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Study Circles to Enhance Program Growth in the New York City Adult Literacy World

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Abstract: The experiences of facilitators and participants in 4 study circles which focused on qualitative research points up individual, group, and systemic challenges and potential for educators in New York City literacy centers.

Introduction

Educators in New York City adult literacy centers participated in four consecutive study circle sessions focused on the use of qualitative research for strengthening programs. Mini action research projects were an added layer of this initiative. While practitioners explored the principles, vocabulary, and issues of qualitative research process, they conducted self-selected, practice-based condensed research projects to reveal some of the underlying assumptions impacting their practice. Two adult educators co-facilitated this study circle which evolved from conversations they had with peers in the field who expressed frustration at the scarcity of available written research focused on the NYC adult literacy community.

Literacy programs for adults in New York City are as varied as the people they serve. Programs are held in churches, schools, libraries, community centers and other non-profits. Dedicated educators, as diverse in background and preparation as their students, are determined to meet their students' individual needs. They do so in an environment where they are increasingly held accountable for student progress measured only in test scores and daily attendance. The co-facilitators envisioned the study circle sessions as providing a space for alternative perspectives into literacy programs. In this current urban context, stories get lost in the requirements for funding mandates and perhaps as a response to this, participants came to this forum hungry to share their stories and be heard.

The purpose of these study circles was to give practitioners a grounding in action research principles and strategies, to provide practitioners opportunities to explore their own practice-based qualitative research in order to appreciate the connection between research and program quality, and to nurture a supportive environment for program practitioners to learn more about using research as a tool and resource for their practice.

The research question guiding our study was: *How do literacy practitioners create knowledge of the qualitative research process to inform their practice?*

Theoretical Framework

Study circles and the concept of participatory democracy are intimately connected with liberatory visions of education rooted in grassroots change where education is responsive to issues in the community (Freer, 1970). According to Scully and McCoy (2005) study circles, based on populist history and principles emerged in the United States in the late 19th century soon after they were credited for promoting participatory democracy in Sweden.

Study circles have historically been connected to various levels of community, institutional, and policy change. One of the main principles of study circles is that space is made for everyone's participation and engagement. A central purpose of study circles is to support participant articulation and exploration of issues in response to the needs of the community. Study circles are envisioned as intrinsically tied to a more participatory democratic community (Study Circle Resource Center, 2005). In that vein, we the co-facilitators saw a connection between the rationale articulated by the Study Circle Resource Center and liberatory education. Study circles offer a "bottom up" approach of voices being heard. The participatory nature of this process honors participants as organic intellectuals with important things to say about their world. (Gramsci, 1971). We hoped to encourage and support alternative perspectives that honored the voices/knowledge/power of adult learners. Study Circles represent a small group democracy in action, a vehicle for people to work on addressing collective change through honoring popular knowledge. (Study Circle Resource Center, 2005). We were practicing co-intentional education. (Freire, 1985). As researchers, we agreed with Freire that without dialogue there is no real communication or true education (Freire, 1970).

Research Design

This approach integrated an action research orientation. A trust in the process of qualitative research underscored our approach. Taking a constructivist perspective and acknowledging the value and integrity of participants' experience, we believed that new knowledge would be constructed by the group. (Patton, 2001). Particularly relevant characteristics of action research are the continual gathering of information from learners through multiple data points, developing questions of inquiry, implementation, evaluation and improvement (Creswell, 2003). Importantly, this method does not relegate evaluation to a summative position, but instead starts and continues with a framing perspective of research and evaluation initially and formatively.

Participants included 12 community educators (6 men and 6 women). They represented adult literacy programs that served ESL and GED learners, BENL (Basic Education in the Native Language) learners, family literacy students, and people involved in the criminal justice system.

A preliminary informal assessment of interest was conducted among program directors in a city wide network of adult literacy centers. Essentially, this study circle organically grew out of conversations the co-facilitators had with practitioners in the field. Participation was voluntary and unconnected with program assessments, evaluations and funding. Participants were sent a welcome letter outlining expectations, work load and scheduling.

