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How do older adult volunteer instructors describe their peer teaching experiences at a Lifelong Learning Institute (LLI)

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Keywords: Peer teaching, LLI, older adults,

Abstract: This paper explored peer teaching experiences of older adult volunteer instructors at a Lifelong Learning Institute (LLI). Data was collected through in-depth interviews with the instructors, observations of classes, and documents of the LLI. Analysis revealed various aspects of peer teaching of adults: participants enjoy teaching, they describe their role as facilitator of learning, interaction in class results in reciprocity, and participants voluntarily continue to develop courses and teaching materials.

Introduction

The Community Academy for Lifelong Learning (CALL) is a Lifelong Learning Institute in State College, Pennsylvania. Lifelong Learning Institutes (LLIs), alternatively called Institutes for Learning in Retirement (ILRs) or Learning in Retirement Institutes (LRIs), are organizations led by older adults dedicated to meeting the educational needs of their members. Although each LLI is unique, there are commonalities: LLIs are sponsored by a host University; they are member-led organizations; and they encourage volunteer participation (EIN, 2006).

CALL shares these commonalities. People in Continuing Education, Gerontology Center, and College of Education of The Pennsylvania State University engaged in the founding of CALL and the CALL classes began in the Spring of 1997 (Knight, 2004). According to the CALL annual meeting report (CALL, 2005), CALL enrollment includes over 800 members. Members' volunteer participation enables CALL to provide educational programs, tours and trips, and a variety of social events at a low cost. Knight (2004) describes teaching at CALL as "sharing a subject or activity they loved with people whom they could look upon as peers rather than as students" (p. 7). This paper reports on a study of teaching older adults by peers, researchers term this *peer teaching*, focusing on how the instructors describe peer teaching experiences at CALL.

Literature of peer teaching in LLIs

Peer teaching between older adults differs in an important way from peer teaching between children. In peer teaching between children, "one child instructs another child in material on which the first is an expert and the second is a novice" (Damon & Phelps, 1989, p. 11), but in peer teaching between older adults, teachers and learners are peers not only as the chronologically same age group but also as the group who share common life experiences and the same sense of history (Strom & Strom, 1993). To further support this point, EIN (2006) reports that teachers and learners are "on the same wavelength" and learners are being taught at the right level, and this results in a very cooperative relationship and active participation in learning. As examined next, studies on peer teaching examined other aspects of peer teaching of older adults.

Differential characteristics of peer teaching have been a topic of studies on education of older adults. Brady, Holt, & Welt (2003) explored how peer teaching in LLIs are different from participants' prior teaching experiences and Simson, Thompson, & Wilson (2001) studied the

characteristics, activities, and concerns of peer teachers of ILRs. In the latter study, a research participant provides differential characteristics of learners of peer teaching classes, which include that learners are more likely to want to study serious subjects than recreational topics, they prefer seminars to large lectures, and they want to prepare by reading books or researching materials.

Special challenges and rewards also are the concern of the studies. Brady, Holt, & Welt (2003) discovered five distinct “challenges” of peer teaching of older adults, which include a wide range of older students’ educational background and reasons for attending; talented students with subject expertise; typical course structure, which is composed two hours per week for six to eight weeks and is not enough for some courses; and physical deficits of aging learners. In spite of the challenges, peer teachers are overwhelming positive about their job, with 97 % indicating that they would teach again (Simson, Thompson, & Wilson, 2001). Peer teachers in the Simson et al.’s study note various rewards, which include personal enjoyment and satisfaction, intellectual stimulation, increase of their knowledge/skills, and increase in enjoyment of teaching.

Studies of peer teaching of older adults examined the roles of peer teacher and preferred method of teaching. In a study of peer learning at an ILR (Clark, Heller, Rafman, & Walker, 1997), peer teachers described themselves as taking a variety of roles, among which peer teachers exhibit three dominant roles: Animator, teacher, and organizer. Brady, Holt, & Welt (2003) studied the role of peer teacher even further by asking questions about preferred methods of teaching. Five methods used among peer teachers are lecture, group discussion, hands-on activities, combination of the three methods, and course coordinator. An interesting point is that, as some of peer teachers in Clark et al.’s study describe their role as teacher, some peer teachers defend the lecture method arguing that “I would like to make my position against the current idea to dislike lecture. I think lecture is essential....” (p. 855). In contrast, peer teachers in Simson et al.’s study reported discussion was one of the most effective methods.

