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Recommended Citation

Wesley, Sherre (2006). "How Adults Learn about Multicultural Diversity through Participating in the Arts," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2006/papers/74>

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How Adults Learn about Multicultural Diversity through Participating in the Arts

Sherre Wesley

Keywords: Arts participation, multicultural diversity, learning from experience

Abstract: This paper explores the ways in which participating in the arts – through creating, attending or organizing – helps adults learn about multicultural diversity. Learning methods, environments, and key experiences are discussed.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to explore if, and in what ways, participating in small to mid-sized arts programs helps adults learn to understand and/or value multicultural diversity. This was done in order to understand how arts participation might help adults better appreciate and communicate with the multiculturally diverse people with whom they must interact in their private and public lives. By doing so, this study sheds light on if, how, and in what ways participation in the arts might be an additional tool for helping adults learn to understand and/or value multicultural diversity.

Key Terms

Arts participation is defined by the activities that are involved in the participation, rather than along aesthetic and philosophical lines (McCarthy & Jinnett, 2001). For the purposes of this study, “*art*” includes all visual, performing, literary, media, and multi-disciplinary art forms, and encompasses traditional, popular, and classical forms. Multicultural diversity is used to define a concept that recognizes that there are many different and multiple ways in which people assign meaning and value to human creations and interactions (culture), and that race and ethnicity are dimensions along which people have a shared way of making sense (Hanley, 1998; Herbst, 1997; Jacobson, 1996). According to Lawrence (2005), “Learning through art is always an experiential activity” (p.80). Learning from experience is understood to be a fluid and holistic process involving the learner in her or his totality. It incorporates thoughts, actions, and feelings, as well as unconscious dynamics; involves multiple modalities; and views learning as socially and culturally constructed (Andresen, Boud, & Cohen, 2000; Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993; Fenwick, 2001; Maltbia, 2001). Stated another way, “cultural knowledge is not learned from experience, but in experience” (Jacobson, 1996, p. 16).

Theoretical Framework

This study assumed that adults who participate in the arts learn from their experience about multicultural diversity, specifically race and ethnicity. Learning from experience theory postulates that adults holistically attend to the experience (before, during, or after the experience), through methods that are cognitive, affective, behavioral and through unconscious dynamics, and that the social context is integral to the experience. This study assumed that this process is enhanced through participation in the arts because the arts involve multiple modalities

of learning, and because diversity is made more visible – both in the artistic content, and in the participants and how they consider difference. Arts participation encourages the critique of values, looking at things as if they could be otherwise, and interacting with diverse people and cultures; enhances the holistic processing and reanalysis of experience; and leads to new insights and actions that promote the understanding and valuing of multicultural diversity. This theoretical framework is based on the work of Elias, Jones, and Normie (1995), Greene and Lincoln Center Institute (2001), Hanley (1998), Jacobson (1996), Jones (1999), Maltbia (2001), Price (1994), Schensul (1990), and Williams (2000).

Research Design

This study sought rich and situated descriptions of how adults make meaning about multicultural diversity through participating in the arts. In addition, this study was concerned with understanding of the particular context, processes, and unanticipated influences – all inquiry structures that are aligned with the qualitative approach. The following research questions were considered: (a) In what ways does participating in small to mid-sized arts programs influence how adults learn about their understanding of multicultural diversity? (b) How do adults who participate in small to mid-sized arts programs describe the value of multicultural diversity?

A 20-person, stratified, purposeful sample was selected from adults who participated in small and mid-sized arts programs in New York's Mid-Hudson Valley during 2002 and 2003. Creator, Attender, and Organizer were used to identify adults whose primary participation was, respectively, in a hands-on way, through attendance, or through organizing of the arts. Ten participants were People of Color and 10 were White. Ten participants were Creators and 10 were Attenders or Organizers. Data were collected by document analysis, critical incidents, and interviews.

Compared to the county, state, and nation, the interviewed participants were: more educated (85% had at least a Bachelor's degree); more females (70%); older (average age 54.7 years); fewer Whites (50%); more Blacks or African Americans (35%); and fewer Hispanics or Latinos (5%). The ethnic composition of the sample is somewhat determined by the goals of the purposeful sample. It should be noted that, within the USA, arts participants tend to be more educated, more females, and older than the general population (National Endowment for the Arts & Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 2003).

