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Abstract: Using collaborative inquiry, the researchers wished to explore the relationship between art and learning. Themes of individual and collective learning emerged. In general, the arts provide a useful tool for provoking reflective dialog and a platform for viewing and assuming different perspectives.

Introduction

The researchers of this study wished to explore the relationship between art and learning. As members of a nascent community of practice, we formulated central questions around which to frame and focus a collaborative inquiry: (1) What kinds of learning does discourse about the arts bring to members of an arts learning community? (2) In what ways is that learning similar and different depending on the media of art discussed? (3) What is the reported learning about self, and self in relation to the learning community?

Review of Literature

How Art Fosters Adult Learning

For individual learning. Art plays a critical role in "open(ing) a connection between emotion and feeling and critical reflection" (Aprill & Townsell, 2007, p. 53). That is, art can intentionally or unintentionally trigger emotion and encourage imagination to help learners take time to see things in multiple ways beyond the surface and in so doing, challenge assumptions, and alter one's perspective forever (Hayes & Yorks, 2007; Lawrence, 2012). Art can, thus, play a role in transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000).

Art can also function as a catalyst for individual healing (Hayes & Yorks, 2007; Lawrence, 2012; Wallace, 2007). Music, in particular, has had healing properties in both ancient and modern cultures (Wallace, 2007). Maxine Greene (1995) suggests that part of the healing stems from the potential of art to stir a person's ability to imagine a better reality.

For collective learning. Once individual learning becomes shared knowledge founded on the interdependence between learners, collective learning emerges as a possibility (Aprill & Townsell, 2007). The use of art in the community can create a safe space to engage in activities such as movement and storytelling. Part of the safety stems from art inducing a "different ethic of listening and understanding someone with whom we disagree" (Scher, 2007, p. 11). Art "create(s) a space where people listen and hear what might otherwise be inaccessible to them" (Hayes & Yorks, 2007, p. 92) by assuming a learner stance (Aprill & Townsell, 2007).

As such, art can build capacities to effect change for community development. Art can nurture people to reach out to one another such that "a desperate stasis may be overcome and hopes may be raised…" (Greene, 1995, p. 132), bringing the vision of community from external experts back to the community members (Aprill and Townsell, 2007) and helping families and the community heal from crisis and "(reconnect) them with their cultural identity rarely acknowledged by the larger society" (Archer-Cunningham, 2007, p. 33).

Nature of Learning by Genre

Some adult educators and thinkers have considered how particular genres of art facilitate learning. Fiction allows the reader to engage in an "intertextual process" (Jarvis, 2006, p. 264) by weaving his or her own narrative into the story resulting in a porous boundary and the creation and co-creation of new narratives (Fenstermacher, Moll, Sprow, Tait, Hayduk, Snyder, Briggs & Taylor, 2009). Fiction can act as a medium for "imaging alternatives – different resolutions to familiar problems, alternative lifestyles, and moral choices" (Jarvis, 2006, p. 76) and to bring about transformative learning, as it contains "disorienting dilemmas" a la Mezirow (2000).

Film inherently carries a transformative potential. Film, like fiction, "engender(s) empathy and identification" (Jarvis, 2012, p. 487). In film, the camera determines how the viewers are drawn into the narrative and whose perspective they are taking. Enhanced by sound, film allows the viewers to "literally see through the characters' eyes" (Jarvis, 2012, p. 488). Film also helps the viewer "to see the constructed nature of (their) realities" (Jarvis, 2012, p. 487) by questioning identity, illusion and reality and reminding the viewers that their meaning-making is a product of sociocultural construction (Jarvis, 2012). Similarly, photography can function as a metaphorical lens to see the world in a different way. The camera is a tool that can draw attention to details and to portray the multiplicity of reality (Lawrence & Cranton, 2009).

Joseph Beuys (Focus, 2008) perhaps most famously discussed the potential for art and especially sculptures to transform society as they have both a cultural and political function. Likewise, dance and theatre "challenge us to investigate – not ignore – …despair, injustice and paralysis" (Spehler & Slattery, 1999, p. 2, as cited in Lawrence, 2008, p. 72) and can, in turn, function as catalysts of social change. In addition, dance and theatre as genres of art tend to heighten the viewers' learning experience through emotions and therefore corroborate Heron and Reason's (1997, 2006) attention to the affective dimension of learning.

