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Examining Adult Learning Through the Lens of Culture: A U.S. Perspective

Badanie kształcenia osób dorosłych w ujęciu kulturowym
w perspektywie Stanów Zjednoczonych

Summary: This paper examines adult learning within United States based journals through the lens of culture. Four thematic areas from the literature are highlighted. These themes include: critically examining one's own and others' cultural stories; utilizing sociocultural approaches to facilitate or guide adult learning; developing and maintaining dialog; and incorporating strategies to improve people's cultural awareness and competency. Implications for practice are addressed throughout. A concluding discussion suggests areas for future research.

Keywords: adult learning, culture, United States.

Streszczenie: Zagadnienia zawarte w prezentowanym artykule dotyczą analizy wykorzystania aspektów kulturowych w literaturze Stanów Zjednoczonych. Artykuł porusza i skupia się na czterech obszarach literatury. Dotyczą one oceny krytycznej historii kulturowych własnych i innych osób, wykorzystanie społeczno-kulturowych podejść używanych do ułatwienia lub naprowadzenia uczenia się dorosłych, rozwijanie i utrzymywanie dialogu, oraz wprowadzenie strategii w celu poprawy świadomości kulturowej i kompetencji ludzi. W artykule zawarto sugestie możliwych obszarów dla przyszłych badań

Słowa kluczowe: uczenie się osób dorosłych, kultura, Stany Zjednoczone.

Introduction

The United States (U.S.) is a multicultural society in which intercultural and ethnic conflicts are part of everyday life and work experiences. To advocate for social justice and equality, U.S. adult educators, like adult educators in

other countries, have been exploring how best to assure education is inclusive of all cultural stories and how best to understand diverse communities of learners in complex, domestic and international environments. However, the dynamic, multicultural context determines that there will never be one crystal ball that facilitates the resolution of all intercultural and ethnic conflicts. Therefore, U.S. adult educators are reviewing both domestic and international adult learning practices to look for creative ways to facilitate adult learning.

Originating from a broader literature review, the purpose of this article is to explore adult learning practices through the lens of culture and to provide one practitioner's perspective on how that lens can be utilized to facilitate adult learning. The themes may inform multiple adult education contexts. Although each practitioner and scholar frames culture in a unique way, culture can be described as values, beliefs, and ways we perform (Bennett, 1993) or "the collective programming of the mind" (Hofstede, 1984, p. 51) that delineates a group from another. Culture is "personal, communal, familial, institutional, societal, and global" (Banks & Banks, 1989, p. 35).

For adult educators who are in need of practical guidance when working with culturally diverse populations, exploring adult learning through the lens of culture offers the potential to help them understand: (1) the necessity of critically examining one's own and the others' cultural stories (Clover, 2010; Rose-Cohen, 2004; Taylor, 2006;), (2) which sociocultural approaches are the most appropriate to facilitate or guide adult learning (Dass-Brailsford & Serrano, 2010; Sparks, 2002); (3) the importance of developing and maintaining a continuous dialog between one's own culture and others' cultures to assure the success of adult learning (Berry, 2005; Bersch, 2005; Faux, 2004; Hill, 2004; Storrs & Inderbitzin, 2006; Ziegahn, 2001;); and (4) how to incorporate strategies to improve cultural awareness and competency (Barber, 2003; Chang, 2004; Chang, 2007; Clover, 2010; Ewert, 2000; Ivers, 2007; Kerssen-Griep & Eilfer, 2008; MacDonnell & MacDonald, 2011; Smith & Neill, 2005; Vaynshtok, 2001/2002).

Within each specific theme, we give examples to articulate culture as a lens through which to view and facilitate adult learning. First, the themes of culture as a lens will be explored. Lastly, a discussion and future implications will be addressed.

Critically Examining One's Own and Others' Cultural Stories

Critical reflection on our own culture is important to facilitate quality adult learning. If we do not scrutinize the impact of our own culture on our instruction, we literally ask “learners who are not part of our culture to make a fuss and be noticed, or participate and be erased” (Rose-Cohen, 2004, p. 38), which is completely the opposite of what the field of adult education promotes. As Rose-Cohen noted (2004) a question as simple as “What does your name mean?” will ruthlessly make a student “the specimen of our study” (p. 38) even if the person who asks the question has no intention to do so. Therefore, conscious recognition of and critical reflection on our own culture offers adult educators the insight to instruct culturally diverse adult learners by carefully using the type of language that “allows the student the momentary privilege of being a person and not an encyclopaedia entry” (p. 38).

