Indigenous Learning: Weaving the Fabric of Our Histories for Success

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Abstract: Six public housing community leaders were interviewed for this study. Four themes for recognizing indigenous learning were identified. Themes explained leadership style, validation of and motivation for leadership, and personal impact. The findings give rise to considerations of how adult educators can identify and begin to understand indigenous learning systems.

Introduction

Typically, nonformal adult learning is "less structured, more flexible, and more responsive to localized needs. It also is expressly concerned with social inequities and often seeks to raise the consciousness of participants towards social action" (Merriam and Brockett (1997, pp. 169-170). Indigenous learning is an important form of nonformal adult learning yet it is often ignored and viewed as inferior, especially in light of formal learning (Brennan, 1997; Cajete, 1994; Ocitti, 1990; Kidd & Colletta 1980). It refers to processes and structures people within particular cultures use to learn about their culture throughout their history (Brennan, 1997). Each community has inspirational faces in their neighborhood, community leaders constantly working on behalf of and/or pulling and pushing those forgotten faces at the bottom of the social ladder, reminding them of an ever-present world of work, opportunity and success; a world that is better for them if they push forward to succeed. They are the focus of this study. What drives them to continue to help and how did they develop successful learning opportunities in their communities? Finally, what impact does it have on their lives?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based in the literature of indigenous forms of learning (Brennan, 1997, 1990; Cajete, 1994; Ocitti, 1990), guided by the research of Brennan (1997) using the first stage of his process for recognizing indigenous learning as an essential part of the nonformal system of learning for adults: the recognition of single approaches/techniques or a group of activities that may be relevant to educational or developmental activities. Examples of these educational activities are observation, demonstration, question and answer, hands-on experiential learning or learning by doing, trial and error and reflection.

Methodology

The paper presents preliminary findings of a qualitative study that followed a biographical research design (Chamberlayne, A.O., 2000). This methodology was chosen because biographies can discover issues which otherwise are difficult to find: such as informal and non-formal learning processes.

Research Questions:
1. How do you help others to develop in your community?
2. How did you become effective (as validated by the community) in helping others?
3. What is your purpose/reason for wanting to help the people in your community?
4. How has your involvement in the community changed your life?

Data collection: Primary data was be acquired through in-depth interviews done with 6 women between ages 34-75, who are seen as inspirational within their communities and beyond the boundaries thereof. Semi-structured interview guides and field notes were be the methods used to collect the data. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of respondents. Interviews were conducted between August 2003 and February 2004. Selected women will reside in six different urban public housing communities throughout the southeastern part of the United States.

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Data analysis: Interviews (biographical sketches) and field notes are the units of analysis. Interviews will be taped and transcribed and findings told through the stories of these 6 women. The transcripts will be analyzed inductively to seek patterns and themes based on the data (Patton 1990; Manning 1997). Descriptive field notes will be kept to describe the data found through meetings, observations in the communities and informal conversations to help form a comprehensive account of what was observed (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

Findings

Using a semi-structure interview, six community leaders identified by housing authority personnel were interviewed for this study. All participants of this study were female. The age of participants ranged from 29 to 84 with an average age of 50. Study participants lived in public housing most of their lives, ranging from 5 to 20 years with an average of 20 years. A detailed analysis of interviewer's notes enabled the researcher to organize data into 35 chunks of information. Table 1 reflects the thematic analysis of data, which reduced information to four categories of themes each with 2 or 3 sub-themes. The thematic analysis is discussed below.

Four themes were identified as single processes relevant to educational and developmental endeavors as suggested by stage one of Brennan's (1997) 4-stage process. Brennan's model recognizes indigenous learning as an essential part of the nonformal system of learning for adults. As illustrated in Table 1 they are (1) helping others to develop; (2) community validation of community leaders; (3) motivation for helping others; and (4) impact of community leadership on life. The four thematic analysis were identified as processes because they represent the way indigenous learning is understood in these communities -- through community leadership. Factors contributing to these findings are discussed below:

Theme 1: Helping others to develop
This theme examined ways in which community leaders helped others to develop. Sub-themes emanating from this theme consisted of (1) modeling exemplary leadership; (2) practicing what you preach (service), and (3) communicating with diverse groups. Spirituality was another factor contributing to Theme 1. All of the leaders were actively involved in a church, often times holding leadership positions. Study participants also engaged church members and others in helping to resolve community problems such as feeding and clothing needy families, and providing services to meet these needs. Interviewees discussed the use of prayer to help those addicted to drugs or struggling to raise a family with minimal resources and often took residents to church with them.

The next page contains Table 1: Indigenous Learning Themes and Sub-themes.

