How Learners Perceive They Construct Knowledge as Participants in Outreach Programs

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Abstract: The purpose of this interpretive qualitative research study was to explore how adult learners perceive they construct knowledge in connection to their participation in outreach programs. The study context involved three outreach programs focusing on the changing global order, the Katyn massacre, and Russia. The three main themes I drew from the study include: the dynamic learning process, influencers of knowledge construction, and individual experiences as connectors in the learning process.

Introduction

Outreach education involves intersecting initiatives identified as formal, non-formal, and informal learning or education, with learning and education often used interchangeably in the literature (Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcom, 2003). While some outreach programs might be described as non-formal enrichment programs (Taylor, 2006), some authors might choose to identify them as informal education (Marsick & Watkins, 1990), or as formal because of a university location (Clark, 2005). Rather than a rigid categorization of formal – informal education or learning, outreach encompasses overlapping leaves of education and learning.

The purpose of this interpretive qualitative research study was to explore how adult learners perceive they construct knowledge in connection to their participation in outreach programs. The complexity of learner participation is a necessary area of exploration to inform the creation of learner relevant outreach initiatives. What adult educators see as an educational domain or the goal of a program may not reflect that of the learners.

World affairs outreach education within this study is an important context in which we can learn about learners’ perceptions of knowledge construction and the learning process. This context involves educational programs that resemble the complexity of many outreach initiatives – free-choice participation and varied learner motivations and abilities. While outreach education is a component of many organizations, the overwhelming emphasis in the field of international education associations within the U.S. is in two functional areas: international student and scholar services and study abroad (Association of International Educators, n.d.). Examining participants’ knowledge construction at world affairs outreach programs could inform and broaden the conversation about international education in general. In addition, exploring adult learning in this context can inform other outreach education initiatives and help us understand the processes through which learners have constructed what they know.

Methodology

A constructivist lens framed this qualitative interpretive study, one which focuses on the learning process as the construction of meaning from experience (Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978). Methods of inquiry included semi-structured 45 to 90 minute individual interviews with twelve participants, a congruent data collection strategy for a qualitative interpretive study (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Interviews took place 6 to 9 months after the learner’s participation in the
program. Research questions included: How do learners perceive they construct knowledge as participants in outreach programs? What influences learners’ construction of knowledge? How do learners perceive their participation in the outreach program as part of their learning process? How do learners perceive context influences knowledge construction and the learning process? Using purposeful sampling, participants were those who had participated in at least one of three identified world affairs outreach programs in winter/spring 2009. These programs included: 1) a program featuring a guest speaker on Russia, 2) a large public forum on the U.S. and the Changing Global Order, and 3) a film screening of Katyń directed by Andzrej Wajda followed by a panel discussion. These three programs are representative of the variety of formats and locations of the organization’s programs with a range of participant feedback.

Data were gathered by audio-taping conversations and interview transcriptions so that I could reference the interview in written form. Descriptive and reflective field notes were recorded in a field log throughout the data collection process to note what happened in each interview and thoughts or insights I had about interview process. I used inductive analysis to discover themes and patterns (Patton, 2002). Topic coding by hand was used to identify and organize all themes for categorization. Ten participants with assigned pseudonyms provided member checks including clarification of transcripts where necessary. The field log, developed matrices, the transcripts, and participant feedback served to triangulate the data.

Findings

The sample consisted of twelve participants: seven male and five female including four participants of Polish national origin. While the sample of those from Poland is out of the ordinary, particular groups may be present at specific programs. The three main themes which I drew from the study include: the dynamic learning process, influencers of knowledge construction, and individual experiences as connectors in the learning process.

Dynamic Learning Process

Learners perceived they constructed knowledge through a dynamic learning process. Throughout the interviews, individuals commented on their perceptions of how the outreach program “fit.” They described the learning process as past knowledge and experience and the current information shaping each other.

Participants described their learning process on a detachment-emotion continuum sometimes moving from the continuum at various points in their learning process. For example, in relation to the Katyń program, Sara described identifying a practical use for the information at work where she connected families separated by war, but also described the program as a “slap in the face” because she felt she was well read and had never heard of the massacre.

In contrast with some other learning contexts, participants viewed learning about world affairs as a never ending process described as having an input of many sources with the outreach program as one of those sources. Jacek compared the learning process and his system of knowledge construction to that of the defragmentation of a computer. He went on to say:

You know in this global era there is a lot of information going around. You have to have some specific filter to…take all of those viruses immediately out. I don’t want to learn why Paris Hilton is going to another party…It’s a virus in my system, and it’s just calling, ‘Big alert, this is the wrong information,’ so I’m just rejecting this immediately.
Jacek talked about the necessity to use many sources illustrating many participants’ perceptions.