Learning Communities

The term *learning community* has been used interchangeably with *communities of practice* as most notably described by Wenger (1998). Glazer (2001) suggests that a learning community values learning together while a community of practice values performance in its interplay of participation. "Learning and deepening understanding are the primary focus…" (Glazer, 2001, p. 2) of a learning community and "learning activities emphasize both individual and collaborative construction of knowledge, sharing knowledge and skills, and emphasizing how to learn rather than what to learn" (Glazer, 2001, p. 2).

Methodology

The study's guiding questions informed our planning, steps for inquiry, and methodology. Our purpose as a learning community was to learn and not necessarily to effect change. With this, we resolved to be guided by the collaborative inquiry methodology described by Heron and Reason (2006).

The steps and protocols we followed are:

(1) *Interest:* Upon coming together as a learning community, the four members identified the arts as an area of shared interest. We began by asking ourselves what we expected to learn from the arts and each other and what questions and actions could support and enable learning.

(2) *Inquiry:* Following reflection on interest, we identified potential themes collectively and shared our initial thoughts for inquiry questions. From this, we developed our overarching inquiry question, and through deeper inquiry sought to further refine that question to craft associated meaningful steps for actual inquiry, reflection, individual and group learning.

(3) *Selection:* We selected four forms of arts media – dance, film, photography, sculpture

– for which we identified presentations and dates for participation and observation.

(4) *Refinement:* After reflecting on and discussing our initial inquiry, we refined and expanded upon our overarching question, which led to developing specific inquiry questions.

(5) *Observation:* This step involved viewing the arts media presentations we had selected and scheduled. In this process, we took notes on our observations for our reflection phases.

(6) *Reflection:* We each kept a reflection journal to record our thoughts and reflections related to the specific arts presentation observations and the inquiry process. We posted and read each other's reflections, considered to be our pre-discussion reflection.

(7) *Discussion:* After each arts observation and posted pre-discussion reflections, we met for face-to-face or teleconference discussions to express what we had seen and learned from the arts media observed, and we expounded and expanded on our reflections.

(8) *Further Reflection:* Subsequent to our discussion, we wrote and posted a post-discussion reflection, which provided an opportunity for additional and new reflection as well as meta-reflection on what learning community members had written, reflected on, and discussed.

(9) *Focus Group:* Subsequent to all arts observations, pre- and post-discussion reflection journaling and posting, and discussions, we conducted a tape-recorded, focus group meeting of our learning community with one member facilitating as we responded to six questions centering on our influences, individual change, participation, advice, appreciation, and final thoughts.

(10) *Data Coding:* All data gathered from our observations, reflections, discussions, and focus group meeting were coded deductively to reflect specific themes from the literature review.

(11) *Reporting:* The final step in our process was to analyze the coded data and to report on it in the findings and synthesis section of a final paper, leading to a presentation of the process, findings and learning.

Findings

After evaluating our individual pre- and post-reflections and our focus group transcript, and connecting them with our research questions and literature review, learning themes emerged:

Themes Supported by the Literature Review

Art drives people beyond rationality and brings out the affective self, hence contributing to whole person knowing (Lawrence, 2012; Hayes & Yorks, 2007; Heron, 1992). Individuals saw art as a personal involvement, not just a cognitive one. The affective and creative domain helped members to open themselves and connect more authentically to the learning process.

Art stirs imagination and triggers new possibilities (Lawrence, 2012; Greene, 1995). Art can help to ignite the creative spark that lessens the imaginative paralysis. With imagination come possibilities: we can reject what reality is and go beyond to what may be.

Art pushes us to challenge our assumptions, to consider multiple ways of looking at things, and to open ourselves to other's point of view (Mezirow, 2000; Lawrence, 2012; Hayes & Yorks, 2007; Scher, 2007; Lawrence & Cranton, 2009). The learning, individual and collective, came from our ability to interpret our experiences, and together make new meanings through the incorporation of other's values, beliefs, assumptions, and perspectives. In our group discussions, we constantly challenged each other to probe more deeply to seek an alternative worldview.

Art works as a catalyst for individual healing (Hayes & Yorks, 2007; Lawrence, 2012; Wallace, 2007). The beauty and pain associated with the different media, followed by reflective discourse in a safe environment, energized us in surprising ways. A member reported feeling weak and ill before the ballet and feeling stronger, centered, as if he had regained his creative forces after the show and the interactions with the group. Other members shared similar feelings.