Further, our culture constantly intersects with students' cultures and we can miss precious teaching moments if we do not thoroughly examine the varying cultures students bring with them to the classroom and think about how to utilize these cultures to their strength. As an international student studying at a U.S. higher education institution, Tan (2009) indicated that studying in the context of a different culture imposed a series of disorienting learning dilemmas on her. She expected that the instructor be more proactive to help other culturally diverse students overcome disorienting learning dilemmas so that they could gain positive transformative learning experiences. Reflecting on how she identified the different cultures and subcultures infused in “hand jives” games, Rose-Cohen (2004) stressed that it is not that difficult to identify culture if an adult educator develops the habit of always being on the look out for signs of culture in everyday teaching practice as well as in students' learning activities. Using “hand jives” as an example, students tell their cultural stories by demonstrating different types of hand jives that they learned from their parents and that they will pass on to their descendants. Therefore, it seems to be conducive to quality learning experiences if adult educators can create and facilitate a learning environment that gives learners a sense of belonging and makes them feel safe to share their cultural stories. Opportunities also should be given to encourage culturally diverse students to share their stories by designing and facilitating culturally appropriate learning activities.

When examining our own and students' cultural stories, “it is best to stay neutral, not make judgments or take sides, and be very careful about

the politics” (Bersch, 2005, p. 9). In order to increase the cultural adaptability of the adult learning program, it is important to remain flexible with adult learning instruction, leave room in course design, be willing to tailor class activities toward empowering students, and be creative with our instruction (Bersch, 2005; Chang, 2004; Chang, 2007; Taylor, 2006). The bottom line is that “no one is harmed or embarrassed” (Bersch, 2005, p. 9). In the context of U.S. adult education, transformative learning often is seen as one of the optimal learning outcomes. Therefore, the establishment of such a bottom line may be a precondition to move students through Mezirow’s (1978) ten phases of transformative learning.

Utilizing Sociocultural Approaches to Facilitate or Guide Adult Learning

Sociocultural approaches, grounded in sociocultural theory, emphasize how the social, cultural, and political environment influence adult learning and development (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Although the environment influences learning, adult educators also can frame culture in the learning environment by understanding how culture is present. As a facilitator, the adult educator’s sociocultural approach can provide particular structures within formal and non-formal learning environments.

For example, Dass-Brailsford and Serrano’s (2010) study is informed by a socio-cultural framework situated in multicultural education and transformative learning. In this study, U.S. counselling psychology students developed multicultural competencies during their 5-week study abroad to South Africa. Students were able to interrogate their positionality, serve, and learn approaches to counselling with families affected by HIV/AIDS and trauma. The aims of the program were framed around increasing multicultural competencies and fostering transformation in students’ as reported longitudinally.

In another example, Sparks’ (2002) work focuses on a sociocultural approach to planning for adult immigrant learners. Sparks suggests that adult educators ground their work in four main principles within a sociocultural approach:

- The significance of cultural context in adult learning and education.
- The notion that there are distinct cultural forms of learning.

- Localized meanings are developed as well as embedded in everyday life.
- Social interactions and relationships that signal power differentials, values, and interests. (p. 23).

In the cases of immigrant learners trying to find a new path in a new nation state and culture, it is important for the educator to recognize the cultural background of oneself and learners. In addition, it is critical to acknowledge that learners hold very specific cultural ways of knowing. Although trends are present within cultural groups, the themes may not apply in the same way to each learner. The educator's role may be impacted by how learners view that educator's power and the power among learners in formal or non-formal educational environments, such as the classroom or on-the-job training. Viewing adult learning through a socio-cultural approach highlights that adult learning always takes place within a socially constructed environment and socially constructed learner identities that are continuously developing.

Developing and Maintaining Dialog

Developing and maintaining dialog between one's own culture and others' cultures can improve the success of adult learning. Health literacy is an example of such dialog (Hill, 2004). Faux (2004) discusses patient-physician communication in situations in which the patient and the physician may not speak the same language. Health literacy also may involve situations in which the patient may not possess native language literacy. In this case, both the patient and the doctor are learners as the patient learns how to express medical concerns and the physician learns from the patient in order to develop symbols relating to the patient's medical needs. Hill (2004) states that this dialog is not only about learning, but also about social justice as patients as learners need to navigate complex medical systems. Colleagues, interpreters, and students also are teachers and learners within these systems (Bersch, 2005).

Within formal education, transformative pedagogy, for example, may utilize simulations to create a dialog with and between teaching cultures while challenging the traditional culture of the classroom to foster new ways of knowing (Storrs and Inderbitzin, 2006). Teaching cultures even when challenged by student resistance can foster dialog and open alternative ways to communicate. In Storrs and Inderbitzin's (2006) study, simulating differ-

ent communities with diverse characteristics named Whyville and Omega, “students became more aware of the relationship between ideology, political economy, and schooling” (p. 183). Although difficult to develop and implement, educators taking risks to create interactive and alternative ways of learning, help students facilitate a dialog with the dominant, passive way of learning and the oppositional way of learning or active participation in their self-directedness.

