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Perspectives on Adult Learning: Framing Our Research

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Abstract: Based on a review of the literature we describe the assumptions and salient concepts of two major perspectives on adult learning: the individual and the contextual. We then argue that although research should continue to be grounded in these two perspectives, we should expand our research efforts in a third paradigm consisting of an integration of these two perspectives.

Introduction

Research in adult learning has been framed by two primary perspectives on how we work with adult learners: the individual and the contextual. Based on a comprehensive and critical review of the literature, we first describe the assumptions and salient concepts and ideas that have emerged from each of these two major perspectives. We then argue while both perspectives should continue to inform our research and practice, we advocate that greater recognition be given to a third paradigm, that of an integrative approach to learning in adulthood. In this integrative approach, both the individual and the contextual perspectives are interwoven in framing research agendas and responding to problems of practice.

The Individual Perspective

Until recently, the individual perspective, driven by the psychological paradigm, was the predominate way we thought about learning in adulthood (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Two basic assumptions form the foundation for this perspective. The first is that learning is something that happens internally, primarily inside of our heads. In essence the outside environment is given little if any attention in the way we think and learn. Second, this perspective is based on the assumption we can construct a set of principles and competencies that can assist all adults to be more effective learners, no matter what their background or current life situation. A sampling of topics grounded primarily in this perspective include participation and motivation (Boshier & Collins 1985), self-directed learning (Tough, 1971), andragogy (Knowles, 1970), transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991), memory and learning (Ormord, 1995), and the neurobiology of learning (Sylwester, 1995). Three of these topics are discussed to illustrate this perspective: participation, self-directed learning, and transformational learning.

Participation is one of the more thoroughly studied areas in adult education. We have a sense of who participants, what is studied, and what motivates some adults and not others to enroll in a course or independent learning project. Beginning with the landmark study of Johnstone and

Rivera (1965), other national studies have sought to describe adult learning (for example, Valentine, 1997). What is interesting is that the original profile put forth by Johnston and Rivera (1965) has changed little over the past thirty years. Compared to those who do not participate, participants in adult education are better educated, younger, have higher incomes, and are most likely to be white and employed full time.

The accumulation of descriptive information about participation has led to efforts to build models that try to convey the complexity of the phenomenon. This work on determining why people participate, that is the underlying motivational structure for participation, has been carried on most notably by Boshier and others using Boshier's Educational Participation Scale (EPS) (Boshier and Collins, 1985; Fujita-Starck, 1996). Between three and seven factors have been delineated to explain why adults participate, such as expectations of others, educational preparation, professional advancement, social stimulation, and cognitive interest. A number of other models, grounded in characteristics of individual learners, have been developed to further explain participation; several of these models also link a more sociological or contextual approach with that of the individual backgrounds of learners (for example, Sissel, 1997).

Although learning on one's own or self-directed learning has been the primary mode of learning throughout the ages, systematic studies in this arena did not become prevalent until the 1970s and the 1980s (Caffarella & O'Donnell, 1987). The majority of this work draws from humanistic philosophy, which posits personal growth as the goal of adult learning. Therefore, understanding how individuals go about the process of learning on their own and what attributes can be associated with learners who are self-directed have been the two major threads of this research tradition. The process of self-directed learning was first conceived as primarily linear, using much of the same language we used to describe learning processes in formal settings (Knowles, 1970; Tough, 1971). The emphasis was placed on what skills and competencies learners needed to be self-directed in their learning endeavors. As more complex models were developed, this emphasis began to shift to viewing the self-directed learning process as much more of a trail and error activity, with many loops and curves. In addition, as in the participation literature, contextual aspects of the process, such as the circumstances learners found themselves within, were found to also be important (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Garrison, 1997).

