Community-Based Multicultural Immersion Programming: An Adult Learning Context

Chaunda L. Scott
Oakland University, USA

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Abstract: *This study gives voice to the learning experiences of 21 adult learners who participated in a community-based multicultural immersion program in an urban Midwestern city plagued by racial tension. Key perspectives of their learning experiences were drawn from the factors that promoted multicultural immersion learning, its uses and its value.*

Introduction: Racial Tension in a Midwestern City

In 1990, this city had 777,000 African American residents, more than any other city except New York and Chicago (O'Hara & Frey, 1992). At the time of this writing, it has the largest population of African Americans and Arab Americans of any major American city and is the most residentially segregated city in the nation (Farley & Frey, 1994).

In the mid-1950s, the population of this city was approximately 2.5 million residents. By 1990, the city's population had declined to fewer than one million, whereas the population of surrounding suburbs had increased to three million because whites had moved from the city to the suburbs during the 1960s and 1970s (Farley & Frey, 1994). White flight to the suburbs transformed the racial composition of this city from 20% African American in the mid-1950s to more than 75% African American and 20% Arab American in 1990. The remaining 5% are Hispanics, American Chaldeans, Asian Americans, and Caucasians (Russakoff, 1994). As a consequence, Chafets (1990) described this city as "an impoverished island surrounded by prosperous suburbs" (p. 19).

In Myrdal's (1994), trail blazing study entitled, An American Dilemma, he judged this city to have had the poorest racial relations than other midwestern cities, because of the strength of the Ku Klux Klan in the city and its large southern-born population. Myrdal based his assessment on the city's long history of racial tension (as evidenced in race riots, cross burnings, church burnings, employment discrimination, and housing discrimination) and, more recently, racial profiling, racially motivated shootings, and neighborhood violence between persons of different races. Nonetheless, the history of race relations in this city is only a slightly worse version of patterns throughout the nation (Russakoff, 1994).

According to O'Hare and Frey (1992), like most other large cities at the beginning of the 21st century, this city had areas that were made up of poor minority groups, surrounded by suburbs composed mostly of higher-income Caucasians. These patterns of residential segregation and racial tension, which are products of the 20th century, have continued to this day and complicate life in this community as it relates to race relations and closing the racial divide. These historical and contemporary issues also created a need for this urban city to identify some strategies to address and resolve these problems.

The Research Problem

The problem addressed in this study is that little is known about what factors promote learning in community-based multicultural immersion programs along with the uses and the value of this learning in the U.S. from the perspective of adult learners. This lack of knowledge limits the ability of community-based multicultural educators and adult educators working in

similar fields in determining what adults have learned in these kinds of programs along with what kinds of skills they take away. Moreover, it limits adult educators' ability to determine whether they are designing and facilitating multicultural programs that produce multicultural leaders and educators. Without a clear understanding of what has promoted learning in community-based multicultural programs from the perspective of adult learners, our current multicultural education practices may be failing to introduce the kind of information adult learners need in order to understand the complex nature of race and ethnicity in America, democratic values, and multicultural awareness, knowledge, understanding, and sensitivity. Therefore, a main purpose of this study was to help community-based multicultural program designers, facilitators, and adult educators working in the areas related to community-based multicultural education proceed from a more informed perspective when developing such programs of this kind for adult learners.

Theoretical Framework

To assist me in understanding and analyzing the adult learners perspective of their learning experiences in the MIP through a theoretical lens, I drew on the work of two distinguished adult education authors, who focused on (a) learning from experience through reflective processes and attending to feelings (Boud & Walker, 1993), (b) leaning from experience related to polyrhythmic realities, the intersection of one's race, gender, class, language, and other cultural factors in the learning environment (Sheared, 1999, Learning From *Experience Through Reflective Processes and Attending to Feelings*

