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The interconnecting web: Adult learning cohorts as sites for collaborative learning, feminist pedagogy and experiential ways of knowing.

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Abstract: This paper describes research conducted to understand and give meaning to the experience of adults learning in cohort groups, in non-traditional graduate and undergraduate degree programs in higher education. The researcher sought to enter into the lived world of the learners to view the experience from their perspectives.

Introduction

A cohort, as defined in this study is a group of 12-20 adult students who meet together once a week for a four hour block of time over a period of 14-18 months, to complete a sequence of courses leading to a degree. As a facilitator of such groups for over 12 years, I have made some interesting observations. The students come into the learning group with no prior knowledge of each other and perhaps little in common except a mutual desire to complete their degree. Many are attracted by the accelerated nature of the program and the fact that it is designed to accommodate the schedule of working adults. A few have had prior cohort experience and come mainly for that reason, but by and large that is not a driving force for enrollment.

As time goes on, something happens to this collection of individuals; they become a group. As they work together and share experiences over time, they get to know each other. In many cases, the group becomes an essential part of the learning process. Many students remark that their self-confidence has increased, sometimes dramatically, and they acknowledge how much they have learned from each other.

This study is informed by literature in the fields of experiential learning, collaborative learning, and feminist pedagogy as well the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, Ira Shor and Myles Horton.

Methodology

Data were obtained through conversational interviews and focus group discussions with 29 students and through analysis of reflection papers written by an additional 18 students. The participants who ranged in age from 23-64, were students or recent graduates of degree programs

in Applied Behavioral Science, Management and Business, Adult Education or Health Care Leadership, at one university, which utilized the cohort model.

Hermeneutic phenomenological reflection as defined by Van Manen (1990) was the methodological tool for data analysis which allowed for both description and interpretation of lived experience. In hermeneutical research, data analysis is not a separate process from data gathering, nor does it stand apart from writing about the research. I began my analysis after the first interview, which was taped and transcribed. The first reading occurred while simultaneously listening to the tape to get a holistic sense of what occurred. In essence, I was re-experiencing the interview, putting it out in front of me in a very literal sense in order truly "see" the experience. The second reading was more analytical. Words, phrases and paragraphs that seemed to have meaning were highlighted. Notes or memos were written in the margins to suggest ideas, questions, possible connections, and preliminary thematic constructs. For each of the identified themes I began to look at how the experience of being in a cohort was intersubjectively viewed by the participants. I used a reflective mode to begin forming an interpretation of what I was learning.

Findings

Six intersecting themes emerged as structures of the experience of learning in a cohort group (Lawrence, 1996):

Building a learning community - Participants created a group identity, personality, history and culture over time. This was characterized by shared commitment and mutual respect. Since participants worked together over an extended period of time, they got to know one another at a deeper level than classmates in a single course. As they became more comfortable with one another they felt safe to express what they were thinking and feeling without fear of judgement. This perception of safety was critical for meaningful communication to occur. Leadership in the group was democratic rather than hierarchical. The instructors were seen as playing a pivotal role in the functioning of the group by setting the climate for collaborative learning, refraining the role of 'expert,' and encouraging and promoting meaningful dialogue.

Experiencing a collaborative process- Experiential learning played a significant role in the cohorts. Students discovered that hearing the experiences of others helped them to learn by introducing new perspectives on issues. Hearing peers experiences helped them to connect to new ideas and concepts when their own knowledge base was limited. Students and teachers co-created knowledge through mutual inquiry and building on the experiences and perspectives of others.

Knowing and learning- Cohort members became open to new ideas as they actively engaged in critical reflection. Many developed an attitude of openness to new experiences, and consideration of alternative ideas and perspectives. They began to view learning as a process of mutual discovery. Most of the participants gradually began to trust the process that they could direct

their own learning activities and that there were few single correct answers or universal truths. Meeting the course requirements became secondary to learning for many of them.

Valuing multiple perspectives-Divergent views expressed from different backgrounds, experience and knowledge bases opened participants eyes to new ways of thinking, creating increased opportunities for learning. Each member was recognized as having something valuable to contribute to the group. Diversity both enhanced and inhibited the learning process. Age and occupational differences were valued by all while differences in race and sexual orientation caused tension in some groups.

Bridging interpersonal connections-Cohorts are made up of networks of relationships. Subgroups often form which can be positive in that they provide motivation, support and connectedness among the members. They can also be a negative influence by dividing the group and limiting opportunities for differing perspectives to be heard. At a minimum level, the group members accepted one another and developed good working relationships. Some groups went beyond acceptance to empathy and caring for one another. Often genuine friendships formed. Group members gave each other moral and emotional support to keep one another from becoming discouraged. Individuals felt a sense of belonging. They did not have to go through the process alone.