Transformational learning theory is a third area of research focusing on the individual perspective. First articulated by Mezirow in 1978, transformational learning theory is about change--dramatic, fundamental changes in the way individuals see themselves and the world in which they live (Mezirow, 1991). The mental constructions of experience, inner meaning, and critical self-reflection are common components of this approach. Adults examine the underlying assumptions on which they have built their lives. This self-reflection is often triggered by a major dilemma or problem, and may be undertaken individually as well as collectively with others who share similar problems or dilemmas. The end result of this process is a change in one's perspective. Although there are also a number of writers who have or would like to connect this transformational learning process more to social action than individual change, the predominate work has been and continues to be done from the individual perspective (Taylor, 1997).

The Contextual Perspective

The contextual perspective takes into account two important elements: the interactive nature of learning and the structural aspects of learning grounded in a sociological framework. Although the contextual perspective is not new to adult learning, it has resurfaced as an important consideration over the past decade (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Tennant & Pogson, 1995). The interactive dimension acknowledges that learning can not be separated from the context in which the learning takes place. In other words, the learner's situation and the learning context are as important to the learning process as what the individual learner and/or instructor brings to that situation. Recent theories of learning from experience (Bateson, 1994); situated cognition (Wilson, 1993), cognitive and intellectual development (Kegan, 1994), and writings on reflective practice (Boud & Walker, 1992; Boud & Miller, 1996) inform this dimension of the contextual approach. In exploring the interactive dimension of the contextual perspective we describe situated cognition and reflective practice.

In situated cognition, one cannot separate the learning process from the situation in which the learning takes place. Knowledge and the process of learning within this framework are viewed as "a product of the activity, context, and culture in which it is developed and used" (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989, p. 32). The proponents of the situated view of learning argue that learning for everyday living (which includes our practice as professionals) happens only "among people acting in culturally organized settings" (Wilson, 1993, p. 76). In other words the physical and social experiences and situations in which learners find themselves and the tools they use in that experience are integral to the entire learning process. One important idea that emanates from making the assumption that learning and knowing are primarily a cultural phenomenon moves the study of learning into the social and political realm and raises the issues of knowledge and power as legitimate aspects of adult learning.

The tenants of situated cognition are often played out in the more recent depictions of reflective practice (Wilson, 1993). Reflective practice allows us to make judgements in complex and murky situations--judgements based on experience and prior knowledge--while we are still engaged in that practice. Three major assumptions undergird the process of reflective practice from a contextual standpoint: (1) those involved in reflective practice are committed to both problem finding and problem solving; (2) reflective practice means making judgments about what actions will be taken in a particular situation; and (3) issues of power and oppression in the judgment making process need to be addressed. The most predominate way adult educators have incorporated an interactive reflective mode is through what Schon (1987) has termed "reflection-in-action". Reflection-in-action assists us in reshaping "what we are doing while we are doing it" (Schon, 1987, p. 26), and is often characterized as being able to "think on our feet". In addition to Schon's work, useful models of reflective practice include the work of Boud and Walker (1992) and Boud and Miller (1996).

The second dimension of the contextual perspective, the structural dimension, argues that factors such a race, class, gender, and ethnicity need to be taken into consideration in the learning process. Being white or of color or being male or female, for example, does influence the way we learn and even what we learn. The structural dimension of adult learning is interwoven into a number of research strands, such as work on adult cognitive development (Goldberger, 1996), adult development and learning (Pratt, 1991), participation studies (Sparks, 1998), and indigenous learning (Cajete, 1994).

The strongest voices for the structural dimension are those scholars writing from a feminist, critical, or postmodern viewpoint (Collins, 1995; Freire, 1970; Hayes & Colin, 1994; Tisdell, 1998; Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997; Welton, 1995). Those studying adult learning from these theoretical perspectives ask questions regarding whose interests are being served by the programs being offered, who really has access to these programs, and who has the control to make changes in the learning process and outcomes. Our assumptions about the nature of knowledge--including what counts as knowledge, where it is located, and how it is acquired--are also challenged. Fundamental to these questions are the themes of power and oppression in both the process and organization of the learning enterprise. Are those who hold the power really operating in the best interests of those being educated? Do our behaviors and actions as educators actually reinforce our power positions, or do they acknowledge and use the experiences and knowledge of those with whom we work, especially those who have been traditionally under-represented in our adult learning programs (the poor, people of color)? Do we use our power as instructors and leaders in adult education to either avoid or ban discussions about the importance of race, gender, ethnicity, and class and the adult learning enterprise?