Tomasz’s outreach education experience reflects this dynamic learning process articulated by participants. He emigrated from Poland as a young boy and was separated from his immediate family in probably the 1950s. He talked about his experience at the Katyń showing and reflected on the officers killed and then on the millions killed in other conflicts. He said, “When it’s all in this perspective you lose the closeness to this. But, people, like I say, families that are left in Poland now, wives and children of these Officers that were killed. Let’s face it, you know. It means everything for them.” The outreach program for Tomasz was an input into a never-ending learning experience: his native country’s history, his family’s story, a country left behind, and a part of trying to make sense of past and current events.

**Influencers of Knowledge Construction**

Participants described various influencers of knowledge construction as important in how they made meaning of content. For example, the physical space of the outreach program and other learning spaces influenced their learning before, during, and after the program. Bob talked about the Russia program with his running group because the topic of nuclear disarmament was of interest to him. For Katherine who participated with her bus full of students in a fourteen hour round trip excursion, the bus was transformed into a learning space with lively discussion before and after the forum on the Changing Global Order. Clement blogged, Tomasz talked to a professor at the gym about the program, Sara conveyed the content to her staff at work, and Edward was reminded of his participation in programs as he read the newspaper. Polish born individuals mentioned the following reasons for participating in the Katyń program: to see what an American audience thought; to share the experience with fellow Poles; to show respect for the content; and to see the film in a place other than the home. Gosia said, “I did not want to bring this feeling into this house.” These spaces of text, work, leisure, and the place of the outreach program were described as influencers in the learning experience.

Past experience was an influencer in knowledge construction and extremely varied. Although Ron and Clement both had experiences in Russia, neither conveyed detailed stories in the region that influenced their knowledge construction process in relation to the Russia program. Rather, their international career experience was described as a profound influencer in how they viewed the need for balance during the Russia and Changing Global Order program. Poles discussed their reflection on an authoritarian system imposed upon them and the residual effects from it in connection to their participation in the Katyń showing; however, they were not a homogeneous group. Whereas Jacek’s family was listening to Radio Free Europe and Marek’s father was put in prison for “speaking his mind,” Gosia described that she grew up accepting more of the government’s official portrayal. She felt the program challenged her even more.

Access to information was also an influencer. Most individuals had the time in their lives to participate in the outreach programs and keep up-to-date on current events. Marek, however, when asked if he had hobbies, said, “No. Not anymore. I’m just trying to survive.” Marek had lost his job, his unemployment was running out, he had no health insurance, and he said that his health bills were going “up and up and up.” These issues consumed his every waking moment. Most participants articulated the need to make an extra effort to find out about world affairs and that the content was not accessible in mainstream U.S. media.

Participants’ self-identified future use for the content as well as expectations were also influencers. Maggie’s co-participants expected a much shorter program and their impatience was
a predominant influencer on her experience. If expectations were unmet some participants often could recall negative points of their experience, sometimes identified as learning.

In addition, the context of world affairs education, including the context of the specific world affairs program, was perceived to be an influencer of knowledge construction. It is not possible to homogenize participants’ experiences or to say that a specific program evoked a common response for a specific group because the context of the program intersected with the context of individuals’ learning experiences, connectors in the learning process.

**Individual Experiences as Connectors in the Learning Process**

Learners described their unique, individual experiences as connectors in the learning process which are the threads woven through the knowledge construction process, connecting the past, present, and future and through which the outreach program was woven. These connectors include different starting points from which to build knowledge as well as the process of reflection. While past experiences are influencers of knowledge construction, a holistic view of these personal experiences as connectors is also important. The outreach program was one learning experience that intersected in multiple ways with the individuals’ learning processes.

Each participant had a unique starting point from which they constructed knowledge within their learning process relating to careers, regional experience, prior participation in outreach programs and learning or social intentions, not always mutually exclusive. Participants’ learning took place in different contexts often framed around intentions and served as another starting point or a connector. For example, Clement, who felt he had a high level of expertise, said, “Why do I go [to the programs]? Because, you know, its solidarity.” Sara said, “It is difficult to know what is a personal and a professional interest.” Intentions were described primarily as educational and social or a combination of both.

