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Resonance and the Importance of Informal Learning in the Literacy Environment

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Keywords: literacy, informal learning, resonance

Abstract: This paper describes a study that was done with tutors and students in Frontier College's *Beat the Street/Literacy and Basic Skills* program. The study investigated how tutors and students interact and learn from one another in a literacy environment. It was conducted with qualitative methods including focus groups, interviews, reflexive inquiry and ethnographic research. Findings indicate that the informal learning of both tutors and students plays an important role in literacy learning, particularly in creating moments of profound connection that the author refers to as resonance.

Introduction

We had a story to tell about literacy work – its complexities, messiness, frustrations, excitement and small celebrations. (Hamilton, 2004, p. 2)

Many people have heard a particular account of adult literacy in Canada. They have heard that “four out of 10 adult Canadians ... struggle with low literacy” (ABC Life Literacy Canada, 2011) or that “too many students are not achieving the level of success in literacy that will allow them to participate fully in Ontario society” (Gouthro, Griffore and Armstrong, 2003, p. 12). There is a relatively untold story, however, that profoundly affects a large number of Canadian youth and adults. This story, or rather many stories, conveys what occurs on the day-to-day, face-to-face level in literacy programming. In order for researchers to adequately capture the intricacies of what goes on for both learners and practitioners in literacy programming, they have to look at something beyond general and often ill-defined assertions – and they have to let those who are in literacy tell their own story.

The study outlined in this paper, which took place at Frontier College's *Beat the Street/Literacy and Basic Skills* program in Toronto, sought to investigate a particular piece of this complex picture: the dynamic interface between a tutor and a student in the literacy environment. In order to understand what happens in this interface, it is critical to understand how the stories of an individual both shape and are shaped by their perceptions and actions. Every tutor and every student brings their own stories – experiences, emotions, literacy practices, opinions of education, etc. – to the program. When a tutor and student meet, they receive information and act through their own unique filter of stories.

In almost all cases, there will be overlaps in the stories of a tutor and the stories of a student. The findings of this study indicate that within these overlaps lies the chance for a powerful and as of yet largely unexpressed phenomenon that I am calling resonance. Resonance is a moment in which a strong connection is made, either with another person's stories or within our own. Resonance is a vital piece of the literacy environment. It can strengthen relationships,

allow for empathy, spark interest, generate or reinforce learning moments, and create opportunities for transformative learning. It also speaks to the importance of informal learning within literacy environments¹.

This paper begins with a description of the program in which the study took place, followed by a discussion of the literatures from which it derives its theoretical and philosophical foundations. It gives an account of the study's methodology, which follows a qualitative framework, before describing the findings through an exploration of the phenomenon of resonance. Throughout this paper, I will be integrating personal narrative with a more academic style of writing. I believe the use of narratives is essential to better illustrate and illuminate some of the concepts I am exploring in this paper.

Background

I came to Frontier College because I went to India. There, I met a group of young women whose determination – and constant good nature – put me on a path I never knew existed. Together we learned how to communicate with little language in common. They showed me the power that nonformal education can have for people, and I showed them how to do compound interest rate questions in Microsoft Excel. When I returned to Canada, I knew that adult education was something that I found inspiring – a good path to pursue. So I came to Frontier College, and began as a tutor in the Beat the Street program.

Beat the Street/Literacy and Basic Skills

The *Beat the Street/Literacy and Basic Skills* (BTS LBS) program is run by Frontier College, a national literacy organization. BTS LBS is tailored towards delivering learning-centered programming to at-risk youth, and includes one-to-one tutoring, a once-a-week math class, and a level one reading and writing class that meets four times a week (known as the Level One LBS class). The math class is run by volunteer tutors, and the Level One LBS class is run by a teacher who originally started as a one-to-one volunteer tutor. For the purposes of this paper, I am using 'tutor' to refer generally to all people who are in a teaching position with students in the BTS LBS literacy program – this includes tutors, teachers and workshop facilitators brought in as part of this study.

The students in the program come from varied backgrounds – from those who are experiencing or have experienced drugs and homelessness to those who have graduated high school but find they still cannot read or write. Tutors also come from a variety of backgrounds. Unlike some other literacy programs, careful attention is paid to who is accepted into the program – both student and tutor. Match-ups are not random, but selected carefully by the program coordinator. Despite this care, tutors and students often have widely disparate backgrounds, and arrive at the program with an assortment of experiences and literacy practices.

Theoretical Foundations

I arrived at Frontier College relatively unaware of any policy debate surrounding literacy. I hadn't spent time thinking about what I meant when I said 'literacy,' or what literacy might mean to other people. Falling headfirst into teaching meant that I was unprepared for and unaware of what might actually go on in a literacy program. Instantly, I was learning. I was learning a lot. My students seemed to be learning, too – but it seemed to me that they were learning

¹ For the purposes of this paper, informal learning refers to any learning that takes place outside the learning prescribed by the literacy curriculum.

more than simply how to read. We talked about life, and the police, and dealing with negligent lawyers. We struggled through issues of confidence, dealt with emotional crisis and cheered on political favourites. And through all this, we changed each other. When I got to OISE and came face to face with some of the current literacy theory and policy, I was confounded. I knew from my time at BTS LBS that there was a lot more going on here than some people seemed to be saying. I wanted to know more about what that was.

