Creating Learning: A Critical Program Planning Praxis For Collaborative Knowledge Construction and Social Change

Colleen Aalsburg Wiessner
North Carolina State University

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North Carolina State University, USA

Abstract: Positing an alternate program planning perspective, this paper explores the possibility of viewing planning as a critical praxis. It blends theory and practice in development, content, and research approach; explores meanings and functions of praxis as a rationale for this perspective; and outlines purposes, principles and practices of the approach.

Introduction

In the last decade a new generation of scholars moved into faculty positions in adult education departments. For many of them, the road to academe wove through diverse and compelling community and organizational contexts related to their practice and to their research. They engaged with stakeholders, constructed knowledge collaboratively and acted to create social change through their program planning efforts. Their voices are beginning to be heard (for example: Bowles, 2007; Bracken, 2008; Grenier, et al., 2008; Mosley, 2005; Wiessner, 2006).

As adult educators we bring the best of our theoretical training, pedagogical/andragogical practices, and teaching and learning skills to our planning efforts. However, adult learners in academic and community contexts have often not integrated theories and practices of adult education and program planning as they engage in experiential and other types of learning. While they often operate out of their tacit pedagogical practice knowledge, making their philosophy, processes, and perspectives explicit aids in fostering effective planning approaches.

This praxis responds to Freire's (1973) directive not to use his work without adaptation and contextualization to the needs of learners involved in a learning project. It is an approach to program planning based in critical and feminist pedagogies, rather than a fixed model of program planning. After several years of working with what I referred to as a model, I realized this work represents a different approach to program planning; a praxis for program planning.

Several years ago I boldly added "Wiessner" to a list of models from which students could choose for a presentation in a program planning course. I did not quite know what that model was, but I knew I had one operating tacitly and viewed this opportunity as a way to finally make it explicit – *if* someone chose it. A curious student did! Since that time, I have worked to refine my work as a model and have presented it each semester to inspire innovation and freedom of thought as my students create and analyze their own models related to challenges and opportunities in their work contexts.

Each time I thought about or presented my "model" I would reflect, individually and with students, as to whether it was in fact a model. I did not think it was, technically, but I was not sure how to categorize it otherwise. Eventually, I began to think of it as a pedagogy, which led to my current exploration of it as a critical planning praxis.

Grounding in theory and practice

Rather than suggesting a new model for program planning, this paper posits a praxis that can be employed in critical program planning efforts. It is grounded in the literature of program planning and of critical and feminist pedagogies. In their work Cervero and Wilson (2006) use

the image of the planning table, referring to their work as a theory for practice. While affirming the value of planning models, they also recognize that structured models "offer limited guidance in the real places where real people struggle to plan real programs" (p. 2). They also address the theory-practice divide, clarifying its scientific and technical-rationale epistemology and advocating for a different approach. "Actionable theory has to be (1) plausible – that is, able to account for actual practice; (2) politically strategic – that is, able to analyze and act within and upon power relationships; and (3) ethically illuminating – that is, able to reveal and sustain ethical standards for judging practice" (p. 260). Planning must attend to power and responsibility and can be characterized as the practice of possibility (Wilson & Cervero, 2001).

Planning models can be viewed in three broad categories: classical, naturalistic, and critical (Cervero & Wilson, 1994). Relevant to this proposed praxis, the critical perspective focuses on best judgments in practice, education as political, social inequities, relationships of power, and the ethical and political nature of planning. "Practice is inextricably connected to institutional contexts that have a history, are composed of interpersonal and organizational relationships of power, and are marked by conflicting wants and interests" (p.25).

Critical pedagogy is a way adult educators seek to create change and foster social justice. This pedagogy is central to program planning efforts, yet it is often assumed rather than described. I have identified principles and practices that characterize critical pedagogy and that are important to this suggested praxis (Wiessner, 2005). They include: conscientization, critical reflection, co-creation of knowledge, problem-posing, reciprocal roles of teacher-learners and learner-teachers, centrality of participants' experiences, engaging in dialogue, valuing participants' voices, using cooperative teams and collaborative learning methods, praxis, and empowerment for action. It is empowering to have experience and voice affirmed. Working together collaboratively also contributes to empowerment. Action critically reflected upon – praxis – is an essential component of critical pedagogy and a way that learning is evidenced.

Tisdell (2000) identifies five themes prevalent in feminist pedagogy: how knowledge is constructed, voice, authority, identity as shifting, and positionality. She also presents feminist teaching goals. Feminist pedagogy seeks to expand consciousness, capacity for voice, and self-esteem. Learners are engaged to construct and express new knowledge and become more fully authors of their own lives and actors in the world. Leaders facilitate learning activities that encourage connection and relationship, use affective as well as rational and cognitive modes of learning, challenge unequal power relationships and work for social change, and seek out and validate contributions of those who have been marginalized by systems of oppression. With their students, they study authors and course content about women to increase women's status and opportunity in society, discuss limitations of their own capacity to facilitate social action or emancipatory activities, and problematize personal or institutional constraints (Tisdell, 2000).