The focus of the four monthly study circles was a deepening understanding of qualitative research. Participants explored the phases of the research process interactively over four sessions. At each session, they received folders with relevant readings and resources which they could voluntarily pursue. Concurrently, they engaged in qualitative research focused on their own practice as they constructed knowledge about research in the literacy field. Individually and collectively, they wrestled with formulating a research question, finding relevant literature, practicing their observation techniques, interviewing and analyzing transcripts. These activities, though highly condensed, were each followed by time for critical reflection and discussion. In addition, participants presented preliminary findings with insight and creativity. Knowledge production/space-making and social justice

connections to research were explored. Because, in context, adult literacy programs marginalize both practitioners and students, it was important for participants to have space and opportunity to voice their reality. Data were derived from their journals, in-class reflections, discussion, observation, newsprint posters, and de-briefing sessions.

An agenda from one study circle illustrates the depth and breadth condensed into one two and a half hour session. A session started by reading aloud a parable related to qualitative research and a welcome that presented the foreseen scope, purpose, and plan for the study circles. After a short presentation of definitions and introductions of each participant that included why they were interested in this program, the entire group engaged in a discussion and a newsprint dialogue activity directed at answering the questions: What is qualitative research? What has traditionally been considered research? How would you define research? What does conducting research with and on mean to you? What are two issues or concerns within your practice that you'd like to understand more deeply? Then key concepts of qualitative research such as action, evaluation, researcher as instrument, inductive and naturalistic methods were discussed. Explanation of the final product we were working toward, to be built on reflections and applied to individual situations, was discussed. Time was then allotted for participants to write before the final wrap up, homework and agreement of the next meeting date. This sample agenda suggests the pace and interactivity of each session.

Findings

The following themes, put in the form of active questions, emerged from our data in response to the research question asking how do literacy practitioners create knowledge of the qualitative research process to inform their practice?

Theme: How did external realities of the dominant culture influence the study circles?

The emphasis on qualitative research of these study circles faced the constant challenge of an environment that valued quantitative approaches. Participants brought different perspectives with them based on their professional positions. Administrators in the group were skilled in working with quantitative data, relating to topics such as educational gains and employment, as a way of advocating for their programs. They brought concerns about this field of battle and may have prioritized quantitative research because they felt it gave them an advantage dealing with the mandates of those funding adult education. These administrators may not have known many of the students in their programs individually. On the other hand, teachers in the room who had no part in reporting quantitative data may have had an easier time adjusting to the qualitative model, since it held the possibility of understanding better the people they were working with day-to-day. They know that their students make progress that isn't captured by standardized tests and other quantitative means.

Constant underlying struggles against some participants' internalized notion that quantitative research was the only legitimized paradigm (certainly the main one that funders recognize) revealed themselves. One participant seemed especially resistant asking in the 3rd session of the 4 session project whether we had indeed mentioned in the original announcement that the focus of this was going to be qualitative. Even though funders' mandates clearly had not served programs or students well (literacy programs are overflowing with stories bemoaning this), it is what many participants seemed to cling to, in some cases perhaps not fully aware of it.

Theme: What was the role of community in building knowledge?

An important part of creating knowledge together was finding ways to sustain some of the connectedness between participants that was an inherent aspect of the project (and especially evident at the first meeting), both between the monthly study circles and afterwards. A month can be a long time between sessions. People get caught up in their own contexts and struggles of directing/teaching in literacy programs. As co-facilitators of this specific type of project, we understood the critical role of participants' level of commitment/engagement. There was a sense of community between and among participants during that project that the co-facilitators couldn't take any credit for. For example, one participant articulated a feeling of responsibility to the group. He felt he owed it to the group to be responsible for keeping the project moving. However, after the study circle was over, he didn't feel this sense of urgency anymore.

In another sense, community meant a connection with other researchers and understanding links between theory and practice. Some participants expressed feeling that the readings helped them connect theory with their practice. As one said, "I'm realizing that there is a lot of research that is very close to what we do as teachers, very close to what I struggle with and wonder about…"

Theme: How can knowledge construction and other complexities of study circles be negotiated in 4 sessions?

