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The Intricacies of Initiate-Response-Evaluate in Adult Literacy Education

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Abstract: The results of a study of adult literacy education classroom dynamics found that the predominant mode of instruction closely parallels the initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) mode that Mehan (1979) identified in his study of an elementary education classroom. The initial conclusion of this study was that adult literacy education closely parallels elementary education. A closer analysis of the data, generated some interesting differentiations.

Introduction

The objective of this research was to provide a detailed and comprehensive analytical description of classroom behavior in adult literacy education. When it was conceived, the research question was very general, "What is transpiring in adult literacy classrooms?" As data continued to be collected, the questions became more focused. For example, "What instructional activities are taking place in these classes?" "What types of questions are teachers asking?" During the data analysis phase the question became, "What does this mean?" The scholarly literature was drawn upon to make sense of the data. Yet the initial search of the prescriptive and empirical literature on adult literacy and learning did not provide the guidance that was needed. A search of the literature on classroom dynamics in elementary education proved more fruitful. Hence, the work of Hugh Mehan (1979) illuminated the findings of this study. Had his study been reviewed prior to beginning the study it might well have been dispatched as being irrelevant to a study of adult literacy education. After all, Mehan's portrayal of an elementary education class presents a picture that differs substantially from adult education theory and the prescriptive literature of adult literacy education.

Methodology

Twenty classroom sites in eight states were selected to maximize program and learner diversity. For each class, data were collected on four occasions. First the class was observed by a trained data collector.. Then an open-ended teacher interview was conducted which focused on the first observation. It afforded the observer an opportunity to discuss with the teacher any episodes in the observation that needed clarification in respect to meaning and purpose. A second observation followed. After each data collection, detailed and comprehensive field notes were completed. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data were analyzed using grounded theory methodology. First a set of descriptive categories which were representative of classroom dynamics and interaction were identified. Starting with these preliminary categories, three researchers then coded the data and in the process identified new themes and refined and elaborated the initial themes. The coding of the three analysts was merged using the QSR

NUDIST Merge Computer Program and categories were collapsed, renamed and expanded as necessary.

Theoretical Framework

In his seminal study of classroom dynamics, Mehan (1979) analyzed the language used during classroom interaction from the point of view of the function that it played during a lesson. He discovered that teachers initiate an elicitation, the students respond, and then there is an evaluative interaction. These interactions were labeled Initiate-Response-Evaluate (IRE). Mehan located four distinct types of elicitations in the instructional phase of the lessons analyzed. 1) Choice elicitations dictate the student to agree or disagree with a statement provided by the teacher. 2) Product elicitations require students to provide factual responses. 3) Process elicitations call for students' opinions or interpretations. 4) Metaprocess elicitations ask students to reflect upon the process of making connections between elicitations and responses to formulate the grounds of their reasoning. Mehan found that choice and product elicitation were the most frequent. According to Dillon (1990), the preponderance of teacher-generated question and the paucity of student-talk has been confirmed by numerous other studies.

Findings

The findings from this study were quite similar. Product elicitation overwhelmingly predominated, followed, to a much lesser extent, by process elicitation. Choice and metaprocess elicitations were barely existent. Yet, what was so surprising was the pervasiveness of its occurrence. IRE predominated in the majority of the 20 adult literacy in the sample regardless of their geographical location or whether they were located in public schools, community colleges or community-based organizations and regardless of the contextual focus such as basic education, GED, workplace literacy, and family literacy. The high predominance of product elicitation suggests that adult literacy education is highly oriented toward discrete skills development in its structure. Given this conclusion, it was very easy to mistakenly infer that most adult literacy classrooms are very similar in their structure. Consequently, it was necessary to expand the analyses of the IRE construct and include variables such as goals of the teacher, learner to learner interaction, relevance of curricula to their lives, and classroom environment in order to analyze the nuances of classroom dynamics in adult literacy classrooms and distinguish them from one another. This analyses led to the development of a typology.

A Typology

In respect to the structure and content of instruction, the classes observed can be divided into two broad categories: discrete-skill-oriented and making-meaning-oriented.

Discrete-skill orientation

The overwhelming majority of the classes observed (16 or 80%), fall into the category of discrete-skill-orientation. Attributes of a discrete-skill-orientation are:

- Teacher-prepared and teacher-delivered lessons focusing on the conveyance of factual information and literal recall from learners.