Boud and Walker (1993) offered a means of analyzing an experience that is relevant to any type of learning experience, including that of adults participating in a community-based MIP. As part of their research, Boud and Walker analyzed a specific shared experience to understand how action and reflection interact. In their model, Boud and Walker illustrate how learning from experience occurs in nonlinear stages of preparation (the use of strategies and skills focused on promoting learning in the learning environment), experience (using experience as a foundation to stimulate reflection in action), and reevaluation (reflection, integration of experiences, validation of experiences, and appropriation or, in other words, owning experiences). A key component that distinguishes their model from similar work by Kolb (1984) and Cell (1984) is the inclusion of attending to feelings, which enhances or limits one's opportunity for learning.
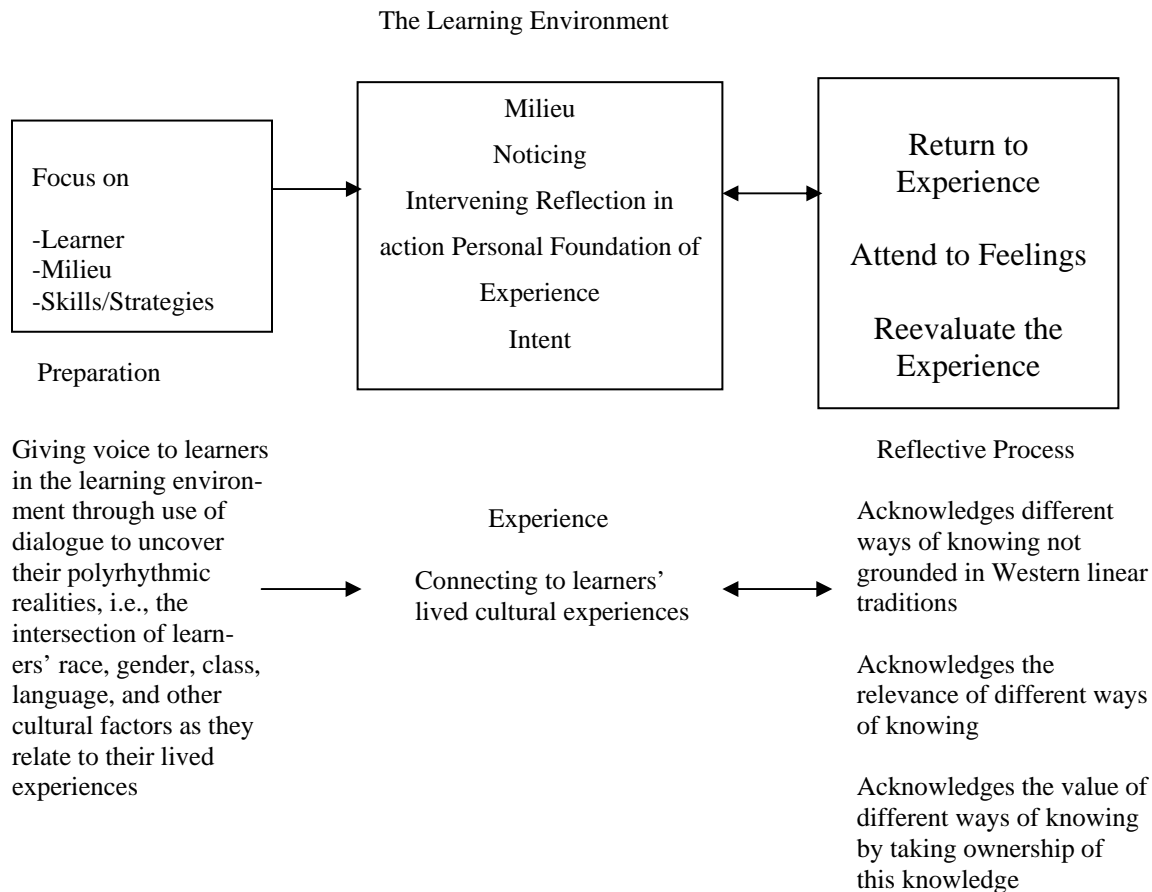
Learning From Polyrhythmic Realities

Sheared's (1999) polyrhythmic realities model of learning from experience highlights the intersection of the learner's race, gender, class, language, and other cultural factors (i.e., history, sexual orientation, and religion) in the learning environment as they relate to the learner's lived cultural experiences. The concept of polyrhythmic realities is relevant to the process of giving voice to cultural factors in a multicultural learning environment. It is "an alternative way to address the effects of race, class, gender, language, and other cultural factors in a classroom environment" (p. 40). The polyrhythmic-realities framework also acknowledges a different way of knowing that is not grounded in the Western linear tradition.