As a part of this cultural dialogue, educators can use culture to facilitate critical reflection. For example, within an on-line course focusing on learning about culture, the medium, the exchange, and the content about culture were inputs into transformative learning (Ziegahn, 2001). Topics such as privilege, power, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and other positionalities as well as the intersections of these positionalities prompted dialogue between cultures. By viewing culture as an important input into dialogue, adult educators can foster meaningful learning, challenge current paradigms, and develop as educators.

Incorporating Strategies to Improve Cultural Awareness and Competency

Although culture is intangible, it is reflected through everything one says and does. Therefore, adult educators not only need to be creative and flexible with their instruction, but also need to take a holistic approach to improve cultural awareness and competency of adult students. First, if the content area is less culture focused, Barber (2003) and Daniels (2003) suggest incorporating collaboration-based teamwork into the curriculum to minimize possible negative impacts of culture. Most students are far more comfortable talking to a few classmates at the same time than interacting with the entire class. Being engaged in dialog with a few classmates, individual learners have sufficient time to get to know each other at a personal level, which helps build a learning tie that later may become very important to support learning. The strong presence of this tie makes learners willing to tolerate differences existing within the group to avoid embarrassment. In addition, this tie among group members is essential for understanding and appreciating differences among members and for improving emotional comfort. Working with a smaller number of people also allows individual students to shift their attention from paying attention to the differences that exist between team members or from guarding one’s own culture to fo-

cusing on how to optimize each other's strengths to produce an outstanding team product.

Second, if improving cultural awareness and competency of adult students is an important component of the curriculum, appropriate learning activities need to be carefully prepared to encourage students to study cultural subjects with an open mind (Le Cornu, 2009). In most cases, it is not easy to verbalize one's own cultures and to objectively discuss each other's cultures; therefore, at times it is more conducive to study culture through cultural artifacts. Clover (2006), for example, emphasizes the educational potential of using the arts in teaching cultural subjects. Many feminist adult educators find teaching about culture using arts (e.g. crafts, photography, drama, theatre, video, media, quilts, paintings) very useful in developing community awareness and competency, encouraging aesthetic civic engagement and knowledge mobilization, and developing leadership (Clover, 2006; Daniels, 2003). Creating cultural reading groups is seen as an effective way to help improve cultural awareness and competency because reading is a matter of desire and aspiration and also a process of identity formation and identification (Jarvis, 2003).

Cultural immersion is also a good strategy to improve cultural awareness and competency (Kerksen-Griep, 2008; Dass-Brailsford, 2010). In a study of developing quality teacher training programs to prepare novice teachers to invest in communicating mindfully and skillfully across cultural boundaries, Kerksen-Griep's (2008) found that immersing novice teachers into the culture of their students helped them gain first-hand understanding of the realities of institutional racism, which led to transformative learning experiences among novice teachers and improved communication and actions across cultural boundaries. Studying abroad is another example of improving cultural awareness and competency of adult students through cultural immersion.

Regardless of which strategies employed to improve cultural awareness and competency of adult students, the most important to adult educators is the ability to critically reflect on their identity and cultural perspectives and be well aware of the associated limitations to their teaching practices. Critical self-reflection is seen as a process of spiritual growth (Tisdell, 2003) and also a main phase to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978). Critical self-reflection is important for responsive adult educators to develop a positive cultural identity and a precondition to fairly conduct culture related learning activities without allowing the dominant culture to dismiss minor-

ity cultures. Yoga, meditation, and tea ceremony (Mayuzumi, 2006) are example activities that help with people's spiritual growth.

Conclusions

This paper focused on how adult educators are using culture as a lens to facilitate learning as situated within the U.S. based literature. As a community of practice, we are still in the early stages of exploring the various ways to utilize culture to enhance adult learning and these themes are not intended to be prescriptive.

Some authors' positions or approaches may be in conflict. For example, Bersch (2005) discusses the importance of staying neutral and not taking sides with regard to culture; however, other authors challenge the educator to avoid complacency with regard to unequal power structures and oppression (Kerssen-Griep, 2008; Ziegahn, 2001). In addition, some aspects of power and privilege are less interrogated in the literature explored. Although the U.S. literature recognizes privileged mobility in areas such as study abroad (Dass-Brailsford & Serrano, 2010; Sparks, 2002), there is still a lack of a focus on the sociocultural approach fostering a two-way exchange between those learners who have privileged mobility and those who do not. Using culture as a lens to foster deeper learning and decolonizing action beyond the extraction of the transformative learning experience are necessary areas for future research.

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