Except for the studies mentioned above there are “surprisingly little” research on peer teaching in adult education (Simson, Thompson, & Wilson; 2001 Brady, Holt, & Welt, 2003). For example, the terms peer teaching, peer tutoring, or peer learning are not included in the subject index of the recent version of *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* (2000). Major academic search tools provide less than ten journal-grade articles by key-words of peer teaching and similar terms in adult education. Among the few studies, two representative studies provided initial understanding of peer teachers in ILRs (Simson et al.) and overall description of peer teaching experiences in LLIs (Brady et al.). Unfortunately, the studies lack in-depth information about peer teaching experiences in LLIs. Research design of the studies shows the weaknesses of the studies: “18 forced-choice and 3 open-ended question” for 76 peer teachers of 65 ILRs (Simson et al.) and focus group interviews with forty-eight peer teachers from five LLIs (Brady et al.). In order to fill the gap I designed a study combining theoretical sampling with in-depth interview.

Research Design

Sampling Research Participants

I adopted the principle of theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which selects participants who will provide the greatest opportunity for discovery. The CALL director helped me select participants. I asked her to recommend research participants who match my criteria of research participant: “the research participant has experienced the phenomenon, is intensely interested in understanding its nature and meanings” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 107). The director introduced me six peer instructors, five of whom

participated in this research. I added one more participant whose course I attended as a student. Six of the participants are in their mid 70s; five of them are male; and five of them are retired professors, teachers, or university administrator and one is acting stock broker.

Interviews and Observations

I adopted Seidman's (1998) in-depth interview guide. For the first interview, I focused on their experiences before teaching at CALL. Then I moved into their peer teaching experiences and their meaning. However I modified the guide to accommodate the concept of "emergent design" (Lincoln & Guba, 1990). Thus instead of given the participants a "pre-ordinate" questionnaire, I let interviews go as the interaction between me and participants developed, while at the same time I kept the focus of my research in mind. According to Moustakas' (1994) interview guide for phenomenological research, the usefulness of "why" questions is limited which inhibited the ability to "facilitate the obtaining of rich, vital, substantive descriptions of the co-researcher's experience of the phenomenon" (p. 116). Contrary to what and how questions, why question might let participants cling to "predilections, prejudices, and predispositions" because it asks participants to reason, conceptualize, and categorize.

I conducted two interviews with three participants each and one with the other three participants. Interviews were 60 to 90 minutes long. I recorded them by a digital recorder and transcribed them for analysis. In order to get additional information I observed classes of participants, one to five times for each participant's class. For the classes of biography writing and stock market forum, I conducted participant observation and for the other classes I conducted non-participant observation. I recorded observation by note taking and digital recorder.

Findings

Teaching, A lot of Fun

An instructor describes his teaching experience that "I have more fun than I could imagine. It's just absolutely a great experience to do it... (and I) learned a lot more about the Civil War by teaching it than I did reading about it." During ten years of his retirement, he became interested in American Civil War and read various books and studied new publications about the war. Another instructor describes her teaching in a similar way: "I don't like to do things that are unpleasant... And (I) do something that I enjoy at the same time." She teaches a biography writing class, which has been her hobby after her retirement. Unlike the first two instructors, who teach subjects based on their more recently developed interests, third instructor teaches what he had taught and played for his life as a high school music teacher and a Jazz band member. For him teaching is more than fun. Music has been his "driving force" throughout whole life and he "love(s) to teach and love to share what I love."

However, an instructor revealed, "teaching did not come naturally to me." In the beginning of her teaching history at a university she was shy and nervous person, but she continued teaching and gradually became more comfortable with teaching. After retirement, she looked for a volunteer opportunity. She became a member of CALL, attended classes as a learner, took volunteer positions within the organization such as phone answering and writing CALL history, got offered to create a course, and taught a course of Great Wars.

These stories match with Simson, Thompson, & Wilson's (2001) finding that personal enjoyment and satisfaction are the top factors which attracted peer teachers to ILR teaching. In addition, they represent how Simson et al.'s third factor, enjoyment of teaching, works.

Facilitation

Three of the instructors use lecture as their primary teaching method, but they supplement their lectures by including providing hand-outs, showing OHP films, examining maps, listening to music on a CD player or playing musical instruments. Although not the primary method of instruction, lecture is used in the architecture tour class, too. For example, in a class of touring newly built buildings, he shows various aspects of the buildings and explains new architectural concepts through lectures at each stop of the tour. Touring also is an important event in the Civil War class. In fall 2005, the class went a tour a military park under title of “Revisit the Turning Point of the Civil War.”

The other two of the instructors use discussion as their primary instructional method. In the biography writing class, students come to the class with comments on the writings of other students, which have circulated by email before the class. Then, attendants and the instructor read one of two paragraphs of their story and exchange questions, answers and comments. Discussion is also the teaching method in the stock forum class. Instructor and some of attendants bring materials related to the stock market’s movement during the previous week and they discuss the trends of the movement and their impacts on domestic markets. He describes his role as to “facilitate(s) the interaction among participants” and “keep it going in the right direction.”

