Developing Communities of Literacy Practice Through Collaborative Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate how adult students collaboratively learn with other peers in both formal and non-formal adult literacy programs. An ethnographic multi-site case study research design was used involving several different literacy organizations. Data collection occurred over a four-month period of time and focused on nine different program sites. Six data sources were subjected to various analytical techniques such as constant comparative, direct interpretation and correspondence and patterns. Findings suggest that there are several key components that make up a community of practice across tutorial, small and large group adult programs. These involve social decision practices, the instructor’s philosophy and leadership style, functioning as a team, movement from guided learning to independent learning and informal learning of new literacy practices. Implications of the study for policy makers, researchers and adult literacy practitioners are discussed.

Introduction

Recent trends in the study of adult literacy have moved from a skill-based model to a socio-cultural learning approach because of its relevance to adult literacy programming. As learners access both formal and non-formal types of programs based on their needs for personal, social and economic well being, different learning strategies that reflect their background and experiences are essential to success. A common element across adult literacy provisions is the grouping of learners according to skill levels or learning goals. In such a group setting, there is much potential for peer collaboration that encourages learning in a community process.

This study was interested in how adult literacy students improve their reading and writing skills through collaborative learning. Often referred to as cognitive apprenticeships, it is a way of learning with another peer (Rogoff, 1995). It is used in classrooms or groups where a more capable student in a particular skill area helps a less capable learner by modeling, mentoring, scaffolding or coaching. As funding schemes for literacy provisions change, the issue of learning styles become more important since literacy instructors are now faced with continuous intake of learners into programs, larger class sizes and groups of students with mixed abilities and skill levels. The overarching research question for this study was: how do adult students collaboratively learn with other peers in both formal and non-formal adult literacy programs?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the study is drawn from the socio-cultural models which posit that learning is shaped by the context, culture and tools in the learning situation (O’Connor, 1998; Hurby, 2001). A chief proponent and early pioneer of the
socio-cultural learning theory was Vygotsky who based his work on the concept that all human activities take place in a cultural context with many levels of interactions, shared beliefs, values, knowledge, skills, structured relationships and symbol systems (Vygotsky, 1999). Many of these ideas have been integrated into situated cognition which supports the idea that learning is inherently social in nature. The nature of the interactions among learners, the tools they use within these interactions, the activity itself and the social context in which the activity takes place shapes the learning (Lave, 1996; Kamberelis & Bovino, 1999). From a situated view, people learn as they participate and become intimately involved within a community or culture of learning, interacting with the community and learning to understand and participate in the cultural values and rules. As some writers have described it modeling, mentoring, coaching, scaffolding and experiential learning are all aspects of cognitive apprenticeships (Rogoff, 1995; Wenger; 1998; Mathes, Howard, Allen & Fuchs, 1998; Maloch, 2002).

Furthering this line of inquiry and using situated cognition theory as an analytical tool to examine Canadian literacy practices, Taylor and Blunt (2001) maintain that it is now possible to view adult literacy learning through the lens of social and cultural relationships, especially in the way that learners draw upon events from their ordinary lives to construct meaning within classroom communities. In a similar vein, Askov (2001) points out that adult literacy programs can be built on the principle that knowledge is socially constructed where both the teacher and the student learn collaboratively. Through such a situated learning approach, adult students construct new knowledge and skills by interacting with others and with objects, events, and processes in their environment, and then by reflecting upon these experiences. Although the socio-cultural models have been widely used in pedagogical classrooms, only recently have they shown some promise in explaining adult literacy learning.

Taylor, King, Pinsent-Johnson and Lothian (2003) found that adult literacy students act as scaffold builders with other peers in a formal classroom environment. In an early organizing framework, they depict four key dimensions that form a literacy learning activity system: the literacy task; the classroom leadership style of the instructor; the collaborative practices among peers and the movement towards the Zone of Proximal development where independent learning occurs. Central to the component of collaborative practices among adult peers, they found that social learning behaviours, negotiation and feedback behaviours. As well, certain patterns of directionality were frequently practiced in adult classrooms where groups were organized with multilevel learners. They suggest that learning concepts like cognitive apprenticeships and communities of practice could act as important cornerstones in a theory of social literacy. However, the challenge is now to examine if this organizing framework has any explanatory power across different adult literacy learning programs.

**Methodology**

The methodology for this investigation was driven by the nature of the research question and the theoretical framework and used an ethnographic multi-site case study (Creswell, 1998). It employed a multitude of data collection methods and data analysis techniques. Through a partnership developed among some of the key providers of a
provincially funded literacy and basic skills program in Eastern Ontario, four delivery agencies were involved in the research project. These involved both formal and non-formal adult literacy programs offered by the Ottawa-Carleton Catholic School Board, the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, Algonquin College Career and Access Program and People Words and Change, a community tutorial literacy program. Each of these four literacy service providers offer different delivery models and include multi-level literacy classrooms, same-level literacy classrooms, multi-level literacy classrooms with prescribed curriculum and individual and small literacy group with volunteer tutors.

