuals see themselves, others, and the world. The ideas of Freire (1970) and Mezirow (1981) have been applied to adult education contexts that include: literacy education, community and social change movements, environmental education, and professional development in organizations (Baumgartner, 2001; Clark, 1993; Robertson, 1996; Taylor, 1998, 2000). Both Freire (1970, 1973, 1997) and Mezirow(1981, 1990, 1991) emphasize that the educator can play a key role as a catalyst of transformative change and learning. In Freire's view, the educator assumes the role of a co-learner who with empathy and insight understands the existential reality of learning. Education becomes democratic when educators participate collaboratively with adult learners in a "critical and liberating" dialogue that is grounded in the life world of the individual. From Mezirow's perspective, the educator is described as an "empathic provocateur" and role model who is critically self-reflective and encourages others to consider alternative perspectives. The process of transformative learning, notes Mezirow, helps learners gain a sense of agency over (themselves) and their lives (Mezirow, 1985). Mezirow (1991) contends that a central goal of adult education should involve creating conditions to help adult learners become more critically reflective and "advance developmentally" toward "integrated and discriminating meaning perspectives" (p. 225). He emphasizes that transformative learning should be the "business of all adult educators."

At best, it seems naive to assume that all adult educators share a liberal-humanist philosophy and that the goal of transformative learning is shared by adult educators (Conti, 1985, 1990; Cranton, 1992, 1994; Ellsworth, 1992; Nesbit, 1998; Pratt and associates, 1998; Quigley, 1996; Robertson, 1998; Taylor, 2000). Indeed, the extensive research on teaching perspectives conducted by Pratt and associates (1998) attest to the diversity in teaching approaches and strategies among adult educators. In his detailed study of teaching processes of basic education mathematics teachers at an urban community college, Nesbit(1998) found that without exception, the teachers in the study focused more on " teaching the syllabus" rather than the students. He describes teaching as "akin to inculcation." Robertson (1996) asserts that

throughout the literature, there is the image of the exemplary adult educator as a person with expertise in facilitating transformative learning, yet again, throughout the literature, there is a lack of information that suggests guidelines in preparing or supporting adult educators who may want to accomplish these goals. With a few exceptions, the adult education literature does not carefully examine the intra and interpersonal dynamics of the educational helping relationship. Similarly, Taylor (2000) contends that adult educators are being encouraged to practice a particular approach to teaching with a process that is still inadequately described and understood, especially in classroom contexts.

Purpose of the Study

Two of the central questions that this qualitative study investigated and analyzed were: 1) Do adult educators' conceptualizations of the teaching-learning process reflect the assumptions about the role of the educator and the process of learning described in transformative learning theories? 2) Do teachers see themselves as "transformative" educators? One of the theoretical models for understanding the different perspectives and philosophies that the educators held was developed by Pratt and associates (1998). In their analysis of teaching in adult and higher education, Pratt and his associates identify five teaching perspectives: the transmission, nurturing, apprenticeship, developmental, and social reform perspective. In this study, the teachers' perspectives were most consistent with the transmission, nurturing, and developmental teaching orientations.

Methodology

The present research was a qualitative study that explored twelve English and ESL teachers' conceptions of their professional world, rather than their teaching behavior in adult literacy classrooms. In the present study, I conducted three one and half to two hour semi-structured interviews with each literacy teacher. The questions centered around their understanding of the process of teaching and learning, their approach to curriculum planning and assessment, and the beliefs and values that guide their practice. Each interview was taped and then transcribed. The data was presented in form of individual profiles of each of the twelve educators. In addition to a qualitative analysis of the interviews, cross verification of the data also included use of instruments such as Conti's (1990) Principles of Adult Learning Scale, Kolb's (1985) Learning Style Inventory and Zinn's (1994) Philosophy of Adult Education Inventory. A repertory grid exercise was used to help the teachers articulate and expand on the roles that they identified most closely with (see Candy, 1991, Cranton, 1994). Some of these roles include: the facilitator, mentor, co-learner, provocateur, instructor, researcher, researcher, and counsellor.