Facilitating individual development-Experiencing success and being validated by peers increased individuals' self-confidence. Individual success and perseverance was nurtured by the group in many cases. The cohort often represented a source of stability in an otherwise chaotic life. Individuals often experienced transformation and a growth of self-knowledge. The group acted as a mirror, allowing the individual to learn about herself through the eyes of others.

Discussion

Learning in a cohort differs from traditional education in many ways. The most striking difference is that students become interdependent upon one another. Their individual and collective knowledge and experiences are combined to contribute to the learning process. The fact that they get to know one another increases their participation and their opportunities for learning. In an environment where learners' experience is valued and sought, students share more with each other.

In order for a cohort to be a positive growth-enhancing experience for its members, certain factors needed to be in place. Participants thrived in an environment where there was mutual trust and respect. It was important that group members shared in their commitment to the group and to all of its members. The students who felt the most positive about their cohorts freely shared their experiences and sought out the experiences of others. They questioned and challenged one another in critical ways and developed group goals for everyone to succeed. In order for learning to take place, it was essential that individuals were open to learning from one another. This meant a willingness to question their own assumptions and learning to view ideas from multiple perspectives. In the most successful groups, diversity was valued. Many students

broke out of their comfort zones of dealing with people who were similar to them. This often meant making a special effort to vary their vision like a photographer hanging over the edge of a cliff to get a different view. (Lawrence and Mealman, 1996) They developed caring and supportive relationships with their cohort members which helped them to keep going during stressful periods. Individuals found joy in learning which extended far beyond their school experience.

Many of the cohort participants admitted to undergoing what Mezirow (1991) referred to as a perspective transformation. They changed in profound ways, most significantly in the way they viewed learning and the role of their own and others' experience in the learning process. As Bonnie described:

I've always been very strict in my beliefs, very careful, very square. This is where they start. This is where they end. Now we have not had a class on religion in my whole master degree, and [yet] I am so different and have explored so many different things and read so many different books and listened to tapes and visited other churches, and I know that it has sparked my not being afraid to explore, hearing other people express some of their feelings... So I realized just the other day that I have done over a total half circle here, and I'm nowhere that I was before, and I didn't plan on taking this trip, I'm just there.

Most of the students were conditioned from prior schooling into what one participant referred to as the "teach and test mode." They believed that knowledge was "out there" somewhere and that it was the role of the teacher to impart this knowledge to them. They were often uncomfortable with ambiguity and frustrated when the answers were not immediately forthcoming from the instructor. They gradually began to shift their view of the authority of knowledge (Bruffee, 1993) from the instructor to themselves and their classmates. The focus changed from what they needed to do to meet the teacher's expectations to what they wanted to know. They began to take more responsibility for their own learning and encouraged each other to take that responsibility by example. Once their perspective of acquiring and constructing knowledge shifted, their awareness of the learning opportunities around them increased. They saw themselves as lifelong learners.

Cohorts have the potential to create an environment conducive to learning as described above; however, in some groups there were factors that inhibited learning. These included: unequal levels of commitment by members, i.e. some members not following through on tasks; closed-mindedness on the part of some members such as believing that they are always right and not willing to consider other views; group members whose learning styles were more independent who refused to collaborate; members who dominated or withdrew from the group; and members who persisted in viewing the instructor as the ultimate authority, discounting the experience and knowledge of their classmates.

Much of the learning that takes place in the group depends upon the motivation of the individuals. Nevertheless, instructors who understand learning in cohorts from the perspective of

the learner can have an impact on the experience by attending to group dynamics, promoting a safe environment, de-centering authority, promoting interdependence, maximizing the potential for co-creativity, encouraging exploration of multiple perspectives, valuing experiential ways of knowing, and helping students develop support systems within the group.

Experiential Ways of Knowing -Many of the participants began to value and appreciate experiential ways of knowing. They had learned experientially in the past, but, as Horton (1990) suggested, were not aware that their experiences had value. The cohort provided many opportunities for them to share experiences, build on the experiences of others, explore the meaning in those experiences and use their experience as a way of accessing theory. Another way they used experience was in the co-creation of knowledge. One person would share an experience or an idea and someone else would add their interpretation from their own frame of reference helping both to understand the idea more completely. This would often include the use of storytelling and metaphor. This level of sharing occurred most often in a trusting environment where people felt safe to express tentative, not fully-formed ideas. In the end, the sum of what they understood was greater than the contributions of each member. To co-create knowledge with others reframes the role of the teacher as expert. People need to believe that their experience and that of their peers is a valid source of knowledge.

