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Are They Going to Stay? Attending to Emotions in Nonformal Settings

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Keywords: nonformal education, emotions, teaching

Abstract: Emotions play a key role in teaching in nonformal educational settings. Understanding the nature of this relationship and developing an awareness of learner emotions while teaching in nonformal settings is an essential practice for the nonformal educator.

Nonformal education (NFE) takes place everyday throughout the country in a variety of settings (e.g., museums, state parks, community education centers, consumer education sites). It is often referred to as a “motley assortment of organized and semi-organized educational activities operating outside the regular structure and routines of the formal [educational] system, aimed at serving a great variety of learning needs of different subgroups in the population young and old” (Ahmed & Coombs, 1975, p. xxix). Recent research (Taylor, 2006) has found NFE to be much more complex than has been historically and anecdotally described in the literature (e.g., Jarvis, 1987; Marsick & Watkins, 1990). One area of particular interest is the role of the emotions in NFE. “There is both professional opinion and empirical research which suggest that the major advantages of learning activities in nonformal settings over those in formal settings may lie in the affective domain” (Meredith, Fortner, & Mullins, 1997, p. 806). This raises questions, such as: What makes the affective domain so significant in the nonformal setting? What do nonformal educators need to be aware of affectively to provide a successful NFE experience? In response to these questions and others, it is the purpose of this paper is to conceptually explore the significance of the affective domain (emotions, feelings) and its relationship to the practice of nonformal education. If better understood this relationship could lead to a more effective NFE practice and offer greater clarification of NFE in relationship to other forms of education (Taylor, 2006).

Nonformal Education and Emotions: A Case Example

To understand the affective domain in relationship to the nonformal setting, it is important to begin with a brief description of an observed nonformal teaching experience at a local home improvement store (Taylor, 2004).

On a Sunday morning at a local hardware store (mid-morning), an employee named Sarah is preparing to teach a clinic on laying ceramic tile. Soon people begin to gather around the table displaying tile and related tools that was set up in a major thoroughfare of the store. Sarah begins by introducing herself and describing the intent of the clinic. She projects herself as someone who is excited, positive (smiling), and confident. Following the introduction, Sarah assesses the learners by asking what brought them to the clinic. Recognizing that time is limited, she starts explaining the tools and materials on the worktable, at the same time, hooking the learners’ attention by passing around some tools for learners to handle and look at more closely. All the while, Sarah maintains eye contact, smiles, and regularly assesses the learners’ reactions to the clinic. As the clinic evolves, the crowd grows to the point where it is blocking the thoroughfare; the

clinic is like a sponge drawing learners in. She is having fun, cracking jokes about laying tile, but at the same time staying on task, as if there is a clock ticking, reminding her how little time she has with these learners. As time progresses, a trickle of learners leave the clinic presumably no longer interested or have more pressing matters to attend to. As interest continues to wane, Sarah heightens learner engagement by asking for volunteers to come to the table to experience laying tile on recently spread mastic (glue). Eventually interest peaks and learners, who are standing, begin to squirm and shuffle their feet, becoming less attentive. More and more learners are peeling off from the crowd and are asking fewer questions. Recognizing interest has dissipated, Sarah ends the clinic assuring the learners that tile laying is fun and easy. Within a span of roughly 30 minutes, the clinic ends and the learners disburse.