Significant Research Findings

Most of the educators in this study did not refer to themselves as "transformative educators" nor did they share a theoretical understanding of Freire's critical education theory or Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation; in this sense, theory is not driving practice. However, significant parallels between some of the teachers' intentions, views of learning, curriculum orientation, and personal philosophy of practice were consistent with the role of the transformative educator and the process of learning described by Freire (1970) and Mezirow (1981). Similar to Taylor's (1997) analysis of the common themes in studies researching transformative learning, the present study found that most of the teachers emphasized the

importance of providing a safe, open, and trusting environment for learning, and using instructional strategies that supported a learner-centered approach that promoted choice and self-direction.

Teaching English from a Transformative Perspective

As a subject, English can be used as a vehicle for exploring values, current issues, and landscapes of the imagination. Gee (1992) writes that English and ESL teachers are “gatekeepers” in the sense that “short of radical social change, there is no access to power in society without control over the discourse practices in thought, speech, and writing.” (p. 60). He further states that while educators can view themselves as “language and literacy teachers” with no connection to political and social issues, an alternative is that they can see their role as persons who “socialize learners into a world view that must be looked at critically, comparatively, and with a constant sense of the possibilities for change”(p.60). Much has been written about using novels, poetry, and other texts as catalysts for triggering critical reflection and transformative learning (Frye, 1978; Green, 1990; Peim, 1993; Rosenblatt,1978). In the present study, a number of the adult literacy educators used different forms of literature as a vehicle for exploring ideas in psychology, politics, media literacy, racism, sociology, and the environment. Autobiography, personal narratives, and other forms of creative writing were seen by some of the teachers in this study as helping adult learners “tap into areas of the imagination.”

The importance of “value laden course content” was also seen by many of the teachers in this study as being an important vehicle for promoting critical awareness and deeper level learning. Many of the teachers in this study emphasize the importance of adult learners being able to relate literacy texts their own lives. Choice, empowerment, accessibility, and the “demystification” of literature were common themes. Craig, one of the community college English teachers, further explained:

Literature provides shape and form to life’s questions. That’s what keeps people reading. My approach to teaching involves this exploration. I have a desire to make shape out of different facts. Unlike other kinds of teaching where the curriculum may be very set and specific, there is an element of discovery in teaching English. Freud studied literature as a way of understanding personality and motivation . . . We all have a narrative to tell. At its basic level, literature exists to help people understand themselves and the world.

Craig described himself as a cultural guide, facilitator, and co-learner. He emphasized that he looks for different kinds of narratives that his students can relate to, and from there he “builds bridges” to new knowledge. As an inner city teacher working with adult literacy learners, Bruce sees literature and creative writing as a vehicle for personal and social transformation:

Writing is an act of seeing. I try to encourage my students to be good observers...I want the students to articulate their experiences and in the process heal in some way. Many of my students are burdened by terrific emotions. I teach in the center of pain and poverty. A lot of talented young people grow up with poverty, prejudice, and a lack of hope. They don’t feel accepted. I try to get them to explore their feelings and share with others by writing about it. I see many of our students who are overwhelmed by their alcohol and drug habits. Students who grew up in parentless homes are now parents themselves. I think that the whole idea of teaching literature and writing is to inform, uplift, and serve as a useful psychological and spiritual guide. Part of my work involves demystifying the language of poetry to make it accessible to students from different backgrounds. In my classes I say: ‘let’s look at the world and see what is there. Let’s look at ourselves and see

what's there.' I try to make them see that literature is a mirror held up to human nature.

