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Recommended Citation

Kittredge, Cindy (1999). "A Sense of Place and the Rural Adult Learner," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/1999/papers/22>

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A Sense of Place and the Rural Adult Learner

Cindy Kittredge

Cascade County Historical Museum and Archives

Abstract: Confirming the importance of keeping the individual squarely at the center of the learning experience, this qualitative study of Montana ranchers describes how a sense of place, in this case an expansive rural landscape, provides Responsive Learners with a unique way of seeing, of communicating, of knowing, and of doing.

Introduction

Pervading human existence and exerting ties that none can forget, place along with its space, reflects those in its grasp and is reflected in them. In the process, it becomes more than an inanimate and passive backdrop. As American society has become increasingly less rooted, the separation between place and self has grown more evident. Wendell Berry (1977), who writes about the inextricable tie between American culture and agriculture, blames this trend on America separating the farmer from the land and thus separating America from its roots since the soil is "the great connector of lives" (p. 86). Increasingly, however, education is identified as a possible change agent to right the ills resulting from the divorce of Americans from place.

In Future Shock, Toffler (1972) describes the changes occurring in the modern world. However, Toffler's call to analyze acceleration and transience is like trying to saddle a galloping horse. It is both difficult to fully understand the ramifications of the rapidly shifting concepts and also impossible to slow the frame long enough to capture a clear picture for study. Rural Montana, isolated by geography and somewhat insulated from accelerated change, offers an endangered view of individuals who because of tradition are tied to a physical landscape, who because of distances nurture social networks, who because of their work are less linear and more holistic, who because of untrammelled space have a limitless framework in view, and who because of circumstances exert choices in their learning. These individuals' ways of seeing and pursuing learning are imperiled by a world filled with the rapid changes predicted by Toffler.

In this changing world, the impact of surroundings has grown increasingly important. Creators and builders of man-made environments are more aware of how their buildings impact the people in them. Preservationists emphasize the importance to society of saving natural and man-made landmarks because every place is imbued with emotional tone for the people there; and artists, writers, and philosophers have long referenced the powerful pull of the natural world.

Educators, too, look at the impact of surroundings on the individual, generally agreeing that two major forces, genetics and environment, shape the learner. However, there is ongoing discussion over the degree to which nature or nurture is at work. Context is seen as "not just an important element in thinking about human learning but is perhaps central to our understanding of adult

cognition" (Wilson, 1993, p. 72) by those seeking further understanding of the tacit dimension of adult learning which "is gained through observation and experience, most of which is acquired in the everyday world" (Sisco, 1994, p. 182). A world of increasing linear specialization that is morphising with light speed ala Toffler makes it especially important to understand how personal landscapes exert their pull and how that influence is connected to learning. How does a sense of place actively shape those in its grasp by affecting not only how they see their world but also how they learn in that world?

Freire, with his views on the development of critical awareness and the use of slides to help the learner more objectively perceive the surrounding environment (Meirhenry, 1983) may hold keys to the answers. This is especially so if his concepts, along with art theories of perspective and space, are used as an overlayment for description of the process of learning in rural learners. At issue is rural adult learners' sense of critical awareness and their sense of place, for if their rural vista, which has formed how they see and learn, is altered overnight, what then happens to their way of learning?

Purpose

The purposes of this study were to describe (a) how rural adult learners perceive their landscapes and (b) how their landscapes through distances and untrammled space have been an active force in their learning. Living close to the land, these individuals have developed a way of learning that works for their situation but which with alarming speed is threatened. The study examined how rural adult learners have developed a sense of place and how that has affected their way of learning in such issues as self-direction, the development of a more holistic view to learning, and the formation of networks.

This study in its look at how a sense of place impacts the adult learner also is a reminder of the impact of increasing shrinkage of space and the rapidly accelerating loss of personal landscapes. These two phenomena will continue to impact education at large, for cut loose from roots and traditional ways of living, individuals will increasingly need to be empowered to take control of their own learning. This study provides further information about the power of the individual learner and the role that learning plays in cementing a sense of connectedness.