Nonformal Education

This case example illustrates a nonformal educational (NFE) event; an episode of teaching and learning that goes on in a variety of settings (e.g., museums, state parks, community education centers, cooperative extension and consumer education sites) everyday throughout this country. Nonformal education is generally defined in relationship to formal education both as “not formal education” (Norland, 2005, p.6) and as the opposite of formal education. Characteristically, NFE is often described as more present-time focused, learner-centered, less structured, responsive to localized needs, and there is an assumed nonhierarchical relationship between the learner and the nonformal educator (Courtenay, 1991; Jarvis, 1987; Marsick & Watkins, 1990), although some of these long-held characteristics have been called into question by recent research (e.g., Taylor, 2006). Furthermore, a variety of teaching challenges often exist that are unique to NFE and are generally not found in formal educational settings. For example, teaching is often short in duration; participation is voluntary; there is a heterogeneous mix of participants (e.g., educational background, age); there are usually regular distractions (e.g., noise, interruptions) particularly in outdoor and public settings; and nonformal educators are often hired to teach for their content expertise and may have little systematic teacher training. It is these and other challenges that significantly impact teaching and learning and provide a setting for eliciting a range of emotions both from the nonformal educator and the learner.

Framing Emotions within Nonformal Education

To help make sense of emotions in a nonformal setting, such as Sarah’s home improvement clinic, is through the use of a framework by Sutton and Wheatley (2003) for conceptualizing emotions in practice. They understand emotions as a process consisting of a number of subsystems (network of changes) of the individual. They include the components of appraisal, subjective experience, physiological change, emotional expression, and action tendencies that both influence each other and are somewhat independent.

Appraisal is the beginning of the emotional process, where there is an interpretation of “some transaction in terms of its significance or relevance for the individual’s motives, goals or concerns” (p. 329). Three characteristics make-up appraisal that are significant for experiencing emotions: goal relevance (the degree it relates to personal goals), goal congruence (more congruent results in more positive emotions and less so for negative emotions) and ego-involvement (the degree of personal benefits and harm in relationship to others). For example, looking back at Sarah’s experience, she accomplished her goals and received supportive feedback (e.g., learners were interested), which in turn elicited positive feelings from the learners about this nonformal educational experience. Appraisal also sheds light on the subjective experience of emotions, such that not everyone appraises an experience similarly. Cultural and

personal differences exist in how both the educator and the learner assess an educational experience. The third and fourth components of the emotional process are observable emotional expressions (e.g., facial expression, tensing of the body) and physiological changes (e.g., body temperature, heart rate, blood pressure), which often “occur in predictable ways when an individual experiences emotions” (p. 331). These are components are observed and reacted upon by the educator and consciously felt by learners. For example, Sarah’s excitement about the clinic was expressed through positive facial expressions and a relaxed manner, which in turn stimulated learners’ interests. Also, the visitors’ antsy behavior at the end of the clinic reflected a growing feeling of boredom and lack of interest. The last component is action tendencies, or responses to emotions. These tendencies often are modulated and controlled by contextual constraints (social and cultural mores). For example, Sarah may have been frustrated with the lack of involvement by the customers in the tile laying clinic, but due to the public nature of the nonformal educational event, it is unlikely that she would have expressed her frustration openly to the group of learners. Further, she used humor to help the learners feel more relaxed, minimizing personal risk, increasing the likelihood of their participation. This framework is helpful because it provides a shared discourse for making sense of emotions in practice, although it does not go far enough in explaining what is unique about the nonformal educational setting.

The Nonformal Education Setting and Its Influence on the Affective Experience

To understand the nature of emotions within a nonformal setting, it is important to discuss its unique context and its impact on the affective experience of nonformal educators and learners. As previously mentioned, the nonformal context poses a number of challenges, which provide a catalyst for a variety of emotions. The contextual factors that seem most influential are: free choice and voluntary participation) (Falk, 2001); the novel setting (Bitgood, 1988); temporal constraints (Taylor, 2006); and the heterogeneity found among learners (e.g., age, class, social background) (Busque, 1991; Falk, Koran, & Dierking, 1986). How the nonformal educator responds emotionally to these challenges determines to a great extent the success of the nonformal educational experience. For example, a significant challenge when teaching in a nonformal setting is “free choice” (Falk, 2001). This is where the learner has the choice to attend to or not attend (physically and mentally) an educational event. This freedom of choice demands that the nonformal educator provide an educational experience that captures the learners’ attention so they choose to attend. As a result, the nonformal educator must regularly appraise the learner’s emotive state, checking for goal congruence, feedback, and level of interest, much more so than would be expected within a formal educational setting, where there is a “captured” audience. The nonformal educator must create a learning experience that “[attracts] the attention of the visitor and [holds] attention long enough to communicate its intended message” (Meredith, Forner, & Mullins, 1997, p. 808). In addition, once the learner is involved, without continual appraisal of the learner’s attention level, the nonformal educator would have little understanding of how to respond if and when the learner’s interest dissipated and why he or she might have chosen to leave the educational event. Consequently, the presence of free choice creates anxiety (particularly for less experienced nonformal educator), at times compromising cognition in response to the myriad of non-formal challenges (Eysenck & Calco, 1992).