Participants articulated reflection as a connector in their learning process and a facilitator in knowledge construction. Participants often described stepping back from an experience to closely examine its connection to their past experiences. For Edward, the base of knowledge was incorrect as he assumed the former Yugoslavia had been behind the Iron Curtain. At times participants described this reflection reinforcing what they already knew. Regarding the Katyń showing, Gosia said, “So any war anywhere in the world, really...I’m almost drawn to it, just to remind myself how awful that experience [is] and that humanity has to see it...It could be me.” The reflection for Gosia was on the program as part of her entire experience connected to Katyń – her mother’s stories, her experience in Poland, and the outreach program.

**Discussion**

This study suggests that learners’ movement through formal-informal contexts of learning is integral to how they make meaning of experiences at the specific program and when they leave the event. Episodes of learning intersect and build on each other, which are important pieces in knowledge construction in outreach education. Scholars have focused on learners (Bilir, 2007), structure (Brennan, 1997), place (Clark, 2005), role of the educator (Eraut, 2000), and contextualization (Rogers, 2004) to distinguish formal, non-formal, and informal learning and education. This study supports Morgan-Klein and Osbourne's (2007) assertion that it may be difficult to categorize some learning and education as we dissect it. Learning and education in an outreach context are reflexive in relation to each person’s individualized process.
This study adds to the literature on lifelong (birth to death) and lifewide learning (formal to informal) by investigating how these learners incorporated outreach programs into their learning biographies (lifelong learning) and throughout the formal-informal continuum of education and learning (lifewide learning). This study suggests that it is necessary to examine both dimensions (Clark, 2005). Even with respect to time, the knowledge construction process for these participants was not a linear one as the term lifelong may imply. Past experience and the projection of a future use which may or may not relate to the participant’s intention of participating may be present during the outreach program or post-program.

Participants described a complex web of connections, building onto each other with reflection playing a role in learning. Reflection enables us to correct distortions in our beliefs whereas critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions of our beliefs (Mezirow, 1990). Learner assumptions, such as Edward’s misunderstanding of Yugoslav history, present challenges for organizations who serve learners with various levels of expertise. Reflection may or may not play a role in a complete transformative learning process. It may be a part of surface, deep, or tacit learning or may play a role in reinforcement rather than a complete change in outlook. Critical reflection rejects or adjusts previous knowledge whereas appreciative reflection pushes within the base of previous knowledge to illuminate important for individual growth and transformational learning (Le Cornu, 2009). Often referred to as reaffirmation, appreciative reflection may be very important to learners and to the sponsoring organization.

For some participants, reflection was a very emotional process. Emotions play powerful roles in learning and may help participants understand content and themselves (Dirkx, 2001). The role of emotion in learning is something we may wish to consider as we try to understand learners’ knowledge construction. Emotion has often been associated with reflection, but the nature of the relationship between emotion and reflection is unclear (Moon, 1999). For example, in this study, Poles reflected on their own memories of a political system and Katyn as a symbolic precursor to occupation. They seemed to use the outreach program to make sense of memory, emotion, historical content, their current place in a new country, and how their native country had progressed. Emotion may be viewed as a barrier or facilitator of learning (Dirkx, 2001). However, emotion also can serve as a motivator for learning and is a part of the knowledge construction process that is less tangible than other pieces. These emotional experiences serve very different purposes for learners.

Implications for Practice

This study identified themes which can be helpful in program planning and outreach education. While we can point to participants’ intentions for professional development or self-awareness, these concepts encompass different meanings for each individual. Therefore, challenges remain for program planners and outreach educators to determine whether they are indeed achieving their mission with diverse participants with self-defined learning objectives. This study suggests that examining a participant’s complete outreach education experience prior, during, and after the program is important in understanding the knowledge construction process. For example, exploring incidental learning served as an important area of inquiry for this study and may indicate influencers of program aims. Often times an outreach program has “one shot” at making the connection with participants at events such as the ones examined here.

We may need to pull ourselves out of the formal, non-formal, and informal boxes to fully appreciate how the outreach program contributes to a person’s entire learning process. We also
may need to examine whether we, as researchers, educators, and program planners, resist calling some experiences “learning” due to our own biases. For example, in this study, the general goal of the programs, such as global awareness, may intersect with a person’s learning biography and lifewide learning in a variety of ways. In addition, the program’s intersection with an individual’s identity or development was a repeated piece of the learning process. The study findings underscore that most often the “for enrichment” educational category may not be fully investigated enough. Learning cannot be separated from the learner.

References


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