Findings

Utilizing a descriptive design to collect qualitative data related to the learning patterns of rural Montana, 40 adults at 22 ranches in five of the least populous counties (less than one person per square mile) of Montana were interviewed on their land. The study examined how rural adult learners have developed a sense of place and how that has affected their way of learning. The findings revealed learners who are best described as Responsive Learners in tune with an expansive landscape. The Responsive Learner, who moves learning past reflection and into action through response, can be described in terms of five actions involved in the learning process: (a) framing reality (b) learning from and in the context of the land, (c) viewing learning as problem-solving, (d) thinking metaphorically, and (e) viewing the world holistically as a system.

Framing Reality

In order to better understand the nature of perspective and space, an artist utilizes a square viewer "to locate an object in space and thus see vertical, horizontal and proportional relationships" (Mendelowitz, 1976, p. 54). Such a frame helps to organize and define space. It also speaks to an individual's freedom to choose how to bound an area and begin to understand its balance (Arnheim, 1988). Just as an artist uses the slide to solve questions of position and perspective, the individual as part of any learning experience frames the situation so that in preparation for any action an objective view of the circumstances is gained. Framing reality then is another way of saying that they are "identifying the issue." Freire (1970), who believe that how people interpret their world is embedded in their reality and how they view it, used a slide as a frame to help students gain new perspectives about their world, a process he related to codification and conscientization.

In framing, perspective is gained, boundaries are drawn, focus is established and balance is achieved. Proud of their name "Flatlander," the Responsive Learners of eastern Montana talk about being able "to see forever," of having a favorite spot on top of a rise that gives them a view of never less than twenty miles and sometimes up to sixty miles in any one direction. The openness of view is more than aesthetic preference, for it also has the purpose of allowing the learner to see problems in time to remedy them. Most of the people interviewed (70%) indicated that the open view removed distractions and made it easier for them to focus on what they had to learn. The focus then becomes one's own responsibility with the learner not only framing individual reality but also holding control of the perspective.

Learning from the Context of the Land

Historian K. Ross Toole (1976) notes that rural Montanans have developed a special relationship over time with the land (p. 69). Such Montanans are aware of the context in which they move, learning from that context in a circular way, which includes action-generating reflection that leads in turn to further response and action. A 50-year-old man said, "You have to find out who you are in the context of where you live."

All of the ranchers interviewed voiced their belief that living on the land and surviving in the life style has shaped the kind of learner that they are. Through necessity, they have become contextual learners, who do not simply exist in a place but who are intimately tied to the land. A 46-year-old woman described her relationship with the land in terms of the land teaching her: "I would also say the land itself teaches. Riding horseback. You learn to gauge and judge;" while a 65 year-old woman said that returning to the land had "cleared my head." For these people, contextual learning involves (a) close observation; (b) an open attitude to see alternative actions; (c) flexibility and adaptability to work with what the land offers; (d) the ability to cope with what is at hand in order to insure survival; (e) the commitment, persistence, and patience to see a situation through, and finally; (f) the self-confidence to act.

Learning as Problem-Solving

In addition to framing reality and learning in context, the Responsive Learner is also a problem solver. In fact, these individuals equate problem-solving with learning. Moreover, whether the problem solving is through insight or trial-and-error, the solution for these ranchers requires some type of action. Every day they are faced with a new set of problems that may bear only a slight resemblance to the issues of the day before.

In their learning process, these learners use several approaches. (a) They view change as a circular evolution, with themselves often the agents of change. Several individuals voiced the belief that, "The old becomes the new. " (b) Faced with daily change, these learners must access a wide range of information, so they gather their information in a number of ways that ranges from formal extension classes to the informal classes held over a cup of coffee in a diner with a salesman pushing liquid feed for cattle. (c) To help in the information gathering, these learners employ networks, much like those identified by Arlene Fingeret (1983) and which use what could be called the "pick-your-brains approach." However, these networks not only exist in the present, but also stretch back to the past, for they have evolved over time and include provisions for help in times of emergency such as prairie fires or illness. Intergenerational learning and neighbors gathering to learn from each other are part of this process which one 46 year-old woman called "the neighborliness of learning." (d) As self-directed learners, they use mentors and guides, serving as examples of how teachers need to "serve as a facilitator rather than as a repository of facts" (Conti, 1983, p. 63). (e) Because every situation and every ranch is unique, all pieces of information are considered and weighed against other information in a process resembling what Brookfield (1986) has called critical thinking. The final decision for action involves an element of experimentation, or as one 73 year-old rancher said, he learned from "blunder and error." (f) Of prime importance to Responsive Learners is having the freedom to direct their own learning and find the solutions to problems that lie in the context of their own existence. Mainstream America may view those in Montana as isolated, but as a 59-year-old rancher said, "It doesn't matter where you are -- this is the hub, the center." (g) The results of their problem-solving is evaluated through the land's productivity and the survival of their families not just in the present but into the future.