Art awakens the social being, creates safe space and acts as catalyst for community development and collective learning (April & Townsell, 2007; Archer-Cunningham, 2007). Art united us, moving us beyond the isolated "islands" we create for ourselves. Through the participatory process, we recognize the power of art. To share our select artistic medium with our colleagues is to open them to the possibility they may relate to (or start to understand) our own stories. The interactions helped us appreciate our collegial involvement, our intellectual and affective contributions, and our shared commitments.

Art can lead to action and activism (Scher, 2007). Art reminded us of the power of storytelling and its ability to effect social and political change. The art we were exposed to remind us nobody is free from oppression—societal, governmental, or familial. The arts led us to discuss how oppression limits choices and silences voices.

Other Emergent Themes

Art pushes people to reflect on their lives, on their lives' meaning, and to imagine alternatives to their realities. Art pushed us to look at where we came from and who we have become. It pushed us to face the horrible realities of the world and question our own life legacy. It drove us to reflect about the way we choose to live our lives, and how we measure success. It pushed us to reflect on how different our lives can be.

Art triggers deep questioning of societal systems. At one point we saw ourselves probing the definition of art itself and questioned how we position the arts within our societal systems. This experience revealed the value humanity places on art and how it is also unable to escape the issues of inclusion and exclusion. We also discussed a possible subversive, anarchic quality of the arts.

Analysis

A close examination of the theme-sorted findings suggested that the reported learning is best analyzed according to its levels, i.e., (1) individual learning (2) group or collective learning (3) societal learning.

For individuals, the learning was emancipatory, grounding and provocative: emancipatory in the permission it gave to "reject apparent reality" and risk the fear of not having expert knowledge and of opening up emotionally and authentically to others. Relating to the film, photograph, dance or sculpture and the characters, images and emotions displayed, induced a kind of subject-object balance shift (Kegan, 2009) which, in turn enabled contemplation and enhanced understanding of life choices, values, motivations and limits.

The group-as-vehicle conceit for viewing and discussing art not only allowed participants to grow comfortable with sharing and challenging observations, but also helped them track consistently and instinctively the "phases" of critical thinking. As described by Brookfield (as cited in Garrison, 1992), these include (1) a triggering event followed by (2) appraisal, (3) exploration, (4) developing alternative perspectives and (5) integration.

The group discourse also promoted a greater awareness of and connection to the best and worst of society and the human condition. That oppression, strife, brutality and stereotyping coexist alongside great empathy, charity, acceptance and peace was not new; however, the act of focusing on those seemingly opposing forces heightened feelings of accountability and impotence. The realization also raised the group's appreciation for the will and work of the artists in exposing and articulating truths that transcend mere linear description.

Across all media, learning was perceived as personally revelatory and cathartic yet broadening, offering a wider perspective on the world and the circumstances of others.

That some group members were familiar with the oeuvre of certain film directors and photographers influenced their choice of artists and the particular examples that were viewed. Despite their prior knowledge, those individuals noted that they saw and learned more about the works that they had chosen in the context of the group discussion and generally enhanced the learning of the rest of the group.

The group's journey, which began with a "direct encounter" (Reason, 1999) with each other and the negotiation of the process, featured travel to "surprising" depths of empathy and resonance, where the thought- and emotion-provoking, presentational expression of the artists and the members' propositional knowledge (Heron, 1992) (about them and their works) ultimately led to learning in and on action (Schön, 1983). In the wake of the collaboration and research, they arrived at the realm of practical knowledge, having transformed the concept of how to learn collaboratively in future cycles of inquiry and communities of practice.

Conclusions

The positive experience of the arts learning community led to the recommendation that educators and learners consider the subject/focus of the study – selves as participants and the process of inquiry in the formation and facilitation of learning communities.

In general, the arts provide a tool for provoking reflective dialog and a platform for viewing and assuming different perspectives. The transformative impact may be felt at the individual and group level and as "whole person" (Heron, 1992) learning. The experience suggested applications for arts learning where disagreement and conflict threaten to alienate parties or groups in need of collaborative action.

The study also raised issues for future examination. They include questions related to the application of the arts learning community model to children and families and in the workplace. Researchers might also examine the impact of group arts consumption and reflection on (adult) cohort learning endeavors, and the learning that occurs when a community creates art (as opposed to viewing it) together.

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