Analysis began during the iterative code clarification process, and included indicators from the literature and those that emerged from the data. The data were treated as two samples: Creators and Attenders/Organizers. Within-sample and across-sample analyses were done.

Findings and Conclusions

This study considered the following three aspects of how participants learned about multicultural diversity through participating in the arts: (a) learning methods, (b) environments, and (c) key experiences. While these aspects are separated for the purposes of analysis, they were intertwined in the participants' experiences and how they learned about multicultural diversity. For example, the Creators used the arts as source material for cognitive methods, such as when Eugene noted people, "discuss the theater, the shows they saw." Creators also had key experiences that were situated in artistic contexts, such as when Laura "noticed that I was the only Black person in the huge theater." Joyce, an Attender, engaged in affective learning at an exhibition that was "like walking through someone having a mental breakdown."

Learning Methods

Nine learning methods were identified: Affective; Artistic; Behavioral; Bodily, Tactile, Sensory; Cognitive; Self-directed; Stories; Through this Study; and Unconscious Dynamics. The average number of learning methods used by Creators was 5.8 of the 9 (64%) learning methods cited, and the average number used by Attenders/Organizers was 3.3 of the 9 (37%) learning methods cited. All participants used more than one method.

What was termed the artistic method emerged during the study, and was the most used method for both samples. Jacobson (1996) advances the idea that “learning a new culture means coming to share in others’ ways of making sense without the benefit of having shared in their histories” (p. 16), and the findings from this study suggest that the artistic learning method provided a way for participants to share aspects of other people’s ways of making sense.

The first aspect of the artistic method, assuming another person’s persona, including her or his multicultural background, was part of how participants “tried on” other cultures to create a character, role or visual image. This aspect was not behaving as if someone else, but rather was a deeper and more inclusive association with a person from a different multicultural background. It involved trying on another person’s language, movement, bodily carriage, history, and way of interacting. Laura summarized this aspect of the artistic method when she commented in the theater, “You get the chance to even more sort of be in the skin – in the persona – of someone ... from another ethnicity.”

Learning through artistic methods also involved using the arts as a lens through which to see. Through the arts, Deborah was “taught to watch people,” and found that “drama gives you a chance to see how people generally behave throughout the history of mankind.” Raphael used his perspective as a painter in processing how he saw his world. When he taught young people about pigmentation and skin color, he continually asked, “What’s underneath?” He continued,

We go farther and we dissect this person. I say, “What’s underneath? What’s underneath your skin?” And they say “Blood and muscles.” “What color are they?” So we go inside to research the skin, this person.

Using arts as a strategy

The third aspect of the artistic method, included incorporating messages about multicultural diversity within artistic products or experiences. For example, Kimberly consciously used the arts to increase the multicultural diversity in her life by attending an African drumming workshop, and Michael spoke of arts participation as a strategy that “gets people to talk and appreciate and learn and understand others.”

This study identified artistic learning methods as particularly rich ways to learn about multicultural diversity, but there were numerous examples of how arts participation influenced other methods of learning. For example, an exhibition became the impetus for discussion, a dance was composed using unconscious dynamics, and the content of a play led to affective learning. Laura provided an example that combined artistic content and technique with long-standing adult learning methods. She “wrote this play that had no ending,” and the audience was “to break out into groups and discuss how they thought the play should end.”

The artistic method extends the awareness of the ways in which adults experience, and learn from experience. It was found to involve deep and repeated engagement with a topic, and often was done from the perspective of another person, or from a different “eye” or lens of the participant’s own perspective. It made use of affect, intuition, empathy and imagination. In their work on presentational knowing, Yorks and Kasl (2002) state that when developing “empathic knowing amid diversity,” one of the challenges is “to find ways of entering the whole-person

knowing of others” (pp. 185-186). This researcher argues that the artistic method is one route for entering a “whole-person knowing” of a person from another multiculturally diverse background.

In sum, the findings and analysis of learning methods led to conclusion 1: Arts participation is a method for facilitating adult learning about multicultural diversity. Arts provided an integrative approach to learning about multicultural diversity that was its own learning method, as well as the provider of source material and springboard for learning through other methods. Participating in the arts expanded the repertoire of learning methods for people in this study.

Environment

Art was important as a learning method, and art also was important in creating and defining the environment in which the participants learned. The learning environment included both contexts and the people in them.

