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Hal Beder
Rutgers University

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Teaching in Adult Literacy Education: Learner-Centered Intentions, Teacher-Directed Instruction

Hal Beder
Rutgers University

Abstract: This paper describes and attempts to explain an apparent contradiction noted in a study of classroom dynamics in adult literacy education: while in interviews adult literacy teachers expressed the intention of being learner centered, when classes were observed it was found that instruction was highly teacher-directed.

Purpose and Perspective

There are many factors which influence how teachers teach in adult literacy education and other venues as well. Among them are formal training, socialization into the role of teacher, teachers' beliefs regarding how they should teach and the context with which they presented in the teaching situation. Context includes such things as the nature of the learners, expectations of influential others and available resources. This paper describes and attempts to explain an apparent contradiction noted in a study of classroom dynamics in adult literacy education: while in interviews adult literacy teachers expressed the intention of being learner centered, when classes were observed it was found that instruction was highly teacher-directed.

Methods

The unit of analysis of the study was twenty adult literacy education classrooms. Research sites were chosen to maximize program and learner diversity. To that end, classes were selected to represent each of 18 characteristics which previous research had shown to be "shaping variables" of adult literacy instruction [e.g. geographic location, program type, urban/suburban/rural, instructional level of the class etc.]. Classes were selected in seven states. For each class, data were collected on four occasions. First, the class was observed by a trained observer. Then the teacher was interviewed. A second observation followed and finally students were interviewed when possible. The teacher interview was open-ended and was focused on the first observation in order to gather data about the teacher's intentions for and perceptions of the class observed. The interview also gave the observer an opportunity to discuss with the teacher any episodes in the observation that needed clarification in respect to their meaning or purpose. After each data collection, detailed and comprehensive field notes were completed. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data were analyzed using a grounded theory methodology. First, after thoroughly studying the over seventy sets of field notes, which were 15 to 20 pages in length, a preliminary set of thematic categories was identified by the researchers. These categories were primarily descriptive of classroom dynamics and interactions. Then the field notes were entered into the

NUDIST computer program for qualitative analysis. Starting with the preliminary categories, three researchers then coded the data and in the process identified new themes and refined and elaborated the initial themes.

Findings

Gillespie (1989) advocates an instructional model for adult literacy that emphasizes critical thinking. Fingeret and Jurmo (1989) and Auerbach (1993) prescribe a highly participatory form of adult literacy education and Equipped for the Future (Stein 1999) advocates a form of adult literacy based on what learners need to do in their roles of worker, parent and citizen. When we interviewed teachers regarding their intentions for the class we had previously observed them teaching, their expressed intentions were consonant with this prescriptive literature. Their most commonly expressed intention was to meet learners' needs. Other commonly expressed intentions were to teach life skills relevant to learners' work and family contexts, to create a positive learning atmosphere, to interest and engage learners, and to develop independent, self-motivated learners. Taken together, this constellation of intentions fits well within the progressive-humanist tradition of adult education expressed by Lindeman (1926), Knowles (1970) and a host of others. It is decidedly learner-centered in its orientation.

In contrast, the data from our 40 observations portrayed a type of instruction that was the near antithesis of learner-centered instruction. In each and every case the organizing unit of instruction was a teacher-prepared and teacher-delivered lesson. There was virtually no evidence of substantive learner input into decisions about instruction. Communication was overwhelmingly teacher-to-learner, learner-to-teacher. Learner-to-learner communication rarely occurred unless the teacher directed it to occur through such things as peer coaching exercises.

The structure of teacher delivered lessons was very similar to what Mehan (1979) described in his observational study of an elementary education classroom--a lesson followed by an elicitation during which the teacher posed questions and learners responded with answers. Elicitations have a dual purpose. They enabled the teacher to determine if learners had "learned" the lesson and they supplemented the content of the lesson by reinforcing learners' correct responses and demonstrating the correct answer to learners whose responses were incorrect.

Mehan identified four kinds of elicitations, choice, product, process and metaprocess. In a choice elicitation, the teacher asks a question and directs the learners to choose from several alternative answers, only one of which is factually correct. In Mehan's study, choice elicitations were rare. In our study, they were nonexistent. In a product elicitation, the teacher asks questions designed to elicit correct factual information, as in the following example from our study.

The class begins work on relief maps. The teacher is sitting on a chair in front of her desk. She asks questions such as: "What is a relief map." "How do you know what mountain range is higher on a relief map?" "What range of mountains are on the West Coast?" "What mountain ranges do you find in South America?" "What continent has few mountains?" Sometimes students answer as a group, sometimes individually. Most answers are one-word answers. "Shading." "Cascade." "Africa." All questions were meant to elicit factual answers. Sometimes the

teacher called upon students directly. "Daniel, can you name one Great Lake in the Great Lake area?"

