Graduate Students’ Perspectives on Adult Education

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Abstract: This research explored how graduate students conceptualize key terms of, and concepts in, the field of adult education. It sought to identify the terminology and related concepts that students in their first semester of a graduate program saw as essential in making meaning of the field.

Traditional boundaries in adult and higher education are changing. The influx of new kinds of students—particularly adult, “non-traditional”, and professional students—demands innovative ways of thinking about processes and structures for teaching and learning (Weil, 1997). Two features of the changing practice of adult and higher education involve the exploration of implicit theories in action (Argyris & Schön, 1974) and an emphasis on the value of integrating experiential, propositional, and professional knowledge (Eraut, 1994). Allied to this is a recent shift in the understanding of knowledge and the nature of learning. Until fairly recently, universities tended to hold the relatively naïve view that their students were essentially empty vessels to be filled with knowledge in a process most aptly called “banking education” (Freire, 1993). Nowadays, it is now more widely recognized that learners bring with them rich pools of experience, that knowledge is socially constructed, that learning is both a social as well as a cognitive process, and that teaching and learning situations (whether in universities or elsewhere) are marked by axes of power and privilege that can heavily influence students’ learning, perceptions, and achievements (Cervero, Wilson & Associates, 2001).

One way to integrate this knowledge is through the conscious attempt to discourage students from the wholesale adoption of others’ interpretations, but instead to encourage them to realize how abstract concepts surface in their own practice. As students move from passive recipients to active creators of knowledge, they can enhance their own epistemological development (Baxter Magolda, 1996). We see these issues most clearly in our Introduction to Adult Education graduate courses. We design such courses to provide a stimulating introduction to the language, concepts, beliefs, and approaches that have shaped the development of adult education in North America. Students in these courses—mostly experienced adult education professionals—bring an essentially practical orientation to their studies. They often find it initially quite difficult to appreciate more theoretical interpretations, particularly those that question or challenge dominant educational discourses and practices. Beginning students often find it hard to develop fluency with the complex ideas and concepts that can help them understand and analyze the educational situations, processes, and practices that pervade their professional lives. They quickly discover that the language of ideas and the language of daily practice are not the same.

In addition, graduate students of adult education face the complication of making meaning of an ambiguous and poorly defined field of study. Historically, adult education has struggled with defining itself as a discipline and a practice (Courtney, 1989), largely due to the eclectic nature of its content and the variety of settings in which it takes place. Also, there is often little consensus among scholars about the meanings and boundaries of the field. This problem becomes apparent...
when considering at the range of terminology and definitions used to describe adult education. For example, terms such as “continuing education”, “recurrent education”, “further education”, “post-secondary education”, “lifelong learning”, “andragogy”, “adult education”, and “community education” are often used interchangeably (Jarvis, 1995; Tight, 1996). In essence, “the field of adult education has evolved a vocabulary possibly unparalleled in its confusion” (Peterson & Associates, 1979, p. 13). This terminological chaos contributes to a lack of clarification over the territorial boundaries of adult education which serves both to perplex students and impede its growth and legitimacy as a discipline of academic study.

Terminology is particularly problematic for entering graduate students. The graduate study of adult education attempts to fashion an academic discipline out of an explicit focus on practical issues and problems—an approach that tends to leave the relationship between theory and practice relatively unchanged. Yet, one of the central purposes of graduate education is to introduce experienced professionals to new knowledge and ideas so that they may enrich their existing frameworks of practical knowledge. Further, graduate education is intended to enable students to assess the value of common practices and approaches for themselves. In other words, graduate study should assist students to avoid the trap of regarding existing practices, and their links with wider society, as unproblematic or uncontested givens.

One way, obviously, to facilitate this is to help students develop their literacy about key concepts, definitions, discourses, and debates. However, though definitional issues are regularly debated in academic journals and at conferences, seldom has the challenge of defining the field been researched in places where it could have a significant impact on outcomes, i.e., on emerging scholars and practitioners in the field. Studying how beginning graduate students learn to make sense of an ill-defined discipline raises issues of both learning and teaching. For example, what terminology do students find most problematic? What concepts and ideas do they find most useful for understanding the field or their own practice? In what ways are introductory courses in adult education helpful to students? What are effective tools for helping students meet the challenges of learning a new discourse?

It was with these questions in mind that we designed a research study to explore how entering graduate students taking introductory courses of adult education make meaning of their field of study. More specifically, the study sought to identify the terminology and related concepts that students in their first semester of a graduate program saw as essential in developing an understanding of the field. Our approach is based on exploring how learning might be seen as a social practice. By this we mean examining how the context and conditions in which learning takes place might be critical to the learning process itself. If we wish our students to become familiar with the lexicon of words and phrases that define key concepts of adult education, then we need to pay attention to the means by which students develop such knowledge.
Methodology

The study involved a purposeful sample of recently admitted graduate students in two Universities (one in Western Canada, one in Eastern USA) taking their first course in adult education. The sample represented all of the students from the entering cohorts at each university during the past two years. As part of their first course in adult education, each student was required to maintain a working definitional journal to keep track of the terminology that helped them better understand and frame the field. By using the course material, class discussions, and any other resources at their disposal, the students were asked to select between 34-40 terms which they saw as the most significant terminology of the field and to develop a brief (2- or 3-sentence) definitions in their own words for each of them. In addition, towards the end of each course, students were asked to use selected terminology from the definitional journal or any other source to develop a concept map of the field of adult education (Novak & Gowin, 1984). The 25 definitional journals and 15 concept maps collected were analyzed by a constant comparative method and then organized into meaningful categories and themes (Patton, 1990).