Literacy is often constructed, particularly in policy and government documents, in reference to “the development and observable achievement of a clearly defined set of relatively low-level skills” (Fulford, 2009, p. 45). Within this construction, literacy is seen as located autonomously within individuals (Evans, 2005). In this view of literacy, literacy programs should accomplish nothing more than the direct depositing of discrete bits of knowledge, tutor to student. Practitioners in the field, however, know that literacy is not merely “skills, functions and levels” (Barton and Hamilton, 1998, p. 5) and that there is more learning and profound personal transformation than a properly filled out grammar sheet can account for. Researchers have begun to investigate this phenomenon, and to describe with more complexity the environment in literacy programs, and the important variety of effects this environment can have on students and tutors.

Within the last 20 years, the New Literacy Studies (NLS) have had a strong influence on the way many researchers think about literacy (Fulford, 2009). In this theory, literacy is considered a social practice, situated in “the relationships between people, within groups and communities, rather than as a set of properties residing in an individual” (Barton and Hamilton, 1998, p. 7). Our minds, therefore, are not thought of as isolated entities but rather are “social, cultural, and embedded in the world” (Gee, 2000). Some theorists have also placed learning within a social context, rejecting learning as solely an “individual process” and instead situating it in the “context of our lived experience” (Wenger, 2009, p. 209). These theories have important implications for literacy programming – they indicate that literacy learning will be socially situated, and therefore deeply affected by and embedded in relationship.

The term relationship, in this case, implies that a reciprocal development exists between a student and a tutor. Recent research has investigated the existence of and circumstances surrounding the learning of volunteers (Cox, 2002; Duguid, Slade and Schugurenky, 2006a, 2006b) as well as specifically of volunteer tutors (Perry, 2008). This research indicates that students are not the only learners in the literacy environment. Tutors are also actively learning, developing, and changing through their involvement in the literacy process. The study *What Goes On Here* (Hamilton, 2004, p. 11) found that a dynamic ‘rapport’ existed between students and tutors – a “connecting back and forth, not just from tutor to student, but also student to tutor.” Research also indicates that there can be change or learning for literacy students that extends far beyond the boundaries of skill sets (Eldred *et al*, 2004; Horsman, 1999).

Although it does exist, there has been minimal research attempting to assess relationships and informal learning in literacy programming from both perspectives – students and tutors – together. This study hoped to do precisely that, and through this exploration to shed light on the literacy process as experienced by those immersed in it.

Methodology

I choose to explore my questions through a qualitative research design, specifically through people’s stories as well as through observation and reflexive inquiry. Qualitative research designs are “concerned with process, context and intricate detail” (Prasad, 2005, p. 9), and can therefore illuminate tutor-student relationships, including the complexities of their

backgrounds and literacy practices. Further, many of the processes I am exploring are tacit or unconscious. Listening to people's stories reveals subtleties of learning, literacy practices, and attitudes they may be unaware of.

To this end, I conducted 6 semi-structured interviews with students (3) and tutors (3), focusing on stories of learning previous to and during Frontier College. I also ran four focus groups, one with students, two with tutors and one with paid teachers and coordinators in the BTS LBS program. Through these methods, I was able to hear about what mattered to the participants, and their perceptions of the day-to-day process of literacy learning and teaching.

I also engaged with students in the LBS Level One class in a 5-month, once a week art class. Data from this experience came from reflexive inquiry and ethnographic research. The former involved thinking and writing about my own practices as a teacher in that class, and in relation to my previous experiences tutoring. The latter entailed observing the interactions between workshop facilitators (brought in for this project) and students, as well as between students and their regular classroom teacher. This classroom project was a more intensive study than an interview or focus group, giving time and space for more complex meaning to unfold. A number of workshop facilitators completed brief emailed questionnaires to further illuminate their experiences and perspectives. I believe important details about the evolution of relationships and learning in the literacy environment are revealed even in the one class in which they were present.

I am aware of the complex role that I played as a researcher in this process. I embrace the notion that in qualitative work, the "researchers are the instrument of study and their experiences and insights are central to understanding the phenomena under investigation" (Boston, 2000, p. 399). As a tutor myself, I am located within my research as someone who has actively participated in the tutor-student relationship. I thus have my own understanding of the process, my own experiences of learning, and my own opinions about how literacy programs ought to run. As an active participant, I tried to be constantly aware of and reflexive regarding my assumptions and choices, including how my presumptions might intersect with the responses and opinions of others.

