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Theorizing Adult Learning from the Postmodern Perspective: What Questions Do We Need to Ask?

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Abstract: The purpose of this roundtable paper is to pose a critique to adult learning theory building and to propose different questions to explore learning activities from the postmodern perspective.

Adult learning theory building has been guided by two important concepts: experience and reflection. Experience is a source or trigger of reflection and we can learn from experience through reflection are underlying assumption of adult learning theory building. These understanding can be summarized into two paradigms of inquiry: (a) learning from experience and (b) learning in/with experience. The former paradigm is essentially based on the question of how adult learners process their experience. Kolb's experiential learning theory and Mezirow's transformative learning theory are dominant theories out of this paradigm. The latter paradigm's fundamental question is where adult learners process their experience. This has to do with an analysis of context and produces situated learning theory that assumes that learning is a legitimate peripheral participation process to the communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Critical adult educators also emphasize that learning is a contextual activity and transforming the unjust social relations by empowering learners is one of the core values (Freire, 1970; Horton, 2003).

The former paradigm mainly views learning from the psychological perspective, while the latter paradigm is from a sociological perspective. In other words, the former is based on humanistic psychology, while the latter is grounded in critical social theory. In spite of differences, both paradigms share the common assumption that the learner and experience are in separate domains and reflection mediates both. Without reflection, experience has nothing to do with learning. The former paradigm assumes that an autonomous learner can reflect on experience. The learner can make meaning, produce knowledge, solve problems, and fulfill self-realization. The latter paradigm assumes a socially constructed learner who internalizes socio-culturally structured knowledge and meaning. When the learner internalizes socio-culturally biased consciousness, adult educators can help or empower the learner to critically reflect and act on it. Both of the paradigms take it for granted that experience situated in the context can exist independently from the learner.

This assumption has been challenged. Typically those scholars who are affected by postmodernism extensively criticize the assumption that the learner and experience are in separate domains (Edwards & Usher, 1998; Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997). They argue that the distinction between the learner, experience, and reflection is ambiguous, unclear, and unsettled. The notion that learner is a stable unitary self is disputed. As Clark and Dirkx (2000) argued, "the self is understood as never fixed but always in process" and "[the] personal identity is not singular but plural' (p. 109). Tennant (1998) identified the problem as being rooted in the

binary opposition between the "individual" and "society." Postmodernists try to overthrow the binary oppositions because "one of the two terms controls the other… [and] holds the superior position" (Spivak, 1997, p. lxxvii). Fenwick (2001, 2003) argues that the learner and the context are inseparable; they are located in the complex adaptive system. They are producing each other and co-emerging. To describe and understand this phenomenon in our daily life is not easy as Clark and Dirkx (2000) acknowledge: "We have not been able to find a clearer way to describe how multiplicity is experienced in practice" (p. 114).

How can we produce learning theory if we embrace the postmodern critique? How can we produce knowledge on adult learning differently? If the two dominant paradigms and their guiding questions, "how and where does the learner process experience?" are not suitable any more, what questions do we need to ask? One possible point of departure is Bové's (1995) insightful questions. In his essay on discourse Bové argues that poststructuralism does not pursue the meaning of discourse but concerns the different questions: "How does discourse function? Where is it to be found? How does it get produced and regulated? What are its social effects? How does it exist?" (p. 54). If we give up finding meaning of experience and reflection in theory building of adult learning, we can paraphrase these questions for our use. And, if we consider learning as a kind of activity, we can use "learning activity" in paraphrasing the above questions: How does learning activity function? Where is learning activity to be found? How does learning activity get produced and regulated? What are social effects of learning activity? How does learning activity exist? Employing these questions can open a new possibility to produce different knowledge on learning in adulthood.

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