The Role of the Transformative Educator

While most of the educators in this study did not see their role as a “transformative educator” they did not discount the reality that the educational experiences for many of their students were very significant and went “beyond the acquisition of practical skills” into the realm of personal development and social awareness. One teacher explained: “Learning is more than an accretion of facts...it's changing the architecture around you. Major learning to me means a paradigm shift of sorts.” A number of the teachers in this study emphasized that all learning was a type of transformation and that changes in self-perceptions and social awareness could be an outcome of “functional” approaches to teaching literacy. When asked the question “What does a transformative educator mean to you?” many of the teachers in this study emphasized that deeper level learning may have more to do with the readiness of the learner than of something specific that the educator may do. Craig explained:

I'm not really sure what a transformative educator means. I think of a dramatic change like a chrysalis changing into a butterfly. I think that if someone calls herself or himself a transformative educator, that's a very demanding claim. I think that if you can help people a few steps along on their journey of learning, you're doing well. I see transformation as having a lot to do with the student, and their own readiness, rather than being with the teacher. I am very wary of the role of the educator as change agent. I have to ask myself: what kind of change?

A number of the teachers also associated roles such as “reformer”, “provocateur” and “transformative educator” with manipulation, and an imposition of the educators' values onto the student. Mary, a community college ABE teacher, emphasized that “adult educators have no business trying to transform students . . . that's a very personal and political matter. It's also patronizing to think that as a teacher I can teach these students about the world in which they live. I would never presume that a student cannot think deeply or critically. There is a certain arrogance in a philosophy that extols the view that ‘we know what a good society is.’ ” Yvette, an ESL teacher, views aspects of transformative learning as potentially dangerous and damaging for adult learners already in a state of transition:

The teacher should not be manipulating any political ideas in the classroom . . . New Canadians are already going through a transformation by their very experience of being in a new culture. Their culture is continually being challenged in terms of religion, marriage, child rearing, etc. If you start bringing up these topics, they will say: ‘I can't handle this right now.’ I've learned this along time ago . . . I am not going to discuss politically volatile topics because I have students from regions that may have been at war with each other. A person's emotional attachments are very strong . . . and you are not necessarily helping just because you address personal or social issues.

The Adult Educator as Co-learner, Facilitator, and Guide

An interesting finding in this study is that the educators did not identify themselves as exclusively having one role—they see their roles as being quite fluid and flexible. The role that they identified most with was the role of the facilitator who acts to guide rather than direct the learning process. One teacher explained: “I'm there to guide people to help them look at themselves and their own discoveries. I consider myself a reformer only in the sense that I can help people find out where or what they want to reform. I can help learners articulate their

experiences.” For meaningful learning to take place, an atmosphere of trust and respect must be there. Yvette identified most with the roles of the co-learner, facilitator, resource person, researcher, and “diagnostician” of learning needs:

I see myself as a manager of the classroom but not of learning. Learning should not be controlled by me. It is a process of discovery. I also see myself as equal to my students. They may be learning about life in Canada but I am learning about them. I am learning about their culture and changing myself in the process. By being parachuted into a new country, a new culture, a new society, the adult learner feels that their own identity is being attacked. Students will often say to me that they feel like ‘ a fish out of water’ . . . We have to give these students an opportunity to express their perceptions and feelings of isolation and uprootedness. A good literacy teacher is one who can get into the skin of that student being first and foremost. The content is secondary . . . I am not there just to teach them lessons in reading comprehension and grammar.

Interestingly, Zinn (1994) notes that the dominant philosophies that an educator holds are more likely to be complementary rather than contradictory (e.g., the progressive and behavioral philosophies complement each other while the radical and behavioral contradict each). This study also found far more contradictions and inconsistencies with regard to the perspectives and philosophies the educators held. For example, some teachers who expressed humanistic themes in the way their facilitated class discussions also held “behavioral” and “transmission” oriented approaches to assessment or in the specific teaching methodologies that they employed.