Similarly, free choice has emotional implications for the learner as well. In voluntary settings, learners often have a heightened sense of curiosity and attention to newness. For example, in a tour of an art museum, it is the selective attention of the learner, for example, that determines if he or she will view a particular painting or pay mind to the tour guides discussion of a sculptor. The learner’s motivational state has a significant influence on the selective

attention and involvement. This motivational state is referred to as “felt involvement” (Clesi & Olson, 1988, p. 211), that of a feeling of personal relevance for an object or an event. Felt involvement is a byproduct of two sources; one being situational and immediate, (the physical and social aspects that emerge in the museum itself that promote learner involvement), and the latter indicative of the intrinsic characteristics of the learner, (a product of past experiences and related to personal goals and values). For example, a learner who was an art major might demonstrate an engaged involvement during a tour of an art museum, as opposed to an individual who was not schooled in the arts. However, the level of involvement will also be situational due to the power (expertise) of the nonformal educator and the type of art found in the museum.

The significance of novelty and its influence on visitors also sheds light on the relationship between emotions and learning. This is particularly the case in museums and parks where there are opportunities to learn “in situ,” in the original or a close fabrication of the original setting. These nonformal settings can be described as having an authentic presence. The emotional power of the novel setting is brought to life by Courtney’s (1991) description of his visit to the Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas, where Oswald shot President Kennedy:

It is an authentic context for learning...there is no gainsaying of the profundity of the emotion you experience as, unrestrained by person or barrier, you approach one of a number of windows which affords a would-be assassin barely interrupted visual passage to the street and plaza below. (p. 4)

In novel settings the context often speaks for itself and the nonformal educator plays more of an adjunct role, interpreting key contextual cues to maximize the emotive nature of the experience. Even Sarah’s clinic on tile laying has a greater authentic presence than a classroom, since it is situated in a location where the materials are sold and customers often engage in discourse of how these materials are used.

Another contextual factor unique to the nonformal setting are temporal constraints (Taylor, 2006). Temporal constraints are the limited amount of time the nonformal educator has to “educate” the learner and the opportunity for repeated engagement with the learner. Most nonformal educational events are short in duration and rarely do educators see the learner beyond one learning event. Successful nonformal education experiences on the surface seem to be unstructured, situated, and responsive to the local conditions, with little attention to time. However, research has shown that across a variety of nonformal settings, educators seem to adhere to a deeply rooted structure that is very much bounded by time (Taylor, 2006). For educators, this contextual factor has a number of affective implications. Every time they begin a nonformal program, they are confronted with a new group of learners, often very heterogeneous in background. As a result, if they are going to provide a successful educational experience, they have to develop a rapport with the learner within a limited amount of time. Emotionally, this can be stressful, creating a sense of being under pressure to complete a task (covering prescribed content), and at the same time, finding a way to connect with the learners. Recent research as shown that in response to these contextual factors, nonformal educators place great deal of emphasis on promoting a feeling of “fun” and less on learning a particular body of knowledge. Modeling a desired behavior, such as positive feelings through fun, “can be effective in increasing participation in museum exhibits, thus influencing the selective attention of visitors, particularly adults” (Celsi & Olson, 1988, p. 808).