Findings

We'd been working on essays for a while now. They came out, but it was a struggle, I could tell. It was boring, and it was painful having to push for more – just one more paragraph, get it down. Come on now, you can do it.

One day, I noticed something about his essay. He was taking one idea, and painstakingly extending that idea for the entirety of the paper. In his brainstorm, he had so many more thoughts. "What about this idea?" I said. He stopped working, stared at the page, then looked at me. "You mean," he said, "You can put more than one idea in an essay?" "Yes," I said, "Of course! In fact, you want to get at least three ideas in there." That was it for him. It was almost a miraculous jump. His essay writing had always been OK. But it had been slow, slow and incomplete and painful. A chore. Now, he wrote an essay like it was something he could do. His ideas were complete and related and insightful.

Tutors and students are constantly interacting with each other, and with literacy, within a literacy setting. These interactions often result in learning moments – moments that are multifaceted and complex, as well as socially situated. This narrative illustrates one of these moments. In that moment, the student and I understood each other, and he learned something. And I had learned something by struggling to get to that point. I learned from his attitude and behaviour that what we were doing before wasn't working. Together, we were instinctively looking for *resonance*, without consciously being aware of what we were doing.

A Person Full of Stories

To begin to understand resonance, one must understand the role stories play in our lives. As Thomas King (2003, p. 2) rightfully claims, stories are “all we are.” In other words, people are *made up* of their stories. All the experiences they have had, ideas they have encountered, or emotions they have felt – people exist through an innumerable and immeasurable plethora of stories that they begin collecting before they are born. These stories do not exist within us in isolation from one another. Quite the opposite is true – it is the nature of stories that they are dynamic. Our stories are constantly in motion inside of us, and constantly changing through their interactions with each other.

Our stories function as a unique filter through which we process the world and any interaction with that world. When a tutor or student enters into the literacy environment, therefore, as in any other situation, all the information they are receiving is processed through this filter. There is almost always an overlap in stories, or bits of stories, between a tutor and a student – shared ideas or experiences or understandings or emotions. Within these overlaps, there arises the possibility for resonance.

What do I mean by Resonance?

Resonance goes beyond simply a shared experience. In my research, I heard what I am calling resonance described in a number of different ways, including as a place of understanding, or as an ‘ah ha!’ moment, or as when something ‘clicks.’ Originally, the word resonance comes from the Latin word *resonare*, derived from the word *sonare* meaning ‘to echo.’ Resonance can be understood through these roots as a moment when we find an echo of an idea in ourselves – an emotional, mental, physical or spiritual echo. It occurs when an idea or story or experience or emotion comes into our circle of stories and echoes with another idea or experience or story or emotion. Resonance, therefore, comes from finding a deep connection – with another person or within our selves.

Resonance and Learning within Literacy Programming

This study indicates that the phenomenon of resonance is an active part of the literacy process, for both tutors and students. One student said, talking about hip-hop, that the song had to contain a “relatable experience” for her to be interested, or to listen. It was generally agreed, by tutors and students, that the same thing applies in the literacy classroom – learning has to be made relatable. It has to matter to students – in other words, it has to resonate within their stories.

Throughout my observations, it was clear when resonance happened in the classroom. The students sat up and listened. They responded. It was equally clear when it didn’t happen. Students shut down, or displayed little interest. In the latter instance, I would hear a lot of “I can’t do this,” or “this isn’t me.” If a student is constantly saying, “I can’t do this,” then probably, they won’t. Etienne Wenger (2009, p. 209) believes that the current focus on the individual in learning, as opposed to social contexts, leads students to believe they “are not really cut out” for learning. I agree to a certain extent, but I think it is more than that. I believe it is the failure of educators to look for and achieve resonance.

Conclusion

A greater likelihood of resonance can be achieved through the process of informal learning. As students and tutors engage in the process of informal learning together, their relationship is enhanced and the possibility of finding meaningful connections increases. Unfortunately, literacy programs in Ontario are not currently structured around a philosophy that appreciates the existence and importance of all kinds of learning for both tutors and students. Program policies often purport to be learner-centered (meaning student-centered), however it is the finding of this study that in order to have student-centered programming, a tutor has to be open to and aware of their own informal learning and constantly push for that learning to be centered on their student. Tutors must search for resonance – both in how they teach and in how they listen to student’s stories.

If tutors are not open to learning, and to finding resonance, than there is the danger that they will get stuck in their own experiences, and fail to notice and account for those of the student. This failure can result in a replication of the negative encounter with education that many adult literacy students have previously experienced. Some students, for example, have had harmful experiences with dominant forms of literacy practices within the schooling system, and thus are resistant to their use within literacy programming. Tutors who can learn to appreciate a student’s own literacy practices, on the other hand, are more able to respect those practices, and not impose their own. Therefore, tutor learning can lead to more adaptive literacy programming, which can result in a positive and transformative learning experience for students.

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