

Learning Observation Project:

The Education of Adults at Two Different Public Organizations

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EHRD 630

April 8, 2013

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Adult education's definition and boundaries vary among practitioners and scholars. For instance, in terms of age, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) includes individuals aged 16 and older in different adult education studies. Malcolm Knowles (1980), an adult educator famous for the adoption of the theory of andragogy, stated that "individuals should be treated as adults educationally" if they behave as adults by performing adult roles and if their self-concept is that of an adult—that is, the extent that an "individual perceives herself or himself to be essentially responsible for her or his own life" (p.24). Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) raised several open ended questions in order to provide a descriptive adult learner profile:

- Who participates?
- Why adults do or do not participate?
- What factors motivate or discourage learners?

According to Stephen Brookfield (1985), the field relies on three assumptions concerning the teaching-learning transaction: (a) the purpose of adult education is to fulfill learners' needs; (b) adults are self-directed learners; (c) adult education activities promote self-actualization. Adult education is an amorphous field of practice comprised of teaching and learning projects with troubled identities.

Purpose of Learning Observation

The purpose of this project is to generate an empirical adult education's definition and boundaries. This empirical approach consisted in observing two adult education projects at different organizations:

1. The University of Texas at Austin- McCombs Leadership Program

2. Austin Learning Academy – Adult Literacy Program

I attended several sessions at both organizations with the following questioning agenda: (a) how the learning was facilitated; (b) the learning environment; (c) participant involvement; (d) instructor invitation for learner involvement; (e) role of teacher/facilitator/instructor; and (f) positive and negative relevant details. Additionally, this agenda's intent was to look for evidence supporting Brookfield's adult education assumptions and factors defining boundaries in local adult education projects. The information presented in this paper is the result of the analysis of personal notes and supporting literature material used during the sessions. Also, interviews with participants and pictorial evidence of the learning environment were used to enrich the description of the sessions.

Background

I approached different organizations involved with adult education in the city of Austin such as Austin Community College, Goodwill Industries of Central Texas and others. However, some of them had strict visiting policies or had little interest in getting involved in my learning observation project. I selected UT Austin and the Austin Learning Academy due to the possibility to observe adult learning projects fitting Penland's definition (1979): "at least a two-day period, totaling at least seven hours of learning" (p. 49). Additionally, administrators from both organizations provided me immediate access to their programs allowing me to observe two contrasting adult populations in terms of demographics and socioeconomic status. These contrasting organizations offered the opportunity to experience first-hand adult education programs focused on general education and personal development. These activities are two of the most popular among adult learners (Merriam & Merriam, 2007).

McCombs Leadership Program (University of Texas at Austin)

The McCombs Leadership Program is a three to four year program providing undergraduate students the opportunity to engage in activities and workshops to complement their academic formation. Program's members are selected from a pool of first year and second year undergraduate applicants. Prospective members must provide evidence of a well outlined leadership project and a strong leadership portfolio (McCombs Leadership Development Program, 2013). The information presented in this document resulted from attending two workshop sessions titled "Managing Organizational Conflict" by Thompson and Associates. The program currently has 103 student participants with a 60% female participation ranging from 18 to 22 years old.

Adult Literacy Program (Austin Learning Academy)

The Adult Literacy Program offers Adult Basic Education (ABE), General Educational Development (GED) and ESL (English Second Language) classes that prepare individuals for employment, job training programs and higher education (Adult Learning Academy, 2012). Enrollment to this program is open to Austin's citizens with proof of residence. The program currently has 27 student participants with 90% female participation ranging from 17 to 60 years old.

Describing Adult Education Sessions

This section presents a summary of my personal notes derived from observing the sessions, conversing to adult learners, and instructors. The summary provides a chronological list of important events that occurred during the sessions.