Instructors experience aspects of course management different than their prior teaching experiences. An instructor explains that unlike college students, CALL learners are not a “captive audience”. Another instructor emphasizes that there are no prerequisites, no expectation, no required reading, and no tests in CALL classes. However, the instructor claims that “they are there because they want to be. It makes a wonderful class I’ve ever had.” Furthermore, some students keep on enrolling in the same course and, according an instructor, these students feel that “there’s something new to see every time.”

There are challenges in course management. Two instructors report trial and errors at their first classes. Age-related challenges such as students’ mental weakness or hearing loss are unique challenges. The instructor says that “it’s not a problem but.... It’s a whole different situation (compared to undergraduate classroom).” She reports another different and hard-to-deal with situation is when a learner dominates class discussion. In this case, she is very careful to make the learner feel that they’ve done something wrong because, she thinks, they may be very sensitive about what they are doing.

Several instructors used the term facilitation, the “hallmark of adult education” (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1998), to describe teaching method, students’ participation, and dealing with challenges. However the form of facilitation varies in the real situation of peer teaching. For example while many instructors adopt humanistic view on facilitation (Knowles, 1980; Rogers, 1986) which opposes didactic teaching, many instructors prefer lecture to discussion.

Reciprocity

An instructor points out that active interaction makes CALL a difference compared to his prior teaching experience. The interaction among students and instructor is not limited to class hours. Rather active interaction occurs in set-up time before class and break time in the middle of class and sometimes it continues after the class hours. An instructor says that she likes the interaction, so she always tells at the first class, “I can be stopped.” Another instructor arranges tables and chairs for better interaction, in her words, for “more rapport with the more contact among the people.”

The interaction results in reciprocity. An instructor describes how reciprocity develops between her and the learners in her class:

They all have something to give just as I have something to give. And they may ask me questions to fill out gaps in what they know or they may contribute something that they remember or had read that I didn't know or didn't know as much about. So there really is an equality factor that I enjoy.

Sometimes she meets students who taught a course she attended as a student or who are an expert in one of the topics in her class. These situations facilitate the development of reciprocity. The instructor explains that "a convergence of life experience and life knowledge" is the condition of reciprocity. By "convergence" she refers to the fact that they lived through the same historical times of WWI, the depression, and the rise of Nazism. She describes the reciprocity she experiences as "peer to peer relationship."

Reciprocity is inherent in the interaction taking place between older learners and their instructors (Chene & Sigouin, 1997). As participants of Chene & Sigouin's study say, instructors create a friendly climate to learning and take responsibility for the content and context of learning. However the situational difference that instructors experience role switch with some of their students, provides variations in the form of reciprocity.

I have to be on my toes

An instructor says that he worries about how many students enroll in his course. He compares his job with salesman's job and considers that student enrollment shows how effective the instructor is. So he kept on developing his course design every term. In the beginning, he offered a golf course, then architectural tours of old buildings, and then architectural tour of new buildings on a university campus. Two other instructors also continue to modify their teaching materials slightly. One of them says:

And I have to try to uh... pay attention to some of that... I mean I've changed... I modified some of the things that I say in this class from what I would've said or did say in class in ten fifteen years ago uh... because of new material um... and you know I found there there is one book that I haven't got but haven't read yet about the ending of the war. Three people in the class have read it and so... (laugh) they keep holding it up and I didn't know this. So you know I have to be on my toes

Volunteerism studies of older adults (Pushkar, Reis, & Morros, 2002; Warburton & Dyer, 2004) provide background understanding about instructors' active engagement in teaching. Most participants explain that they started teaching at CALL because it was a chance of volunteering they looked for after retirement. They got paid anything but students' enrollment, according to an instructor, which is the sign of success. Even though volunteerism studies show two different motivations, altruism and egoism, participants' statements reports that two motivations work together in peer teaching of older adults.

Conclusion

This study revealed that peer teaching of older adults is a more complex phenomenon than former studies' finding. For example, contrary to former understanding that students do not like lectures, many participants prefer lecture to other teaching methods. In addition to similarities in age and the sharing of historical events, participants mention that mutual contribution and role reversal between instructor and students are crucial to the interaction.

Participants provided understanding of how volunteerism of older adults works in peer teaching of older adults. They keep on renewing course design and teaching material for successful classes, and successful classes are the rewards of their volunteering. These findings suggest that adult educators and practitioners should be mindful of the complexity of the phenomenon of older adults' peer teaching.

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