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THEMES	SUB-THEMES	FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THEME DEVELOPMENT

Helping others to develop	1. Modeling exemplary leadership	▪ Organizations within neighborhood (public housing Resident Advisory Board)
		▪ Organizations outside neighborhood (board members for non-profit groups, active in church)
		▪ Spirituality
		▪ Exemplary leadership characteristics
		  - work beyond the call of duty
		  - willing to take an unpopular position on issues
		  - demonstrate upward mobility (ex. offer jobs and also housing in safer communities)

	2. Practicing what you preach (service)	▪ Advocating for services ▪ Brokering services ▪ Providing services to help others
	3. Communicating with others from all walks of life	▪ Build relationships with stakeholders across the continuum to solve community problems (ex. police officers, drug dealers, addicts, parents, youth, housing authority staff, policy makers)
Community validation of community leaders	1. Intangible validation	▪ Credibility earned through trust, respect, and evidence of work
	2. Tangible validation	▪ Gifts and random acts of kindness from groups/individuals inside and outside of the community

Motivation for helping others	1. Community motivated	▪ Concerned about:
		  - Community safety
		  - Apathetic residents
		  - Outside groups taking advantage of residents

	2. Personally motivated	▪ Traveling to meetings and conferences ▪ Job offerings resulting from their work
	3. Spiritually motivated	▪ On a mission for God
Impact of Community Leadership on Life	1. Negative impact on life	▪ Burnout and depression as a result of family and community work
	2. Positive impact on life	▪ Learned how the system works and that people can make a difference ▪ Enhanced self-esteem

All interviewees were involved with organizations inside and outside of the neighborhood serving the community. Three qualities noted as exemplary leadership characteristics were commitment to work beyond the call of duty, willing to take a stand, and upward mobility. In all instances study participants voluntarily worked in the community. Even when funds were available, the salaries or stipends were minimal. Interviewees also spent countless hours mentoring or facilitating leadership in their communities, working to get parents involved in neighborhood and school issues. In addition, willingness to take a stand emerged as leadership characteristic associated with helping others to develop. Leaders often spoke about taking unpopular stands, sometimes having to stand either with the community or with the housing authority. Leadership characteristics also included upward mobility. Job offerings, eligibility for public housing units in safer communities, and home purchases illustrated hard work has its rewards.

The sub-theme "practising what you preach" reflects services actually rendered to the community by study participants. An analysis of data revealed that community leaders study played a key role in advocating, brokering, and providing services to help others. Study participants reported advocating for residents in five domains; neighborhood (i.e., eviction notices, over charged for rent), school (i.e., student suspensions, academic performance), family (i.e., supplying survival needs), and the justice system (i.e., identifying lawyers to help with youth and adult court cases). Leaders were also instrumental in brokering beneficial services to the residents, which included GED classes, health education, literacy, tutoring, and babysitting. Lastly, study participants provided an array of services to the community, some of which included homework assistance, working with law enforcement and other agencies to reduce drug trafficking, conducting fundraising events, and feeding and clothing needy persons. Study participants also demonstrated the importance of the extended family by raising grandchildren when their own children became addicted to drugs. In some instances leaders extended this care to children who were not a part of their biological families.

Another sub-theme, communicating with others from all walks of life, reflects participants' ability to build relationships with persons both inside and outside the community in order to resolve community problems and enhance community conditions. In this regard, participants demonstrated an uncanny ability to build relationships with police officers on one hand and to conduct open and productive dialogue with factions of the drug dealing community on the other hand. Community leaders demonstrated courage in being able to have dialogue with highly educated persons (i.e., elected officials, researchers, and administrators of programs) as well as residents responsible for many of the negative elements of the community such as drug dealers, crack addicts, and other convicted criminals.

Theme 2: Community validation of community leaders

The two sub-themes that emanated out of the theme community validation of community leaders who help others to develop were (1) credibility earned through trust, respect, and evidence of work and (2) gifts and random acts of kindness from the community and outside organizations. The evidence that community leaders provided meaningful services was intangible. Trust was expressed through youth and other residents confiding confidential information to leaders, Respect was expressed through drug dealers moving their business off corners near or around community leaders dwelling or events and evidence of work—the importance of winning battles -fought on behalf of residents—was expressed by community leaders. Tangible validation of community leaders' ability to help others was expressed through gifts from persons within and outside of the community. One interviewee indicated that after

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becoming ill, she was showered with financial assistance as well as food and other survival needs from persons within and outside of the community. This response to leaders by the community was common. Concerned residents also protected services and programs sponsored by community leaders from negative elements of the community (ex. discouraging drug dealing where services were being provided). Significant tangible validation of leader's ability to help others was also given in the form of building space from local organizations and access to services such as food donations and informational programs to community leaders for community activities. Such actions further demonstrate appreciation for the work of community leaders.