Session 1: Managing Organizational Conflict

McCombs' team of instructors was comprised of an educator and six assistants. Figure 1, taken during the session, depicts the classroom seating format. The setting consisted of the traditional classroom format where the instructor is at the front of the students facilitating the course content. The instructor set the interaction's tone at the beginning of the class when she asked students to share their experiences dealing with organizational conflicts. However, students' interaction increased considerably after they were asked to form groups and share their ideas about this topic. She asked students to share their group thoughts and complemented them with real world examples where communication and decision making comes to play.



Figure 1. McCombs Leadership Program Classroom Setting

The vivid classroom environment offered the perfect opportunity to introduce the collaborative problem solving process. She used power point slides to explain the process in details consisting of communicating about the issues; identifying individual and group interests; generating options; evaluating options; and developing a plan. The instructor complemented theory with examples of how to use the process in organizations. Additionally, the instructor tried to promote class participation by presenting a simple and fun case analysis, defining the

dress code in organizations, related to identifying individual interests in organizations. At this point, students' engagement was minimal and only a small number of female students participated in the session. However, the instructor kept encouraging participation from other students and tried to enhance class interaction by asking about their personal experiences.

The role of facilitators in organizations was introduced using the same presentation format consisting of power point slides accompanied with examples of how common issues performing this role. The leading instructor along with the assistant coaches, simulated issues among an athletic team meeting and highlighted the concepts and processes presented previously. The instructor stopped the simulation several times in order to highlight some of the issues with the group meeting and her role as a facilitator (e.g. a member talking too much). The simulation ended with an open class discussion while the instructor summarized students' responses on the board. Students responded with logical answers demonstrating their attentiveness to the simulations. The instructor then spent some time going over some of the literature provided for future students' reference.

The final activity of the session included a case simulation performed by students. They had to adopt the role of a CEO and meeting attendees with specific agendas. Students alternated roles and experienced leading a meeting with a diverse audience. The assistant coaches supervised the activity and provided individual performance's feedback. Additionally, students had the opportunity to share their thoughts and ask specific questions about their performance. The classes regrouped at the end of the exercise and shared their experiences. The instructor complemented students' responses and highlighted some of the individual performances during while observing the class.

Session 2: Managing Organizational Conflict

The second session introduced new definition and strategies of how to ask questions. The leading instructor shared some common mistakes while generating questions. The session continued with the participation of a student willing to answer different questions with the format and strategies previously presented. The instructor addressed common issues while formulating and presenting the question such as modulating the tone of the voice. Additionally, the instructor highlighted questions from the audience with the correct format and following strategies previously covered.

The session continued with a group activity where students had to formulate different type of questions according to the topic selected by the interviewee. Participants had the opportunity to bring a topic related to something they want to change in their life (e.g. being more involved in academic activities). The assistants supervised the exercise and provided feedback to the students related to their questions. Additionally, the leading instructor complemented the assistants' feedback with details of how to enhance formulating questions. The group activity finish with a summary of the pros and cons of some type of questions performed during the session. The instructor then spent some time going over some of the literature provided for future students' reference.

The session continued with the introduction to skills of listening for interest. The power point provided supportive material related to identify interests at the substantive, psychological, and procedural level. The instructor complemented the material presented with examples related to the topic. Furthermore, students formed groups and analyzed a case scenario related to the effectiveness of a project management office in terms of identifying the group and individual interests. Assistants helped students with cues and providing feedback to their analysis. The

same teaching dynamic continued after introducing the concept of planning strategies yet this time a pair of students worked in the analysis of a written meeting agenda. Additionally, the instructor provided some efficient diagrams showing effective room arrangement and complemented them with applicable scenarios. The session concluded with an open class discussion about the applicability of the information presented in class and unresolved questions.

Session 1 & 2: Adult Literacy Program

The Adult Literacy Program's team of instructors was comprised of two adult educators and one program coordinator. Figure 2, taken during the session, illustrates the classroom seating format. The setting consisted of the traditional classroom format where the instructor is at the front of the students facilitating the course content. Both instructors had warmth welcoming messages for the students and started with warm-up math exercises. Instructors and students had a fluid interaction as a result of more than one month of sessions. Both sessions were continuously interrupted to check for students' understanding.