- The predominance of commercially published materials for reading, writing, math and GED instruction.
- Lessons that are organized into distinct time periods. Each lesson has a clear beginning and a clear end.
- Focus on the discrete skills that encompass traditional subject areas. For example, reading is divided into such things as comprehension, inference, facts and opinions, etc. In Math there is an emphasis on the rules governing mathematical operations.
- A high degree of teacher-to-learner and learner-to-teacher interaction and a low degree of learner-to-learner interaction.

Although a discrete-skills-orientation was clearly evident in all the sixteen classes grouped under this category, there were differences among the classes that can be explained by three sub-categories: decontextualized instruction, contextualized instruction and disjointed instruction.

Decontextualized instruction.

The discrete-skills-oriented classes identified as being decontextualized represent the purest form of discrete-skill-oriented instruction; nine of the classes observed fell into this category. Lessons focused clearly on discrete skill building and the elicitations that followed were almost exclusively product elicitations. Teachers seemed primarily concerned with moving learners from one level to another, from pre-GED to GED for example, or from one grade level on a standardized test to another grade level. The structure of these classes revolved around teacher-prepared and teacher-delivered lessons organized into distinct time units that moved from one activity or subject area to another. For the most part, the content of instruction was framed by the subject being taught and the commercially published ABE materials employed in teaching it, rather than by the systematically diagnosed needs of learners or by learners' adult experience. In decontextualized instruction, free and open discussion characterized by learner to learner interaction and use of authentic activities was very rare.

Contextualized Instruction.

Four classes were categorized as contextualized. Although in contextualized classes product elicitations dominated and the emphasis was still on discrete-skills, process elicitations that sought learners' attitudes and opinions were also part of classroom discourse. Occasionally instructional content was contextualized around themes that were related to the learners' lives, although in most cases the teacher generated the themes. While some materials used were commercially published, authentic reading and writing materials and activities were apparent too. In short, although the contextualized classes we observed were clearly discrete-skills in orientation, and although instruction was usually decontextualized, there were also episodes where instruction became contextualized around the lives and experiences of learners.

Disjointed Instruction.

Three of the sixteen classes fell into this category. In disjointed instruction, the instructional content was so unfocussed that teaching goals and objectives could not be inferred from observation and much of what transpired seemed to happen by chance. When learners engaged in academic tasks, they tended not to complete them. Teachers seemed more focused on keeping learners busy and making them comfortable than on providing coherently organized instruction. Although little teaching per se took place in these classes, when it did it was consistent with a

discrete-skill-orientation. Although teachers seemed to be concerned about their learners, this concern was expressed primarily through affective interactions rather than through structured learning activities. In disjointed instruction, it was as if affect had replaced substance.

Meaning-making orientation

A meaning-making-orientation is the second category. Only four of the twenty classes observed fell into the meaning-making category. The attributes of a making meaning -orientation are:

- In addition to reading, writing and mathematical skill development, meaning-making instruction focuses on such things as problem solving skills, critical thinking, creativity and social awareness.
- Meaning making instruction emphasizes process over structure and lessons are less likely to be structured into discrete units bounded by time.
- There is considerably more collaboration between teachers and learners than in discrete-skills-oriented classes
- For the most part, authentic materials are used rather than commercially published ones.
- Teachers tend to function more as facilitators and process managers than as conveyors.
- Authority relationships between teachers and learners tend to be more level than in discrete-skills classes. All the teachers in this category negotiated curricular content with learners to some extent.
- There is a high level of learner engagement.
- Communication is learner-to-learner as well as teacher-to-learner and learner-to teacher and learners express their feelings and opinions spontaneously.

Conclusions and Implications

The results of classification analysis clearly support one of the initial conclusions of this study that, for the most part, adult literacy instruction is oriented toward the conveyance of factual information and the development of discrete basic skills. This conclusion is supported by other studies in the field of adult literacy education (Purcell-Gates, Degener, & Jacobson, 1998; Young, Fitzgerald, Morgan, 1994; Collins, 1992; Koen, 1986; McCune & Alamprese, 1985; Mezirow, Darkenwald, & Knox, 1975). At the same time, however, the typology clarifies some of the differences among the classes observed. Although they are in the distinct minority, there are discrete-skills classes where instruction is to some degree contextualized around the lives and experiences of learners. There are also classes where instruction is disjointed and lacks focus, and there are making-meaning classes where process is emphasized over structure and an effort is made to develop problem solving skills, critical thinking and social awareness. This raises the question of what kind of instruction is best. On one hand, what is termed discrete-skill-oriented instruction may be the most efficient way of moving learners to higher levels as defined by commonly used standardized tests and the quickest way to help learners pass the GED tests. On the other, it could be that this form of instruction is inadequate if the objective is to prepare learners for meaningful employment in today's workforce or success in higher education.

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