Findings

Analyzing the definitional journals and concept maps revealed a number of findings. We first focus on the terminology selected by the students. Next, we explore the process of compiling definitional journals and graduate students’ reactions to this experience. Finally, we examine the concept maps and discuss the themes and patterns that emerged.

Terminology

When analyzing the word choices several patterns emerged. First, the students had a tendency, not surprisingly, to select words that were specific to the field of adult education. For example, “andragogy”, “autodidaxy”, “conscientization”, “transformational learning”, “functional literacy”, and “popular education” were often selected. Second, there was a tendency to select educational terms that are used in all systems of education (not just adult education); of these, “constructivism”, “critical pedagogy”, and “multiculturalism” were most prevalent. Third, we noted a predilection for students to choose philosophical and sociological terms over more historical or descriptive phrases. Here, terms such as “epistemology”, “hegemony”, “phenomenology”, “praxis”, and “technical rationality” were chosen by almost everyone. In addition, few students included any words that had an instrumental emphasis, indicative of teaching methods or strategies, that might directly inform their practice.

Compiling Definitional Journals

Without exception, students found the process of compiling their own definitional journals challenging but also extremely useful. One student’s comments typify the responses of many:

When initially going through the readings I felt like I had gained a basic understanding of most of the terms. However, I was surprised at how difficult it was for me to articulate them in my own words. Having an understanding in my head and being able to communicate this to others are two very different things….And the gap between them is larger than I think.

Having students compile their own dictionaries clearly encouraged a richer understanding
of the dominant terminology and concepts in a field derived from so many diverse elements and approaches. As one student claimed, “For me, deeper comprehension comes with review and analysis.” Many students reported that they grew to discern the perspectives of particular authors to a much greater extent: “It shocked me to discover that not everybody defined things exactly the same…and that authors’ personal preferences or opinions about the concepts might affect their use of [the concept].”

Students also reported a change in perceptions of their own learning and noticed an improvement in their metacognitive abilities. One student described how she “became aware how much I often skim over words or phrases…and assume a definition based on the context of the literature.” Another described “feeling insecure determining whether I had comprehended the concept correctly. Compiling the dictionary helped me appreciate that…and helped clarify the concept itself.” A third described how, for her, “meaning becomes clearer with repetition and redefinition….I was surprised at the extent to which many of the unknown terms I noted several weeks ago I can now define.” In sum, this comment typified the responses of many: “I now have a much deeper respect for the process of learning. It takes a lot of time…and it never lets up.”

Finally, students’ reported an increased awareness in their research abilities. One became aware of the strength of using multiple sources: “The words [I selected] would often appear in several different readings. Because I recorded the references as I came across them, I was then able to combine the information from several different sources into a more coherent definition.” For another, “Checking the details of my sources also caused me to reread certain sections…and consolidated my earlier understanding….and, in some cases, extend it.” A third discovered the importance of correct referencing: “Previously, when I had written down words I didn’t know, I never noted where I found it…so, I often had to spend a painful time looking for it again. Now, thanks to this assignment, I always include the text and the page number alongside.”

Concept Maps

An initial look at the concept maps reveals the large degree of general similarity that existed between the two groups. In general, the students structured their concept maps in one of two ways. Some chose to place the term “adult education” at the top of their map and underneath use progressively more narrow concepts to describe the field. Alternatively, students placed “adult education” at the center of their map, circled by a ring of broader concepts, which was, in turn, wreathed by an outer ring of narrower concepts. All the maps seemed to rely on terms derived from the course material and readings—such as “formal”, “informal”, or “nonformal” education—and lacking any terms that emerge from the students’ professional practices or interests. Also, the maps closely follow the approach of the set readings by describing the field using a largely philosophical orientation. Predominantly, the terms used to describe the field appeared to cluster within four areas: adult learning sites, types of learning, theories of learning, and philosophies of education. This is particularly striking since all the participants were practicing adult educators and might be expected to hold at least an implicit understanding of the roles and responsibilities of an adult educator. However, that implicit practitioner’s understanding does not seem to emerge in these maps. Instead, the knowledge presented in the texts is privileged. What gets reflected in the maps is a decontextualized perspective of the field; a personal portrayal of the individual adult educator, i.e., the practice of the map’s designer, is absent. A
second observation is that there appears to be a division in students’ minds between theory and practice. These maps give no indication that students make connections between course readings and their potential applicability. Students may theorize about their work and they may be able to conceptualize the field in their practice but the connection between the two was not manifested in the maps. Third, we noticed a significant absence of the adult learner in the maps. Only a few students put the term “learner” or “adult learner” on their map. On most maps, the learner is either absent, or, when mentioned, unadorned by additional concepts which might give add details about who the adult learner is. The learner is portrayed as one-dimensional without any recognition of factors, such as age, cultural difference, learning styles, etc. that impact the learning and teaching experience.