The overwhelming majority of elicitations we observed were of the product elicitation variety, elicitations where correct factual information was sought from the learners in the question/answer sequence. This suggests that for the most part, adult literacy instruction is oriented towards the acquisition of discrete basic skills.

Mehan's third type of elicitation is process elicitation, a series of questions designed to elicit learners' opinions. This is an example from our fieldnotes:

The teacher begins to ask questions about the story the class was reading. She is in front of the room. Everyone else is sitting. The teacher says, "What do you think?" A learner answers, "It was cool." Another says, "It was educational." A third says, "What happened to Pycillicia, that do happen." The teacher says, "What happened?" and the learner responds, "The feelings, being judged from the outside, not inside. That wasn't right." Another learner says, "It happens a lot. You're judged by the color of your skin."

Process elicitations were evident in only about a fifth of the classes we observed, and for the most part, they did not segue into open discussions in which learners interacted with other learners. Rather, even with process elicitations communication was generally teacher to learner and learner to teacher.

The fourth type of elicitation was termed by Mehan metaprocess elicitation. Here learners are asked to reflect on the process of making connections between elicitations and responses, to formulate and justify the basis of their reasoning. This form of elicitation is related to the formation of critical thinking, and it was extremely rare in classes we observed. Indeed in only two classes did anything even close to a metaprocess elicitation occur systematically. Here is an excerpt from a reading lesson we observed in that class.

Teacher: Ok. If you were reading this by yourself, would you keep going?

Learner: Um Hm. I would want to read about these dreams that they are talking about.

Teacher: Great. So keep going." The learner keeps reading. ".....the sun is gone down but he has left his footprints in the sky.

Teacher: What does that mean?

Learner: Saying he has left his footprints in the sky.

Teacher: The sun?

Learner: Sun or something? The clouds or something? I think it would be the clouds because you can see different things in the clouds.

Teacher: Oh I see, so the image of the cloud. You know what I got from it is that the sun has light and it had left some of the light in the sky. One thing that's really helpful is that this whole story takes place in the country. So nature's really important. So you have to kind of think of yourself.....have you ever gone out to the country or ever lived out in the country?

Learner: Yeah.
More discussion follows.

The discrepancy between teachers what say they are trying to do and what we observed them doing leads to an apparent contradiction: Although adult literacy teachers intend to be learner-centered they, teach in teacher-directed ways. Why? Although it could be that teachers were induced to teach in teacher-directed ways by supervisors or other forces, we found no evidence of this. Rather, we conclude that there two reasons. The first pertains to the socialization process that all teachers and learners are products of. The roles of teacher and student are two of the most intensely socialized roles in our society. The great majority of the teachers we observed were certified in K-12 education. For them, socialization into the teacher role began in grade school and continued through their teacher training. For learners, socialization into the student role also began in grade school and continued until they dropped out of school.

We infer that teachers taught in teacher-directed ways because that that way of teaching was a deeply ingrained product of their socialization. Moreover, since learners were socialized as students in the same system, they expected teach-directed instruction and this reified teachers' behavior. Because teachers were so deeply socialized into a teacher-directed form of instruction, they might not have been entirely cognizant that they were teaching as they did. In effect, teacher-directed instruction was reproduced by socialization in the k-12 system, the net result being that teacher-directed instruction pervades adult literacy education too.

The second reason for the apparent contradiction was that teachers believed that their learners were primarily motivated toward obtaining their GEDs, and the perceived benefits of doing so, in the shortest possible time. Furthermore, the amount of time available for instruction was relatively short in comparison to elementary, secondary or higher education. Thus teachers wanted to maximize efficiency and believed that teacher-directed, basic skills-oriented instruction was the best way of doing so.

Although instruction itself was teacher-directed, the teachers we observed were decidedly learner-centered in their affective relationships with learners. Teachers liberally praised learners for correct answers and rarely sanctioned learners negatively for such things as being tardy or tuning out. Most teachers maintained a helping posture in class. Thus, there appears to be a duality to the meaning teachers of adult literacy education ascribe to their teaching. While their instruction is teacher directed, their learner-centered values and beliefs are manifest in their affective relations with learners. In this sense, for adult literacy teachers being learner-centered is not a teaching technology or methodology. Rather, it is a set of values that guide teacher-learner interactions.

Implications

If teacher-directed instruction is indeed a product of intense and protracted socialization and commonly held beliefs about learners' motivations, then changing teacher-directed behavior will be a very difficult task, perhaps requiring re-socialization. Such an effort may be beyond the means of the current professional development system in adult literacy education.

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