Critical and feminist pedagogies clarify the intentions and actions that support and drive this critical program planning praxis.

Praxis in adult education: Foundation for program planning praxis

I present dimensions of this critical program planning praxis below. It was my original intention to focus on that aspect in writing this paper. During its development, however, I realized the importance of featuring the rationale for this praxis and the methodology in this first treatment; clarifying and questioning the appropriateness or value of this approach.

Freire defines praxis as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (1972, p.28). The relationship between theory and practice is often cited in the literature. "In

more scholarly terms praxis is defined as the necessary conjoining of theory and practice, so that theory is seen as both arising within practice while simultaneously informing practice" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 505). Vella (1995) states that, "Praxis invites an examination of an action just completed so that relevant theory can be applied. The cycle of praxis is (1) do; (2) look at what you did; (3) reflect using theory; (4) change; (5) do, and so on. Praxis is not practice, which could be a repetition of a given approach without the reflective analysis and new dimensions" (pp. 180-181). She refers to the *process* of praxis.

Both Freire (Elias,1994) and Greene (1988) refer to praxis as a way of knowing . hooks emphasizes active engagement, wholeness – union of body, mind and spirit – and mutuality. West (1999) links praxis to prophetic pragmatism. Organic intellectuals, like West, help people challenge hegemony, based on their "empathetic identification" with what it is to be oppressed" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 506). Bellah, et al. (1996) temper this perspective a bit, suggesting that practices of commitment are akin to praxis. These "shared activities…are not undertaken as means to an end but are ethically good in themselves" (p. 335).

Newman (2006) links praxis to consciousness. Elias (1994) analyzes Freire's use of praxis in relationship to conscientization. hooks' perspective on praxis centers on conscientization as well, referring to critical awareness and engagement as consciousness joined by meaningful praxis. She emphasizes the importance of creating a participatory space with learners for "verifying in praxis what we know in consciousness" (hooks, 1994, p. 47). Greene cites the importance of imagination; in cycles of action and reflection new futures become clear.

In addition to its nature, the literature discusses the processes of praxis. Brookfield refers to it as the "heart of facilitation" (1986, p. 10) and emphasizes the importance of collaborative analysis of activity. "Central to this process is a continual scrutiny by all involved of the conditions that have shaped their private and public worlds, combined with a continuing attempt to reconstruct those worlds. This praxis of continual reflection and action might be accurately viewed as the process of lifelong learning" (Brookfield, 1984, p. 294). Context is critical to praxis (Brookfield, 1984; Vella, 2008) and praxis can lead to transforming contexts.

The concept of praxis has sometimes been coopted and used to refer merely to an integration of reflection and action without attention to its "dialectical unity of thought and action rather than a sequence" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 505) and without critically challenging dominant ideologies. Additionally, its connections to its Marxist origins are often lost.

This proposed praxis joins cycles of action and reflection, challenges hegemonic forces and institutions, creates spaces for imagination, and engages participants toward social change.

Methodology

This pedagogy for program planning emerges from five sources of knowledge construction: 1) thirty years of professional practice in collaborative program planning, 2) ten years of empirical research on program planning for conferences and other adult learning events, 3) analysis of written resources created both in practice and from research, 4) feedback from selected collaborators in the program planning activities, and 5) critical reflection with students and colleagues as part of a program planning course in the context of an adult education program. It is grounded in adult education theory and program planning literature.

Brookfield (1992) posits three types of criteria for theory building in adult education that I applied to developing and analyzing this approach to program planning: 1) epistemological, 2) communicative and 3) critically analytic. Jarvis' (1999) theory/practice work was also formative.

Von Krogh, Ichijo, and Nonaka (2000) identify five steps for new knowledge creation: sharing tacit knowledge, creating concepts, justifying concepts, building a prototype, and cross-leveling knowledge. Each of those steps has been taken in this process of creating new knowledge related to a critical perspective on program planning. A central activity is making tacit knowing explicit (Polanyi, 1973); clarifying and naming the planners' activities and experiences. The process used in developing this praxis parallels the praxis itself, as used in program planning contexts.

The first step to clarifying this approach to planning took place at Teachers College during my doctoral studies. A group of colleagues and I developed Women as Change Agents: A Values-Driven Model for Program Development. One step of that project was to identify best practices that we had each employed in planning efforts. It was the first time I put into words what I had been enacting in practice. It also clarified the centricity of values in my planning.