Class participation was constant throughout the sessions. Instructors encouraged class participation by letting students share their solving strategies with the rest of the class regardless of their accurateness. However, instructors provided immediate feedback and ask students questions in order to reflect on their thinking process.



Figure 2. Adult Literacy Program Classroom Setting

Supportive material was provided to the students during the math and reading comprehension sessions. Instructors encouraged students to personalize these materials and link them to previous content. Additionally, instructors highlighted “must know” terms or concepts essential for their exam preparation. Students responded positively to new concepts by relating to familiar local landmarks (e.g. parallel lines are equivalent to Austin’s 6th and 5th streets). These cues helped students to personalize their notes and reinforce new concepts. In some cases, instructors explained mathematical operations with daily activities such as determining how many liters or gallons of soda were required for a family meal.

The reading comprehension session presented some challenges for both instructors due to a great number of ESL students. For instance, several exercises included information about the stock and exchange market which was a topic little known among students. However, both instructors handled the situation well by sharing solving strategies and finding cues to determine unknown words or information. Instructors continuously emphasized students’ strengths as well as diminished their vocabulary limitations. They even acknowledged students’ heritage by adopting some Spanish phrases and words commonly used in learning settings (e.g. let’s look for “pistas” or cues).

During break sessions, I had the opportunity to talk with several students about their motivations and goals. I was amazed by the openness and sincerity of these students had with respect to their living situation. Three of them mentioned their motivation was to learn in order to help their kids with their academic and personal development. They felt disconnected and had the urgency to regain communication with them. Additionally, some older students mentioned the pure desire to obtain a degree for personal satisfaction. During all sessions, instructors

continuously reminded students about the importance of their effort in terms of not only professional development but human development.

Discussion

This learning observation project allowed me to have an understanding of the population participating in adult education programs in my community and the factors driving the demand for these programs. Additionally, I had the opportunity to observe adult education projects utilizing Brookfield's (1985) assumptions: (a) the purpose of adult education is to fulfill learners' needs; (b) adults are self-directed learners; (c) adult education activities promote self-actualization.

The Purpose of Adult Education is to Fulfill Learners' Needs

Cognitive learning theories define the term concept as "knowledge being applied in new ways, in new situations, or in familiar situations with different content" (Schunk, 2008, p. 209). However, sometimes prior learning interferes with subsequent learning due to the lack of solid content foundations or limited experiences. These constraints can lead educators to look for creative ways to overcome these learning obstacles and help students understand concepts to fulfill learning needs.

The instructor at the McCombs Leadership Program used hands-on methods such as case scenarios, role playing, and behavior modeling to promote learning (Noe & Noe, 2008). Furthermore, at the beginning of each session, she used forward-reaching transfer techniques in order to encourage individuals about potential uses of skills and knowledge (Schunk, 2008). Also, semantic maps in the form of casual class discussions were used to activate prior knowledge. She started the discussion with a question related to the concept to be covered in the session and asked student to share their thoughts. The main purpose of this strategy is to help

students with the organization of their prior knowledge in order to enhance their learning (McLaughlin, 2010).

The instructors at the Adult Literacy Program used other traditional teaching strategies. For instance, the question-answer relationship strategy was used during the reading comprehension/critical thinking session. This strategy helped students to realize the need to obtain information from the text and their own background knowledge and explicitly illustrates the connection between questions and answers (McLaughlin, 2010). Furthermore, the reading comprehension exercises required teaching strategies focused on vocabulary due to the great number of ESL adult learners. The vocabulary bookmark strategy improves reading comprehension by motivating students to check their understanding of new words. In this case, the educator highlighted a word from the text and asked students what they believe the word meant. After reading the manuscript students checked and discussed the definition of the word chosen. The correct application of this strategy can dramatically improve the vocabulary level since students must not only generate their own word definition but also to verify if necessary (McLaughlin, 2010).