Theories of experiential learning have been around since the time of Dewey (1916). Kolb (1984) developed a model of experiential learning that included four access points for apprehending experiential knowledge: concrete experience, reflection, abstraction and experimentation. Of the theorists who have attempted to expand on Kolb's model (Jarvis, 1987; Burnard, 1988; Hutchings and Wutzdorff, 1988), only Burnard acknowledged experience sharing as an integral part of the experiential learning cycle. This sharing of experience is critical to learning in a cohort.

Individuals come into the group with their own unique stocks of experiences. Experiences don't always educate (Jarvis, 1987; Horton, 1990) but they can provide a strong foundation for learning. In a cohort, people get to know one another over time. During this time the members gradually share bits and pieces of their experiences as they become relevant to the discussion. As participants share their lived experiences they allow others to enter into them. More than merely hearing about someone's experience, as one enters into a dialogue with that person, it becomes part of their own lived experience. Each new experience shared is viewed from the context of what one already knows about that person, which is more than the sum of their experiences. A cohort allows for one to view experiences in a more holistic way.

Experiential learning in a cohort involves making sense of one's experience not only through personal reflection, as Kolb (1984) suggested, but through sharing the experience with others. Often the very act of articulating an experience in words helps the individual to understand its meaning. Hearing others interpretations of the experience in a group has the added benefit of allowing the individual to "see" the experience from multiple perspectives. As Kate observed:

Here we were living through, reading about theories of adult development and learning, or stages of adulthood, and everybody was at a different stage, and we

could see what was happening in each other's lives. So to me, that made it a lot more fun and exciting.

Collaborative learning assumes that knowledge is socially, rather than individually, constructed (Bruffee, 1993). A limitation of previous research has been that the time frame of a traditional college class isn't sufficiently long enough for true collaboration to occur. Because students remain together for an extended period of time, the cohort provides an effective model for studying the effects of collaborative learning. The reality of knowing one's classmates over time, sharing multiple experiences, co-creating knowledge by exploring issues from many perspectives, building supportive relationships, democratic participation and modeling a passion for learning contributes to the collaborative learning process. This study did not attempt to evaluate learning in cohorts. It does not claim that collaborative learning is superior or inferior to others forms of learning. Its purpose was to understand the meaning of the learning experience for cohort participants. It does, however, suggest a starting point for understanding how collaboration impacts individual learning for some adults.

Feminist Pedagogy-There are no studies to my knowledge that link collaborative learning with feminist pedagogy, yet feminist pedagogy is by definition collaborative, with its focus on relationships and democratic participation. (Schniedewind, 1985; Belenky et al. 1986; Maher, 1987; Shrewsbury, 1987) Students in cohorts become interdependent upon one another so that learning is less teacher-centered. Both men and women come to appreciate subjective ways of knowing where experience, intuition and emotion are valued along with rationality. Feminist pedagogy assumes that there are multiple realities rather than universal truths. The cohort creates a context for these multiple realities to be explored. Shrewsbury (1987) envisioned a feminist or liberatory classroom to include students engaged with one another and the community in a process of continuous reflection, a network of relationships where students respect each other's differences and care about one another's learning, learning that builds on the experiences of the participants and a democratic community where power is shared. This study has shown that the potential for this sort of classroom is high in a cohort group if the students are equally committed to their learning process.

This research explored the phenomenon of co-creativity. This process utilizes experiential and collaborative learning as well as feminist pedagogy. Students and teachers co-created knowledge in the classroom through dialogue and experience sharing. Participants alternatively described this process as "bridging" or "sparking" off of the ideas of others and thus making connections. The cohort is ripe with opportunities for co-creation. This process rarely happens in a traditional lecture course where one engages with the material through individual reflection, if at all. In a cohort which allows for democratic participation, students can immediately verbalize their thoughts, thus making connections to the material. When others contribute their ideas as well, a bridge is built which increases understanding. Tentative ideas can be expressed to be played with and explored by the group. The result is a collective knowledge that is co-created by the group.

Although students study theories of adult learning, they don't fully understand what it means to be an adult learner until they reflect on their experiences. Adult learning in a cohort is approached in ways that are congruent with individual learning styles and nurtured in a group environment. It involves making individual and group decisions, thinking through ideas, and

creating knowledge. Adult learning also involves unlearning. This means letting go of assumptions about universal truths and embracing multiple realities. It involves admitting one's ignorance in order to actively learn from others. It involves stretching one's limits beyond one's assumed capabilities. Learning in a cohort is a collective process that sparks passion from one individual to the next and grows into a shared passion.

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