Initiating the model development process in the class I teach at NCSU, the student researcher conducted document analysis and coded resources I had written about programs I had designed and the planning work involved. By email we collected ten descriptors from eight collaborators who participated in programs we jointly developed using this approach. In person, I collected ten descriptors from six additional collaborators. Their involvement took place over a period of twenty years. Next, we individually analyzed the codes that emerged from the articles and the descriptive words we collected. Comparing our analyses, we developed themes and arrived at what we then called a model.

Confirmability of this approach has been assessed informally. Before I present this approach in class – usually toward the middle of the semester – I ask students to write five descriptors each, related to what they think the model will include based on their experiences in class. In groups they combine their ideas and form categories. I involve everyone in presenting Creating Learning. As the presentation progresses, groups speak up when their purposes, principles or practices are mentioned. We reflect on the planning approach as part of the class.

Program planning praxis

In this section I present the critical program planning praxis in four sections: epistemology, purposes, elements, and practices.

Epistemology

This pedagogy grew out of planning in non-profit contexts with the goal of social change and educational innovation. It is grounded in critical and feminist pedagogies. Infused with a love of the arts and a belief in the power of creativity, it evidences commitment to multi-level, multi-dimensional inclusion and the value of every voice and its potential to make a difference.

Purposes

Purpose forms the first focus of this approach. Adult educators who created and engaged in this praxis were involved in program planning in contexts where the purposes included transformation, collaboration, inclusion and valuing of a range of voices and perspectives, developmental leadership, knowledge creation, innovation, and embodying spirituality.

Principles

Principles clarify activities central for program planners in meeting those goals. They include: focus on purpose; study, respond to and connect to context; involve all stakeholders;

embody vision and values; pursue multiple purposes and symbolic goals (organizational); create connections (individual); plan for continuous learning; build or create the infrastructure for both the team and the organization; and use transformative and developmental vehicles. Team members are asked to establish their own developmental goals and are also asked, "What else can we accomplish while we work on this project? Developing leaders is one example.

Practices

Vehicles facilitate the enactment of this approach in planning and implementing actual programs. These include fostering involvement of all voices; engaging in dialogue; modeling; involving the whole person personally and experientially; collaborating and participating in large and small groups; thinking critically; planning for multi-intelligences, multi-sensory, multi-modal, multi-faceted learning activities; integrating the arts; storytelling; stimulating expanded and creative thinking; organizing by purpose at every level; attending to detail; and flexing, adapting or improving as needed. Program planner skills and dispositions undergird these activities and processes. Evaluation takes place at multiple levels – team, organizational, stakeholders, and participants – with different types of evaluation for different audiences.

While responses from collaborators divided into these practices, the language used to describe them was also interesting. Most of the following words or phrases surfaced repeatedly: inclusive, communication, engaging, do what you teach, interactive, tingle and texture, colorful, dramatic, out of the box, theme, intentional, prepared, spontaneous and surprising.

Each aspect is grounded in adult education research and practice. All need further description. However, with limited space, I didn't feel the praxis would make sense without the foundation provided by the reframing rationale and the knowledge construction process. This critical praxis constitutes a way of seeing and being, of acting and thinking. It embodies theory and action, and action and reflection, in continuous cycles designed to foster knowledge construction and social change as outcomes to the planning activities.

Discussion

I view the concept of a program planning praxis as a work-in-progress, a scholarly reflection on ways to conceptualize researching, teaching, and participating in practice-based planning efforts. I look forward to reflecting on it with others. It emerged out of decades of collaborative program planning. Numerous questions beg consideration:

- Does it focus on and capture the planning processes, or is it more descriptive of the form that the programs take, or a program best practices perspective?
- What is its relationship to planning models? Does it supplement various models or would it be substituted for a model?
- Could it be adopted and adapted by others, or is it primarily the reflection of one person's practices?

Critiques abound and I present a few. This approach is clearly complicated and many layered. How would it be implemented? It may be best used by one style of leader at an advanced level of experience, limiting its applicability. This praxis often requires co-leadership to maintain a marriage of vision and detail. It enacts high mega, high macro, high micro, *and* high quasi level foci simultaneously. As with any enterprise, who can really say what someone else needs? The danger of patriarchy exists. I have wondered how one would equip a learner to use this praxis. The answer: through engaging participants in the praxis and by shaping it through their critical action and reflection, just as it was originally developed and enacted.

Conclusion

So, is a critical program planning praxis an approach that merits consideration? If so, is this work-in-progress a legitimate praxis with potential to add to the planning literature? Am I just giving new language to something that already exists? As planners we need to engage in the cycles of praxis discussed in the paper. Our praxis as adult educators – action and reflection – represents a means for building and rebuilding theory, not just illuminating practice. This presentation as part of AERC creates another level of reflection on this proposed critical praxis.

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