Thinking Metaphorically

In order to nurture the process of gathering information, reflecting and acting, a Responsive Learner often becomes a metaphorical thinker. A metaphorical thinker is an individual who when faced with a situation can pull two disparate ideas together and find the common threads that relate them. In this process a new idea is created.

The ranchers in this study live in a vast land, which itself becomes a metaphor for how they see the world. A 46-year-old woman said, "This is the land. The land is unchanging. It still is, and it will be. No matter what we do and no matter how great we think we are. It is still there." As these learners move and work in the vastness of such a landscape, their very survival depends on the originality and the accuracy with which they draw comparisons. Such metaphorical thinking manifests itself in (a) their identification with their place, (b) their view of the uniqueness of the individual whether it be land or person, (c) the creativity that manifests itself in their analytical thinking and its expression -- from poetry to the development of genetic lines in livestock, and (d) the diversity of their responses to situations, which are many times filled with humor,

illustrated by an 80-year-old man's comment on his life, "It hasn't been all downhill and in the shade."

Viewing the World Holistically

A key characteristic of the Responsive Learner is the ability to think in terms of the whole instead of thinking linearly. Since Newton, Descartes, and Bacon, Western thought has been guided by the view of the world as a gigantic machine that is best understood by disassembling it and understanding each part (Capra, 1982). The sum of the parts creates the whole. The Responsive Learners of eastern Montana see the whole as inseparable, thinking more in terms of a circle of related systems than a line with a definite beginning and end.

Holistic thinking in these learners involves several elements. (a) The generational success of these families lies in how aware they are of all the systems that make up their world. They take in all pieces of information regarding their ranch and then treat it as a whole, coping with a multitude of projects at once. (b) The systems they see as part of a whole are ever moving and changing, stretching back into time and forward into the future. In fact, they call their land "Next Year Country," for next year always holds the opportunity for something better. (c) One of the most important systems in their world is the community. A 46-year-old woman said, "People make the land; the land makes the people." Perhaps this belief is why one of the recurring questions raised was where the next generation of ranchers will come from: "How do we keep kids on ranches in Montana?" (d) Working the land, these learners have become so rooted in their place that, as one man's wife said, "He's really tied to the land in so many ways that it's hard to differentiate what's the land and what isn't." These ranchers see the land forming a system, the community of people forming a system, and the two intersecting through the individual. (e) As part of seeing the whole and of understanding the inter-workings of the system around them, these learners have an understanding of their own small role in the whole drama. A 46 year-old woman said, "Having grown up here in this wide open country, it makes you less selfish; it makes you more aware of the bigger things in life, the bigger part of life."

Conclusion

In addition to describing the Responsive Learner, the data from this study led to the following conclusions: (a) Rootedness, or a sense of place, plays a role in learning by providing a context for the Responsive Learner and by furnishing a frame or focus for use in the learning process; (b) learning in the context of the land involves systems thinking and a holistic approach as opposed to the more linear approaches of traditional thinking; (c) rootedness is related to "centeredness," for the individuals in this study are not only centered and at one with the land but also are at the center of the learning experience; (d) learning for the Responsive Learners in this study is an individual experience that grows out of, takes on meaning from, and is fed by their context which includes their culture; and (e) the Responsive Learner is not only part of but also is at the center of a web of separate and specialized networks, in which some stretch back to the past, but in which all supply the learner with information, support, guidance, and vision.

The conclusions formed by this study of Responsive Learners indicate that their relationship with the land provides them with a unique way of seeing, of communicating, of knowing, and of

doing. Despite their ability to change and survive, these Responsive Learners' way of life is threatened by outside pressures over which they have no control. If their way of life does not survive, society as a whole will lose a special breed of learner, while also losing a window on better understanding a learning process that is so naturally a part of humanness that it is often overlooked. Adult educators can play a major role in disseminating the benefits of this learning mode which puts the individual squarely at the center of the learning experience, and Responsive Learners can serve as reminders of Myles Horton's Highlander axiom, "Learn from the people; start their education where they are" (Adams, 1975, p. 206).

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