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Developing a Taxonomy to Support Program Planning for Adult Learning Events

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Organizations invest millions of dollars annually in conferences and other learning events aimed at adult learning. Professional and scholarly conferences are time honoured traditions in our field. Yet, often we fail to consider whose purposes and learning needs are met in conferences and whose learning needs remain unaddressed or unmet. Additionally, we bristle at the structure of events we attend as adult education professionals.

Identification of stakeholders and stakeholder needs is a key element of program planning models (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, 2005; Caffarella, 2002). I feel we have recognized the importance of this focus on a micro level without fully embracing its implications on a macro level. Adult educators appear to be either generalists, viewing all conferences as relatively the same, or specialists, focused on one specific type of large group educational gathering, such as professional development or continuing education events. We fail to critically analyze the hegemonic structures that guide our current event practices. We do not question alternate means for organizing these important gatherings that lie at the center of our professional and disciplinary lives.

Methodology

This grounded theory study analyzes data collected through seven independent case studies conducted over eight years. Each case study focused on a specific type of adult learning event with a stated goal: theory building, discipline-based research, training, or professional development. Each case was initially examined to determine what was learned in that context and how that learning occurred. In many instances, missed learning opportunities were also identified.

Data sources include in-depth interviews, participant observation of conference activities by multiple researchers, critical incidents, document review and data forms. Conference participants completed data forms with statements about their New Learning (Storberg-Walker, Wiessner, and Chapman, 2005). Open coding was employed to develop in vivo codes. The research adheres to Creswell's (1997) eight standards for veracity. Its participatory nature also added to its trustworthiness, according to Merriam (1998).

Findings

Recurrent themes included participant and organizer dissatisfaction with event design that focused on not having enough time to accomplish stated goals or to experience the programmatic elements in ways conducive to individual and group learning. Seasoned event coordinators and adult educators made statements like, "Why can't we seem to put our beliefs into practice? We know what makes for effective adult learning, but it is rarely reflected when it comes down to the conference schedule and design." The differing, and sometimes conflicting, needs of scholars and practitioners were often cited. In this developing taxonomy, it became evident that the core purposes point to the core processes to be enacted in order to accomplish the intended purposes. Using in vivo coding methods, a series of words emerged, unintentionally alliterative in nature. The following table presents a sampling of those purposes and processes.

Table 1. Program purposes and processes

Program Purposes	Program Processes
Theory building	Exploring, examining
Discipline-based research	Exhibiting, experimenting intellectually/professionally
Training	Enacting, embodying
Professional development	Experiencing professionally/personally, exercising, expanding

Discussion

This roundtable explores the following questions: Who is included in these groups? Whose interests are served? How can they better reflect our democratic, disciplinary, and critical perspectives? What differing processes could we employ in adult learning events if we fully embraced the differing purposes for which they are held? How can we make conferences more effective in achieving their purposes?

Implications, Recommendations and Conclusions

Further research should include continuing education and personal enrichment events. This emerging taxonomy extends our understanding of program planning models, elucidating specific contexts in which they are employed. It also makes what we know about adult learning, group processes, and program planning more relevant and more clearly applicable in these settings.

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