The Adult Literacy Educator as Counsellor

The teachers in this study explained that it was sometimes difficult to separate the role of the counsellor/therapist and the teacher. Mezirow (1981) emphasizes that educators should have “sufficient psychological knowledge” to help learners deal with anxieties and emotional barriers that may interfere with learning, yet most adult educators are not trained as counsellors to deal with the problems that many adult literacy learners’ experience. Catherine, a college English teacher working in a self-paced literacy program, explained:

When adults return to school, so much of what we do as teachers has nothing to do with academics. Many students don’t know how to study or they have no confidence. As teachers, we really have to deal with self-esteem issues. This is never done as an exercise in confidence building; instead, it is part of what I do every day in speaking with the students individually. I am more like a counsellor than a teacher some days.

While the teacher’s ability to empathize and be sensitive to the learners’ problems are critical, a number of the teachers in this study explained that they felt very hesitant to take the place of a therapist. One of the literacy teachers explained: “Many of my students in basic literacy have been victims of trauma and abuse. I’m not trained as a therapist, and if a student is having serious problems, I try to refer them to a counsellor.” In referring to literacy programs that have attempted to integrate literacy learning and psychological healing, this teacher emphasized that “more time, resources, and education” would be needed if literacy educators are expected to take on a therapist role.

The Role of the Adult Educator as Manager, Expert, and Planner

While the adult educators in this study had views consistent with collaborative and transformative perspectives of teaching and learning with regard to the importance of establishing a positive atmosphere and in their emphasis on teachers having empathy and

insights into learners needs and barriers to learning, their views differed from transformative approaches when a closer analysis was made into the evaluation process and the design of the curriculum. The role of the teacher as manager, expert, and planner surfaced more when the teachers in this study spoke of setting course objectives, evaluating and assessing student learning, and organizing specific classroom activities. Despite the effort that many of the teachers in this study made to reduce the power imbalance between himself or herself and the students, the educators acknowledged the limitations of “power sharing.” The literature on transformative learning in the adult education classroom tends to underscore the reality of evaluation and assessment. One teacher explained: “Evaluation is a fact and I must work under those parameters. I am not under any illusions. Our students know that. Right away, there’s a power differential . . . there are also socioeconomic and cultural differentials that many teachers don’t seem to think affect the way they come across to their students.”

The Mission of the Institution and Department

One of the factors influencing the curriculum and to some extent, the teaching approaches of the educator may relate to the department and institutional directives. Kember and Gow (1995) for example, found that the specific guidelines of a department have “a fairly strong influence over the teaching of individual lecturers” (p. 70). In departments where “effective teaching” is conceived of as “knowledge transmission” didactic teaching methods are more likely to be the preferred department teaching orientation. “The extent to which a faculty member’s conception of teaching is a reflection of the individual or the department presumably depends upon the balance of individual autonomy and department and institutional pressures” (Kember and Gow, 1995, p. 71). In this study, a number of the teachers noted that literacy education is increasingly becoming a “commercial enterprise” and that educational institutions are driven more by a “technical” view of adult literacy where learning outcomes are quantifiable and measurable. One literacy educator explained: “We have to fight to keep the word education in our programs. So many programs are becoming ‘training’ nowadays. The administration keeps asking for key productivity indicators and this is particularly frustrating when you work in basic literacy.”

Conclusion

It is interesting to note that while the adult education literature emphasizes the importance of educators critically challenging learners and fostering a climate where deeper level or transformative learning might occur, the trend in many adult literacy institutions is toward a “narrowing” of skills and competencies that may be diametrically opposed to transformative types of learning. Partnerships with business, English for a technical purpose, computer literacy, workplace literacy and training, and standardized evaluation all emphasize a transmission of specific skills and competencies. In these contexts, the teacher is more closely connected with the role of “instructor” or “technician”. The practical realities of teaching in an inner city high school for adults and in a city community college may make it difficult for teachers to apply “transformative learning” approaches even if they choose to do so. Finally, this study found that the perspectives on teaching and learning that the educators in this study held developed over time and were influenced by factors such as personality, family and educational experience, past teaching experiences, the specific characteristics of their students, and their work context.

*References are available upon request.