Theme 3:Motivation for Helping Others

Community leaders indicated that they were motivated by number of reasons for helping others in their community. One of the sub-themes emerging from this theme suggest that they were motivated by the need to resolve overwhelming and complex community problems. These problems often included making the community safer, an unwillingness or inability of parents to get involved, and serving as gatekeepers to screen the sincerity of those wanting to provide services in their neighborhoods. Some of the study participants noted that they were motivated by perks such as traveling throughout the country to attend leadership meetings and conferences and the opportunity to stay in beautiful hotels and to interact with other community leaders experiencing similar challenges. Though jobs and other perks were offered as a result of their work, none of the study participants cited this as their primary reason for getting involved. Many indicated their involvement was spiritual motivated and that they were doing the work of God.

Theme 4: Impact of Community Leadership on Life

The fourth and last theme examined the personal impact of being a community leader. Study participants experienced both negative and positive impact as a result of the time and effort spent in serving as leaders. The negative impact—solely taking on the burdens of their family and the community—lead to depression and burnout. However, the positive impact—learning how the system works, that people really can make a difference and through their helping relationships they were increasing their personal self-esteem—were intangible benefits they felt made their sacrifices of time and effort well worthwhile.

Discussion

The themes identified in this study represent the processes or ways indigenous learning is understood and transmitted in these communities. The next step in stage one of Brennan's model is to determine – how are the themes relevant or how do they connect to educational and developmental activities? Learning is the connection between processes and educational and development activities. First it's important to understand that the themes denote a form of learning. Helping others to develop can be learned by others through modeling exemplary leadership, practicing what you preach, and communicating well with diverse groups. Understanding how leaders are validated (tangible and intangible) can be a learning experience for prospective leaders in the community. Learning is intertwined with culture, thus learning is a product of culture, as can be seen in the processes and ways indigenous learning is transmitted among the participants in this study.

With an understanding of the ways of learning, the connection of the processes (themes) to educational and developmental activities becomes much more apparent, particularly for educators of adults. Thus, the connection to learning is unstructured and achieved in an informal manner. As shown in this study learning was largely accomplished through observation, demonstration, question and answer, hands-on experiential learning or learning by doing, trial

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and error and reflection. Consequently, learning was achieved in the context of the whole community, the content of which was determined by the actual life in the community. Connecting educational and developmental activities to processes or ways of learning in indigenous communities means to contextualize the educational or developmental activities or to root learning in the context of community life.

Recommendations and Conclusions

There are few discussions of what learning involves at the indigenous level. Brennan (1997), a preeminent international scholar on various forms of non-formal education, states the lack of attention to the indigenous learning structure may have been initially the work of missionaries who viewed indigenous culture as inferior and non-Christian and therefore to be ignored or if necessary repressed. This attitude of inferiority was certainly adopted by school administrators, churches, government, and independent personnel. Adult educators should not follow the practice of earlier educational planners of ignoring indigenous learning systems and strategies. Several writers have suggested what might be done to promote a more equitable system of adult learning (Cunningham, 1988, Hayes and Colin, 1994a; Merriam and Brockett, 1997 Bailey, Tisdell, and Cervero 1994; Brookfield 1987; Mezirow, 1990 and Baptiste and Brookfield, 1997). According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999), suggestions fall into two main categories: (1) development of a critical pedagogy in which adult educators evaluate values and assumptions that perpetuate inequities, question the role of adult education, question issues of power, control, oppression and social inequities and be aware what's happening with families, schools and in the mass media, and (2) promote nonformal community-based learning activities such as indigenous learning processes outlined in this research.

Educators, employers, and society at large are focusing attention on developing skills needed for individuals at all levels to be productive and informed members of a fast-changing and highly technical society (Merriam & Cafarella, 1999). The findings of this research study gives rise to considerations of how adult educators can identify and begin to understand indigenous learning systems. Given the vastness and complexity of indigenous learning and the small amount of organized research that exists on the subject (Brennan, 1998, Ocitti 1988), much more research is needed to offer insights into such a vital form of learning. This study offered its findings based on stage one of Brennan's four-stage process for recognizing indigenous learning as an essential part of the nonformal system of learning for adults. Future studies can examine the remaining stages of Brennan's model to classified these themes for indigenous learning into formal learning systems and to identify a mechanism to advocate for broader indigenous learning systems which will ultimately lead to the development of more detailed and comprehensive learning systems for adults.

References available upon request.

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