Linking the Perspectives

We believe that research in adult education should continue to be done from both the individual and contextual perspectives. For example, what we are currently learning about the neurobiology of learning has the potential for greatly expanding our knowledge about learning disabilities in adulthood, the importance of emotions in the learning process, and how biological changes in adulthood are linked to learning. Likewise, we still need more in-depth exploration of both the interactive and structural dimensions of the contextual aspects of learning, including such areas as reflective practice, and the influence of race, gender, class, and ethnicity on how and what adults learn. In addition, we strongly support the further development of research that links the individual and contextual perspectives. An integrative perspective means conceptualizing learning in adulthood using a combination of two major lens or frames: (1) an awareness of individual learners and how they learn; and (2) an understanding of how the context shapes learners, instructors, and the learning transaction itself.

A number of adult education scholars acknowledge the importance of taking into account both the individual and contextual aspects of adult learning. Their work provide a starting place for researchers who want to focus on the integrative perspective of learning in adulthood. For example, Jarvis (1987) writes "that learning is not just a psychological process that happens in splendid isolation from the world in which the learner lives, but that it is intimately related to that world and affected by it" (p.11). Likewise, Tennant and Pogson (1995) highlight both psychological and social development and their relationship to adult learning. They stress that "the nature, timing, and processes of development will vary according to the experiences and opportunities of individuals and the circumstances in their lives" (Tennant & Pogson, 1995, p. 197). And, Heaney (1995) observes that "a narrow focus on individual--in-the-head images of learning--separates learning from its social contents, both the social relations which are reproduced in us and the transformative consequences of our learning on society" (p. 149). Rather from Heaney's perspective, "learning is an individual's ongoing negotiation with communities of practice which ultimately gives definition to both self and that practice" (p. 148). In a more practical vein, Pratt and Associates (1998) outline five alternative frames for

understanding teaching, some of which capture both the individual and contextual nature of adult learning.

Some researchers have even confirmed that the integrative perspective of learning can provide rich frameworks for thinking about specific aspects of adult learning. For example, Sissel (1997), in her ethnographic investigation of Head Start as a setting for adult education, found that both individual and contextual factors influenced the participation and the learning of the parents involved with the Head Start Program. More specifically, the positive and negative interactions of parents and staff, which were influenced by issues of both power and control, lead her to propose a "three part framework regarding the interaction of the concepts of capacity, power, and connection" to explain the participation and learning of this specific population. Likewise, Fleming (1998) also found that contextual and individual factors surfaced as influencing both what and how adults learn in residential learning experiences. Her respondents first affirmed that the context of learning, that is being in residence, did indeed make a difference. "Participants learned through being *immersed* in their learning, and being able to focus for uninterrupted periods of time and with greater intensity than usual...[In addition], they learned about themselves and others as a result of being forced by the demands of living together *to go beyond their own comfort limits of personal interaction*. Although uncomfortable, participants valued this learning" (p. 266). Her subjects also spoke about individual changes that resulted as a result of their learning. For some the changes were short-term and directly linked to the time they were in residence, such as expanding their self-awareness and feeling more personally creative in their learning. Others described changes that were long-lasting in nature, as "individuals underwent *personal transformations*, related primarily to developing more positive feelings about themselves, and the decisions they had made, and could make in their lives" (p. 267). As a result of her findings, Fleming has proposed an organizational framework of residential learning that encompasses both individual and contextual elements, and links these elements together through two overarching themes of detachment and continuity.

In conclusion, we advocate that more research be undertaken from an integrative framework. While we are well aware of the challenges of studying adult education from this integrative perspective, we believe that accounting for both the individual learner and context of the learning offers the greatest potential for advancing our understanding of the complex phenomenon of adult learning.

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