Sheared's (1999) viewpoint was used in this study to connect the concepts of giving voice to polyrhythmic realities as they related to adult learners' lived cultural experiences and learning from reflection. A relationship was established between Boud and Walker's (1993) three-stage model and Sheared's concept of polyrhythmic realities. Sheared focused mainly on giving voice to learners' lived experiences in the learning environment as they intersect with race, gender, class, language, and other cultural factors. These concepts were inserted into Boud

and Walker's model (depicted in Figure 1) and were used to translate the process of giving voice to polyrhythmic realities in the learning environment into a process that draws upon reflection in terms of thinking and action. The resulting new model is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Boud and Walker's (1993) Model of Reflection Processes in Learning from Experience Related to Sheared's (1999) Model of Polyrhythmic Realities

The Learning Environment

| | Milieu Noticing Intervening Reflection in action Personal Foundation of Experience Intent | Return to Experience Attend to Feelings Reevaluate the Experience |

Focus on
-Learner
-Milieu
-Skills/Strategies

Preparation

Giving voice to learners in the learning environment through use of dialogue to uncover their polyrhythmic realities, i.e., the intersection of learners' race, gender, class, language, and other cultural factors as they relate to their lived experiences

Experience

Connecting to learners' lived cultural experiences

Reflective Process

Acknowledges different ways of knowing not grounded in Western linear traditions

Acknowledges the relevance of different ways of knowing

Acknowledges the value of different ways of knowing by taking ownership of this knowledge

Source: Author's adaptation of concepts in D. Boud & D. Walker, "Barriers to Reflection on Learning" Using Experience for Learning," Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1993, pp. 77; and V. Sheared, "Giving Voice: Inclusion of African American Students' Polyrhythmic Realities in Adult Basic Education," New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, Summer 1999, No. 82, pp. 33-48.

The work of Boud and Walker's (1993) and Sheared's (1999) provided the framework for this study in the context of giving voice to multicultural ways of knowing and being. The framework was useful to this study because it provided a perception of how learning takes place through reflection when giving voice to lived cultural experiences in the learning environment.

Research Questions
The study sought to highlight not only what the adult learners identified as the factors that promoted learning in the MIP, but also how this learning can be used and the value attached to this learning personally, in the workplace and in society. The following research questions were posed to guide the collection of data: (1) What factors were perceived to promote

community-based MIP? (2) In what ways can community-based MIP learning be used in the workplace and society? (3) What is the personal value of community-based MIP learning?

Research Methodology and Limitations of the Study

A qualitative interpretive case study research design was employed to explore the factors that promoted learning in a Midwestern community-based MIP and the uses and value of this learning from the perspective of 21 diverse adult learners. The primary rationale for employing a qualitative, interpretive case study design was linked directly to the core research questions listed earlier. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) stated that "qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive naturalistic approach to its subject matter" (p. 3). This means that qualitative researchers study phenomena in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

I selected a unique community-based, social-action-focused MIP in a Midwestern city for the research site because I have an interest in these type of programs and I thought it was an ideal site to examine adult learning, community-based education, multicultural immersion education, and uses of this learning in communities, workplaces and society simultaneously. The MIP was developed in 1996 by members of the New City Coalition to address the racial tension this Midwestern city has often experienced since the mid 1960's. The goal of this community-based MIP is to develop a network of multicultural leaders and educators who will be prepared to facilitate on-going dialogue and cross-cultural collaborations aimed at closing the racial divide in this community and the larger society (MIP Official Records, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002).

People who apply and are accepted to participate in this free 7-month program represent various racial, ethic, and cultural communities throughout the Midwest and a cross-section of nonprofit organizations, businesses, government agencies, educational institutions, civic groups, and health services. The MIP uses guest lecturers, books, role-play, art, games, music, and food, along with personal sharing, which both the program instructors and learners use to teach the program's content. The program's content consists of a multicultural ideology, the history of racism and ethnicity in America, democratic values in America, and concepts of multicultural awareness, knowledge, understanding, and sensitivity (MIP Official Records, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002).

The study's population sample was comprised of 455 people who had participated in the MIP over a 7-year period, 1996 through 2002. Out of the population sample, I selected the 21 culturally diverse individuals who participated in this program from the MIP's master list who had taken part in the program from 1996 through 2002. To gain an understanding of what these 21 adults had learned from the MIP, I then selected three participants from each of those years based on their race and ethnicity, type of work setting (i.e., corporate, nonprofit, educational, government, or other), and availability to take part in the study to make up the sample of 21 participants.