**Discussion and Implications**

The findings of this study reveal several issues and implications about how beginning students make sense of unfamiliar discourses and concepts. First, when listing their key terms, students obviously seemed to emphasize words that they had most likely never seen or used before, regarding them as particular to the field of adult education. These lists provide a template of terms and concepts that students perceive as unique and separate from other disciplines. They also can serve to remind faculty of the essential terminology which might be covered or reviewed in introductory courses.

Second, students predominantly feature sociological or philosophical terms. Partly, this results from the choice of readings given by instructors; these terms are commonly found in many introductory texts. However, what is significant is that the words chosen are, without exception, from an outward focus. This is, the students’ initial tendency appears to be to identify terminology that is more descriptive of others’ conceptualizations and depictions of the structures and foundations of the discipline, instead of regarding themselves as possessors of much valid knowledge and focussing inwardly on their relationship to the field. Furthermore, in the journal entries, we noticed a strong concern among students to get the “right” definitions. Possibly, once there is greater clarity about the boundaries of the field in students’ own minds, they may be more likely to reflect on their own locations within the discipline or feel more comfortable with any conceptual ambivalence.

Third, it was apparent from this study that there is still a high degree of confusion among our students about the field of adult education. Partly, this due to the ambiguous and complex nature of the field itself, but part of it also may result from the design of introductory courses in adult education. Most survey or introductory courses are designed to offer a broad perspective of an area of study with the intent to provide students with an understanding of pertinent literature, an historical perspective of how the field evolved, a sense of its general philosophies and approaches, and an overview of its central topics, issues and areas of contention. In addition, students are expected to begin to develop an appreciation of how the field is bounded and framed in relationship to other disciplines and areas of practice. Our findings suggest that just reviewing and discussing pertinent literature is less than adequate for students to grasp these complexities.

Our last point relates to the notion of theorizing and how faculty can nurture appreciation and use of theory. We define theorizing here as the process of interpreting, explaining, or judging intentions, actions, and experiences. So, asking our students to develop dictionary definitions and
concept maps encourages them to begin theorizing for themselves. As we indicated earlier, our novice graduate students are reluctant to tackle what they consider “theory”, regarding it as separate from, and alien to, much of their practice. They have yet to appreciate the extent to which all theories are the product of some practical activity and all practical activities are guided by theory. So, for us, the process of theorizing involves starting from the students’ own understandings of the concepts themselves and of the arrangements and constructions of those concepts that students find familiar and helpful. The words and phrases chosen by the students—along with the ideas they represent and the relationships between ideas—become the building blocks of such theorizing. However, the process is neither static nor conclusive: new concepts gain greater meaning as they become more familiar or as new relationships are discovered or developed. As concepts become more differentiated, they are never “finally acquired” but are always being learned, modified, and made more explicit and more inclusive. Also, the overt representation of concepts and their linkages through concept mapping encourages learners to discuss why a particular link is good or valid or to recognize missing links between concepts (Novak & Gowin, 1984). In these ways, learning and theorizing becomes less the acquisition of others’ prior ideas and more the construction and creation of one’s own meanings.

**Conclusion**

Definitional journals and concept maps are an excellent learning tool for helping students build and reflect upon their personal and professional knowledge. By constructing their own definitions and maps and sharing and explaining them to others, students experience an increase in understanding and confidence in their cognitive abilities. Perhaps most importantly, beginning graduate students come to realize that the engagement with the making of meaning is an essential process in, and about, understanding adult education. By the careful recording and questioning of complex or problematic concepts and the creative production of maps linking these concepts, students are able to relate new knowledge to their existing understandings. Through our use of definitional journals and concept maps we intended to follow a long-established principle of adult education: encouraging learner agency. In our work, we have repeatedly found that, once students come to see the bigger picture and how many pieces it takes to construct the complex puzzle that is adult education, they then feel less isolated or passive against external forces and become empowered to act as agents of change themselves. In sum, we believe that to be effective, learning must start with the interest and experience of learners themselves. For us, the most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Hence, we strive to engage our students in the production of their own knowledge rather than the unthinking adoption of others’ ideas and terminology. How successful we are remains open to question, but we take heart from the comments of one of our recent students:

> By paying deliberate attention to the words and phrases and how they’re used, I’ve begun to feel much more comfortable with the academic language used in educational discourse. I used to think that academia liked big words and would often take very simple concepts and place complicated labels on them just for the sake of it. Now, I regularly catch myself using those very terms that used to scare me so much.
References