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Persistent Challenges in Cross Cultural Quantitative Research: Measuring Classroom Dynamics in Adult Learning in Ireland and the USA

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The Problem To Be Solved

This research roundtable will explore some of the conceptual and methodological considerations that underpin high-quality cross-cultural quantitative research. The core problem to be addressed can be best exemplified by real-world vignettes drawn from our own experiences:

- A researcher employs a questionnaire developed and validated in the USA survey to gather comparative data in England.
- A professor in an English-speaking developing nation employs an American test to measure the literacy ability of adult learners.
- An American professor translates a Russian psychological measure into English in order to assess adults' self-esteem.

In all three of the cases, researchers are intentionally or unintentionally ignoring what we have learned about cultural psychology and Foucauldian analysis in recent years. Each culture embeds its values, assumptions, and power struggles into its socially constructed languages, and research instruments inevitably reflect those constructions. To unreflectively use a questionnaire or test developed in one culture in a different culture is to view the latter through the social lenses of the former.

The Basis for Examining the Problem

We have undertaken a five-year collaboration to understand key differences and similarities in adult education in the two countries. Because the planned studies are to involve large numbers of geographically-dispersed learners, the study will employ questionnaires to collect learners' perceptions of classroom dynamics and other key variables.

As a first step, we have begun a systematic attempt to develop research instruments that take into account important cultural differences. We propose a three-step model to achieve this:

Step 1. Interrogation of Key Constructs. We cannot assume that the constructs expressive of classroom dynamics are universal. Consequently, the cross-cultural research team must share readings from a variety of cultural perspectives and identify the constructs that have equivalent meanings in both cultures.

Step 2. Identification of Common Language for Expressing the Constructs. Despite the significant reclamation of the Gaelic language, for the majority of adult learners in Ireland, English is the first language. In the USA, despite the growing and significant population of people who speak a "minority" language, the same is true. However, there are substantial cultural differences with respect to how that language is used.

Researchers in the two countries must work together to discover a common language that minimizes discrepant connotations and ambiguities. In order to accomplish this, it is essential that critique sessions be held with learners and educators on both sides of the Atlantic.

Step 3. Conducting of Equivalent Pilot Studies. In order to ensure that the psychometric quality of the instrument is comparable for learners in both cultures, pilot

studies must be conducted in both settings. Reliability, observed variance, and evidence of validity problems must also be simultaneously considered.

Other issues to be discussed during the roundtable include sampling issues and drawing meaningful conclusions from comparable data.

Implications for Adult Education

Although these issues represent an immediate problem for our current research, we believe that these same issues confront many of our international colleagues. We are eager to discuss the problems and our proposed solutions with other thoughtful adult education researchers.