Time is also a factor for the learner. Attention and curiosity are fleeting phenomenon particularly in free choice settings, where learners can disengage mentally from a presentation and/or move on to other activities they find more interesting. In addition, there are physiological

factors, such as the consequence of standing in one location for an extended period of time. If a nonformal event, such as a tour, is not emotionally engaging (promoting curiosity and attention), and runs over a long period of time, learners will feel bored (yawning) and restless (shuffling feet) as described in the vignette at the beginning of this chapter. These behaviors are indicators of learners' emotions and levels of interest in relationship to the nonformal educational event. If properly appraised and addressed in a timely manner by the nonformal educator, they can often be rectified resulting in a more successful nonformal educational experience.

Implications for Engaging Emotions in Nonformal Settings

Based on the analysis of the NFE context from an affective perspective, it is apparent that the nonformal educator faces a number of unique emotional challenges. In response to these challenges, several strategies have been identified that will help the nonformal educator promote greater felt involvement by the learner in the NFE experience. First, it is important to *model behaviors and emotions* that are desired among learners participating in the nonformal educational event. This means that the nonformal educator must project positive feelings both about the learners and the teaching event, increasing the likelihood that they will reciprocate in kind. Furthermore, a positive and supportive affective environment helps minimize ego involvement (risk) and creates a secure and safe feeling among learners, increasing the likelihood of greater visitor participation. Second, it is important to develop a heightened *attentiveness of the learner's affective state* at the beginning and throughout the nonformal educational event. For nonformal educators, this requires a heightened sense of "appraisal," continually assessing the learner's emotional state (felt involvement) by observing their level of eye contact, verbal interaction, and body language. It means for nonformal educators, to ask themselves: Does the learner look interested and engaged? If not, and instead they appear antsy, drifting off, bored, and not focused on the NFE experience, the educator needs to respond accordingly by looking for ways to quickly promote curiosity and selective attention through novelty and learner participation. Third, educators need to constantly assess the learners, a process of both ascertaining learner needs and *establishing a personal connection*. Research has shown that many successful nonformal educators begin an educational experience by exploring why learners have chosen to attend the nonformal educational event (Taylor, 2006). Understanding the learner interests provides an opportunity to make connections between the educational experience and the learner's interest, leading to greater felt involvement by the learner. Further, by engaging learners on a personal level (if time allows), it helps establish a rapport, being in sync emotionally with the learner and creating a comfortable and supportive environment for learning. Fourth, it helps to be aware of time and cognizant of the emotional impact that time has on the learner and the educational experience. Often due to the limited amount of time available, nonformal educators feel pressured to cover as much material as they can as quickly as they can. The consequence of an emphasis on content often leads to less than successful educational experiences for the learner. Learners lose interest quickly in lengthy didactic presentations, particularly if it lacks opportunities for questioning and active engagement. Through planning, the nonformal educator needs to identify what is most important for the learner and allow time for their personal involvement in the learning experience. Fifth, the educational experience should be *fun and enjoyable*. In a recent case study of two nonformal sites, one of the most interesting findings was the "high degree of emphasis on fun by nonformal educators" (Taylor, 2006, p. 302). Fun explains to a great extent why learners attend nonformal educational events. Fun educational events generally foster positive emotions of pleasure, excitement, and joy. However, promoting fun is a challenging skill and not all educators have the wherewithal and

knowledge of how to plan for fun, particularly within such demanding learning environments. In response to this challenge, advice from successful practicing nonformal educators suggest that NFE educators have to first find a way to make the teaching of nonformal educational experience fun for themselves. Without that, there is little likelihood it will be fun for the learners. It is important to remember that when promoting successful nonformal educational experiences to give serious attention to the affective domain. By being responsive to the learners' emotions, first and foremost, the nonformal educator is likely to engage the learner, maintaining his or her interest, and ensure a positive nonformal learning experience.

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