Because we had only four sessions to complete this project (a contradiction of the organic flow encouraged in study circles), we felt a persistent yet invisible pressure around time management. At times we struggled with simultaneous roles as space-maker and facilitator and the contradictions they involved (Sheared, 2006, personal conversation). Did we ensure multiple voices being heard without unknowingly silencing people? Were we making spaces for voices that mainly reflected our opinions? How well did we negotiate that terrain while striving to stay true to the principles we sought to foster in this particular project? Was the momentum fed only when the group came together or was momentum being built and kept alive in programs by people who were involved? Were programs able to see their individual action research projects to their ends or did projects fizzle after the 4th session?

Theme: How can study circles support the growth of strong programs?

As a form of staff development, the format of the study circle was conducive to collective, critical, transformative thinking and concrete steps toward the sustainable growth of stronger programs. By supporting adult literacy practitioners "where they live," the study circles energized them. It deepened and detailed their knowledge of their programs. The dynamism in the group seemed to be increased many times over. From conversations with participants, we attributed this to the dual layers (study circle plus action research projects at each participant's site of practice). One participant planned to continue his project by inviting students to interview other students. He was going to use the ideas from those as codes for problem posing units in his upcoming class. Another participant planned to have her students design their own guidebook.

Theme: How well did we negotiate the "hall of mirrors" of learner centeredness?

Learner-centeredness is often given lip service in adult learning settings, yet adult literacy policies often sabotage this approach by privileging standardized tests and other

measures which maintain and perpetuate the status quo (Sparks and Peterson, 2000). Notoriously missing in this area are students' voices and realities. Participants critically reflected on whose interests and perspectives are maintained by the current political landscape.

As we acknowledged the tension of practitioners' getting to student-centeredness in a teacher-as-expert climate, we also struggled with our own simultaneous roles as space makers and facilitators and the contradictions this involved (Sheared, 2001). We experienced the counter intuitive discomfort of facilitating discussion rather than dominating it. We grappled with the future of student centeredness in a climate that doesn't acknowledge its importance let alone make space for its contradictions and complexities. We wanted teachers to experience learner-centeredness so that they could transfer it to their own practice.

As the facilitators struggled themselves with the urge to tell rather than listen to participants so participants struggled to devise ways not only to observe and listen to their students, but also let them explain their needs. For some, the process was difficult but revealing into their students' worlds. As one participant wrote under the title, What I Learned While Doing Research,

> *Though this research project now consists of one transcribed conversation, the experience has changed the way I think about teaching. I more clearly understand the need to listen closely to my students. It was also reinforced that what is often called resistance should more properly be viewed as a complex reaction to past experience and inadequate teaching. I have been forced to listen and listen again (in transcribing) to two representative students' dreams, desires, wounds and frustrations. Their patient explanations wouldn't let me forget how complex the interplay is between the past and present, inside and outside. As I listened again and again, I began to feel the urgency of their stories.*

Participants individually voiced their own internalizations of the deficit model. In a chain reaction, participants' own perspectives were broadened as they told their learners' stories.

Implications for Adult Education

This study provides an illustration of how adult educators can use research focused study circles and action research to improve/expand their practice in inclusive, organic ways. In the marginalized world of adult literacy, this study provides an example of how quality can be improved through research and group learning aimed at supporting a vision of adult education that is rooted in equity for the vulnerable populations in our society. It supports the bases of adult education which recognize prior experience, need for relevance and practical application, and the knowledge that students bring with them and the new knowledge they construct together (Horton & Friere, 1991). Most importantly, it provides an example of the uneven often uncomfortable dimensions of authentic learner-centeredness. In a system and result oriented climate that increasingly demands evidence of effectiveness, it suggests a meaningful alternative where more voices can be heard.

Study circles are a possibility for sustainable program growth. No outside expert facilitators are needed to guide/lead study circles. It is a forum that honors people's voices and builds their knowledge. Study circles that integrate action research projects offer a way to blend theory and practice in an organic relationship that can strengthen the program in meaningful ways.

Who We Are

Barbara: I have been involved with adult learning for over 20 years. I currently teach in and coordinate Fordham's University Masters Program in Adult Education and HRD.

Dianne: I am an adult literacy practitioner who has taught and conducted staff development in community based adult literacy programs for over 10 years. Now, I am an adult literacy staff developer at The Department of Youth and Community Development in NYC. I also recently completed my doctorate in adult education from National Louis University.

Eric: For the past eight years, I have taught reading, writing, math and computer skills at the Fortune Society, which helps people coming home from or facing time in the prison system.

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