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Towards a Theory of Collaborative Learning at Adult Learning Events: A Grounded Study

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Abstract: This roundtable focuses on the work-in-progress of building grounded theory. Specifically, the researchers will describe the context, the research project, and the iterative, collaborative theory building developments that have been in process over the past 27 months. Critique is sought from a variety of perspectives, including feminist, critical race, and other theories.

In 2003, a group of North Carolina State University researchers, led by Dr. Colleen Aalsburg Wiessner, began a project to examine adult learning at conferences. The primary purpose of the study was to identify when, where, and how learning occurs when adults gather together at a learning event. The principle frame of the study is feminist theory, which exposes silent voices and hegemonic practices. The secondary purpose of the study was to create a theory of learning in this context (e.g., adult learning events). To date, the study has generated five peer-reviewed articles (three in review, one in press), eight conference proceedings, seven scholarly presentations, and one non-reviewed publication. Data has been gathered in fourteen different contexts and findings have been presented to each of those constituencies.

Despite the millions of dollars spent each year on professional conferences, concern has been raised about actual learning taking place at these events. Jacobs and McFarlane (2005) suggested that conferences are primarily for “presenting, evaluating, and discussing disciplinary and methodological developments as a reflective community of practice; ensuring that, as a whole, research and/or professional practice progresses both substantially and methodologically” (p. 319). However, the potential to create situations where participants consciously generate new learning and seek out and *create* knowledge is not being realized by the majority of conference planners, attendees or evaluators. Graham and Kormanik (2004) criticized this lack of focus on learning by reporting that too often conferences rely on one-way communication with little time spent on discussion or on ways to use information in future theory, research, and practice.

New Learning: Findings to Date

Our findings to date suggest that collaborative learning at adult learning events is a critical component of furthering communities of practice across geographic regions, transferring knowledge between groups, and advancing professional practice. Further, collaborative learning practices surface diverse voices—a central value of the study. This ongoing study fills the gap in the literature as well as provides conference planners and organizations with research-based evidence on generating the maximum amount of learning in this context.

The following are specific examples of learning outcomes. The New Learning study for the Educause Learning Initiative resulted in structuring learning circles to foster knowledge construction, creating new spaces and times for informal learning, changing discussion group structure and style, and moving learning throughout the organization. The National Community College Hispanic Council discovered which learning activities led to participants in their leadership development program becoming able to envision themselves as future community college presidents. Cross-study analysis led to an emerging taxonomy of adult learning events, to

identification of previously unrecognized adult educator roles that foster learning in conferences and to development of multiple modes for reflection in conference contexts.

Development Process Update: The Story of the Emergence of Grounded Theory

The amount of data being collected is, unsurprisingly, huge. This fall (2006) we have begun the theory building process generated from that data. Due to the nature of the phenomenon under investigation, combined with the iterative process of implementing, analyzing, and revising, we determined that grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) is the most appropriate theory building method to craft a theory of adult learning in this context. Grounded theory involves constant comparison between data; our study compares the data gathered from the fourteen contexts described above. The comparison illuminates both what is common, and what may be silent or invisible. The process is iterative, and the literature searches are a function of the emergent themes.

The method of inquiry uses constant comparative and theoretical sampling practices. Glaser & Strauss (1967) introduced grounded theory as a strategy for qualitative research as a response to the “extreme positivism” (Suddaby, 2006, p. 1) in order to counter “the dominant view that quantitative studies provide the only form of systematic social scientific inquiry,” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 509). To begin building a theory of learning at adult learning events, two research questions were posed and answered a) what are the critical components of learning at events? And b) what are the relationships between the components? As described by Charmaz (2000), “grounded theory methods consist of systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analyzing data to build middle-range theoretical frameworks that explain the collected data,” (p. 509). Key words in this definition are *systematic* and *analysis*. There is a particular system of collecting data in grounded theory—this is called theoretical sampling. Also, there is a particular form of analyses—this is called comparative analysis. Glaser & Strauss (1967) introduced theoretical sampling and comparative analysis in order to enhance the credibility and relevance of new theories. They suggested that the criteria for judging a theory “be based...on the detailed elements of the actual strategies used for collecting, coding, analyzing and presenting data, and on the way people read the theory,” (p. 224). Consequently, in grounded theory the method begins with the idea of generating a theory and ends when the provisional theory is written up in a manuscript, and the theory is judged on the level of detail and ‘in vivo’ (real life) descriptions of the phenomenon.

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