Artistic contexts, for these participants from small and mid-sized arts programs, were places where diverse people gathered. When asked to compare the diversity of the people with whom they interacted at work, while socializing, in their community, and through the arts, 8 of the 10 (80%) Creators indicated that the arts arena was the most diverse, or tied for the most diverse, arena. The arts arena was the most diverse, or tied for the most diverse, for 9 of the 10 (90%) Attenders/Organizers. Michael, for example, commented that his arts arena tended to be, More racially diverse and culturally diverse because it was the one place where people could reach out and extend themselves beyond their own culture – beyond their own racial background – and could enjoy music and art and poetry from a variety of sources.

Price (1994) found that “the tendency of the arts to accept and benefit from the cross fertilization of cultures has been one of the reasons why so many historically marginalized people have considered arts organizations as havens” (pp. xvii-xviii). That appeared to be the case with the participants in this study.

In sum, the findings and analysis about the environment for learning led to conclusion 2: Through participating in the arts, the participants were placed in learning environments with greater diversity of people than in their work, social or community arenas. The arts environments also were places where differences were visible.

Key Experiences

The final aspect of how the participants learned from experience is drawn from their *key experiences*. Key experiences were personal and individualized, yet showed that the majority of Creators learned from negative experiences such as those involving stereotyping and discrimination. Four of the 5 (80%) Creators of Color reported negative key learning experiences. Eugene and Althea provided examples of discrimination in casting and in housing while on tour, and Laura discussed a key experience that happened to her while in a theater in London. Laura recalled:

And the woman next to me, and it’s all coming back to me now, [ironic chuckle] that’s when I realized I was the only Black person in the audience. The person sitting next to me, who happened to be a White American woman, slapped my hand. OK? Slapped my hand! ... I was so upset about that because it did come across to me as a Black and White thing. And it so took me out of enjoying the experience in the theater, even though they were all White actors and I was the only Black person in the audience.

All 5 (100%) of the White Creators reported negative key experiences. Roger was denied the opportunity to apply for specific illustration jobs because he is not a “person of color,” and Theresa provided the following example from an exchange about casting:

We couldn't find a Black person to play in *The Crucible*, to play Tituba. So, I said, “Why don't I play Tituba? ... Why can't I get real expensive make up? Why can't I do that?” “Well, 'cause Whites can't play Blacks. It's unacceptable.” “Well why? That's ridiculous. Blacks can play Whites!”

While the Creators had a number of experiences with stereotyping or discrimination in the arts, this was not the case with the Attenders/Organizers, whose key experiences tended to be expressed in value-neutral terms. However, the Creators' perception of their key experiences, and the way they made sense of them, were not necessarily negative.

Jones (1995) indicated that our perception depends on our cultural environment, and it appeared that the specific cultural environment created by arts participation was a place where participants used these negative events as opportunities for learning. Being a Creator exposed participants to negative key experiences from which they learned about multicultural diversity. They continued to participate despite these experiences. Perhaps it was because, as Theresa said, they also experienced the “higher ideal” and unifying aspects of the arts.

Key experiences, along with other aspects of the study, led to Conclusion 3: Among these arts participants, multicultural diversity was dynamic in its meaning and in their experiences. Racism, prejudice, and discrimination were parts of the arts participation experiences, and part of how and what Creators, in particular, learned.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

The findings and conclusions of this study suggest that adult education further explore the arts as a way to assist learners – including those who attend or organize the arts as well as those who create the arts – in learning about multicultural diversity. Greater use of the arts would expand an adult educator's repertoire for assisting learners, and, as Lawrence (2005) notes, “arts are an ideal complement to the rational discourse that dominates most of academe” (p.8).

In this study, an artistic method was identified which incorporated aspects of other learning methods, but which was distinct for these participants. The findings and conclusions of this study also suggest that adult education practice might be enhanced if adult educators further explored and expanded the use of the arts as triggers for learning through other methods. For the adults in this study, the arts became the source material and springboard for learning when, for example, drama became the impetus for discussion, attending an arts workshop triggered personal reflection, or visiting a gallery resulted in affective learning. As a result of the need to create a play, poem, or painting, participants engaged in self-directed learning and research.

The researcher recommends that adult educators leverage the diversity that is visible through the arts, and use the arts as an opportunity to promote the value of difference. Adult educators could place themselves in arts environments, thereby expanding the experiences from which they can draw as educators, and through which they can connect with learners from multiculturally diverse backgrounds.

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