Lois Brown Easton (2008), a recently retired director of professional development at Eagle Rock School and Professional Development Center in Colorado, stated that “educators often find that more and better are not enough. They find they often need to change what they do, on a daily or sometimes hourly basis, as they respond to the needs of the learners they serve” (p. 755). Instructors from both organizations presented students with different learning activities (e.g. group discussion, role simulation) helping them to determine the most effective ones for the session.

Adults are Self-directed Learners

Self-direct learning includes six major steps: climate setting; diagnosing learning needs; formulating learning goals; identifying human and material resources for learning; choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies; and evaluating learning outcomes (Merriam & Merriam, 2007). Knowles (1980) believed adult learners have the ability to diagnose learning needs and formulate learning goals. This learning observation project exposed me to two learning groups with different learning needs and goals. The Adult Literacy Program had students eager to learn in order to pass the GED examination and improve their socioeconomically status. These individuals identified a source of information in the Adult Literacy Program and tried to fulfill their learning needs. On the other hand, participants in the McCombs Leadership Program had their learning needs identified by the school department looking for specific learning outcomes.

Adult Education Activities Promote Self-actualization

Self-actualization refers to the individuals' desire to develop and reach their human potential. Instructors in both organizations encouraged class participation and attendance by praising students' efforts and future professional rewards. Schunk (2008) defined motivation as the "process of instigating and sustaining goal behavior" (p. 453). It is a factor that must be addressed by educators because of its direct impact on learning. Motivation can help adult educators to understand students' behaviors and their engagement in specific activities. For instance, students at the McCombs Leadership Program expressed their desire to attend future sessions due to their interest in learning business practices and skills applicable in organizations. On the other hand, female students at the Adult Literacy Program were motivated to learn and attend sessions in order to help their children in their development.

Adult educators must be able to differentiate between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in order to use different teaching strategies to keep students engaged in academic activities. For example, instructors at the Austin Learning Academy rewarded students' attendance by taking them for a visit to the culinary and dental schools at the Austin Community College. These two domains are ranked high in the students' academic preferences. Additionally, instructors reminded them constantly about future payoffs of their efforts and use visual images to motivate students. Figure 3 shows pictures of former students hanging on the walls of the classroom.



Figure 3. Adult Literacy Program Graduates

Conclusion

The success of individuals to interact in different systems, such as academic or professional settings, is determined by their capacity to use knowledge and skills acquired in different learning interventions (Swanson & Swanson, 2007). The key for successful human capital's development via training is based on individual assessment or feedback (Noe, 2008, p. 149). Knowles (1980) stated that "individuals should be treated as adults educationally" if they behave as adults by performing adult roles and if the "individual perceives herself or himself to be essentially responsible for her or his own life" (p. 24). However, this sense of responsibility

and accountability was more visible in the adult learners participating in the Adult Literacy Program. This might be due to learners' urgency to improve their personal living situation and socioeconomic status.

This experience allowed me to realize that adult education programs are more than just promoting teaching and learning with emphasis on the workplace's needs. Adult education projects sometimes present the opportunity to have an impact in social justice. I think social justice in adult education means providing access to information and knowledge to all individuals in order to put them in a position of having the same probability to integrate successfully in any socioeconomic environment. Both programs provided individuals with the opportunity to enhance their chances of succeeding in their personal and socioeconomic lives. Specifically, I think the Adult Literacy Program transcended its original mission of preparing adults to join the workforce. For instance, more than 90% of the program's participants are female immigrants from Latin America or local Hispanics looking not only to improve their socioeconomic status but having an impact in their kids' development. Students' development permeates to future generations of citizens that will join socioeconomic activities.

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