Data were gathered through a demographic questionnaire, in-depth interviews, and official records from the MIP. Member checks and follow-up telephone interviews were also used to increase trustworthiness of this inquiry (Merrriam, 1998). The literature review helped in the initial phase of analysis. Using concepts from the readings, I constructed a matrix that helped me organize the data. The data-collection materials for each participant were assigned the same numerical code. This procedure helped to keep the data organized, while ensuring participants' anonymity. By using more than one source of data, I was able to look for consistencies and

inconsistencies in participants' responses. Triangulation of the data also helped to ensure the validity and reliability of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

To begin the analysis process, I tabulated and compiled the questionnaire responses. This information allowed for a view of interview responses by participants' race/ethnicity, gender, age, educational level, occupation, work setting, and years of work experience. Next, I coded the interview transcripts for common themes and patterns, connections, and any discrepancies between interview and questionnaire responses. The responses initially were placed into six categories derived from Boud and Walker's (1993) work on reflective processes and Sheared's (1999) work on polyrhythmic realities. This helped me organize and make sense of the data that had been collected.

To establish inter-rater reliability (Merriam, 1998) after preliminary coding and categorizing of the data, I discussed these categories with my colleagues in the field of multicultural education and human resource development, and then compared them to the concepts found in the literature. Last, I examined the various emergent categories and themes in order to synthesize the data and make meaning of it.

Limitations of the study

There were also certain limitations due to the scope of the study and the use of qualitative research methodology. For example, these limitations included the following:

- The study sample was drawn from a volunteer population
- The study lacked a longitudinal perspective
- The constraints of using qualitative instruments such as questionnaires, interviews and follow-up interviews to achieve objectivity and subjective interpretations
- The researcher's bias, as it related to her being committed to promoting racial and cultural awareness for 12 years in her community, workplace and society
- The sample size was small and limited in terms of representing different geographic areas and the many diverse cultures and ethnicities in today's society and
- The findings were not generalizable to the universe of diverse adult learners participating in similar MIPs in the U.S.

In recognizing these limitations and biases, I made every effort to ensure that I represented the ideas and perceptions of the participants accurately by remaining aware of the above limitations and biases when I analyzed interpreted and reported the findings.

Findings

The study's findings revealed that the MIP content increased all of the study participants understanding of multiculturalism, racism and oppression. The content on democracy however, only confirmed what he already knew about democracy. In the MIP learning environment, the adult learners stated that they learned from rules to guide learning (ground rules) and from reflecting on and giving voice to their lived experiences with cultural diversity and their intersecting polyrhythmic realities (Sheared, 1999), their race, gender, class, language and other cultural factors. They also learned from meeting and talking with people from diverse cultures, visiting cultural sites, eating and making cultural foods, doing cultural dances, and making cultural crafts. Moreover, several of the adult learners were able to use what they learned from the MIP to create multicultural awareness programs at their church, and places of employment, i.e., a museum, a university, a middle school, a community center for boys between the ages of 8-16, and a community program for teenage girls between the ages 13 to 17. Lastly, all 21 adult learners shared that having the opportunity to personally share their way of knowing and being

with others who were culturally different from them, allowed them to better understand, respect and value the lived cultural experiences of all the diverse cultures living in this urban Midwestern city and the larger global society.

Implications for Future Research and Practice in Adult Education

As the researcher, I hope that the findings presented can make a positive contribution to adult educators and practitioner's working in the areas of multicultural education who wish to further explore the usefulness and personal value of community-based MIP learning from the learners' perspective as well as integrate concepts as rules to guide learning, hands on experience with multiculturalism and giving voice to polyrhythmic realties (Sheared, 1999) into their current practices. Lastly, I believe that this study adds to the literature in adult education by expanding our understanding of reflective processes (Boud and Walker, 1993), and polyrhythmic realities (Sheared, 1999), in that these theoretical frameworks were used as multicultural lenses to examine and make meaning of the learning experiences of 21 diverse adult learners who had participated in an urban community-based MIP. This is significant in this study because it breaks *new multicultural education ground* in both of the aforementioned adult education theoretical frameworks.

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