Data collection occurred over a four-month period and involved nine different program sites. The literacy coordinators from each program helped to select the sites where instructors favoured a classroom approach other than solely teacher-directed. In total, six data collection sources were used in the data analysis phase that allowed for triangulation of the results. Participant observations were conducted for each of the nine program sites using an observation checklist developed in an earlier study (Taylor et al., 2003). In addition to each classroom, small group or one-on-one observation, a video recording was taped and included approximately one full hour of collaborative learning interactions among students and teachers for each site. Both of these data sources acted as guideposts in the selection of learners and instructors using a semi-structured interview schedule. In total, 25 interviews with learners and 9 interviews with instructors were conducted. During the interview process, the video clips taped from each program site were used to probe deeper into the dynamics of the collaborative learning. Both interview data sources generated a preliminary list of themes that were used for discussion in the two focus groups with learners. These group interviews were conducted shortly after the individual learner interviews. The sixth data source included the artifacts that were collected from each program site and were categorized into institutional program documents, teacher-made learning materials and student’s writings. Researcher field notes that covered the entire span of the data collection phase were also used as a data source. These various data sources were transformed into research narratives and member checked with all key informants. They were then subjected to a data analysis path that used the constant comparative technique, direct interpretation, correspondence and patterns (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 2001).

Interpretation of the Findings

As an organizing scheme, the community of practice concept serves as a way of displaying the core data from this study. According to Wenger (1998) communities of practice are based on a sense of a common goal, an experience of mutual communication and a shared perspective on how things should be done. Figure 1 depicts some of the key components that make up a community of literacy practice across tutorial, small and large group adult programs.
Based on the data, collaborative learning is the cement that bonds the various building blocks in a community of literacy practice. In other words, collaborative learning is characterized by a progression of practices and events that occur from the moment of entry into a literacy program through to the exit door of the learning experience.

**Social Decision Making Practices**

As an adult student walks into a literacy program, he or she is greeted with a set-up for supportive learning that has already been arranged by the instructor. The teacher may decide to pair learners in a one-on-one match or to organize small groups. Instructors rely on their knowledge of individual learner’s needs, strengths and characteristics to make these decisions. For instance, in one literacy program aimed towards employment, the instructor matched some of the learners based on their linguistic backgrounds. This type of supportive learning initiates a key element in the community called Social Decision Making Practices. Social decision making is an important democratic opportunity for adults to accommodate their own interests and goals for participating in such a program. These decision making practices are often complex and involve an evaluation of their own learning needs, their perceptions of the abilities of peers, and decisions around who in the group has common learning goals and common cultural and life experiences. Given the diversity of learner abilities, these decision making practices can vary from day to day and week to week depending on the group composition but they help bind individuals...
together early in the learning process. These decisions influence the ongoing nature of the learner-to-teacher interactions and the learner-to-learner interactions.

**Instructor’s Philosophy and Leadership Style**

Both the instructor’s philosophical orientation towards adult education and a leadership style that focuses on participatory practices is central in developing a community of learners. Instructors have certain conceptions of their roles, the nature of learning and ideas about how student learning can be supported. They believe in the power of collaborative learning and view themselves as facilitators and orchestrators of activities always scanning the environment and observing the small group interactions. This teaching posture translates into particular methods and techniques that encourage collaboration among all ability levels of learners. Inside such a learning environment students feel comfortable and safe. Respect and trust are components of such a safe learning environment and set the stage for creating and managing meaningful learning experiences that are diverse and imbedded in real world examples.

**Functioning as a Team**

Based largely on leadership style, the instructor chooses certain teaching strategies that encourage learners to process new information, initiate self-assessment and act upon feedback. As the community of practice starts to gel, learner attitudes begin to develop and mature. These positive attitudes are a result of awareness that, although this type of learning is different, “it feels good”. As the day-to-day progress evolves, the community of learners begins to function as a team. What this means is that they are now well aware of their peers in terms of their abilities, needs and learning styles. In small groups, for instance, members know who are the less capable students and the type of support or feedback that they need. As well, inside the small group, the instructor practices a number of teaching phases commonly referred to as cognitive apprenticeship – modeling, approximating and fading. The more capable learners quickly pick up on these teaching strategies and practice them in the small groups or dyads. In one example, the more capable learner was careful not to do the task for the less capable peer but instead, allowed him to problem-solve on his own. During the modeling phase of the cognitive apprenticeship, less capable learners primarily watch, listen and closely imitate what the more skilled peers do. In the approximating phase, the less capable peer begins to ask for more information and for clarification in performing the steps in the task. The more capable learners encourage and relieve tension when progress is slow.

**Movement from Guided Learning to Independent Learning**

In a collaborative learning environment, both the roles of the instructor and the student gradually change. This change occurs as a student moves from a position of being guided in the learning to one where he or she experiences some sense of independence and autonomy. During this passage, the instructor moves from transmitting the information to facilitating the learning outcomes. This change in teaching style helps the
learner capitalize on their own abilities, knowledge and strategies that they have developed with other peers. As a result, engagement in the learning tasks is highly concentrated. As students move into an independent learning mode, they begin to learn to take responsibility for monitoring, adjusting plans, self-questioning and questioning others in the group. This sense of independent learning is evidenced when a student feels capable of managing their own learning, reflecting on how they have learned and tapping into a wider range of resources to help achieve a goal.

Informal Learning of other New Literacy Practices

In a collaborative learning environment, adults begin to see the connections between the practice of learning skills in the classroom or group and the practice of literacy skills in the world outside. Some students experience a type of transformation as they start to learn new things independently inside the program and in their home or community environments. This transfer of learning skills is a discovery that what was happening in one environment could be applied in a completely different one. Reading at home about a new topic or a newspaper headline and then expressing opinions in the group the next day helps make connections across different learning environments.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

There are several outcomes of this study for policy makers, researchers and adult literacy practitioners. Many adults who want to improve their literacy skills and become adaptable life-long learners face barriers because of the way literacy training programs are organized. Results of this study provide new insights on adult learning strategies that can help change the current way of delivering literacy services. Adopting a collaborative teaching style helps create a learning context in which ABE learners experience a change in how they view themselves. Initially when these learners enter literacy programs, they tend to view themselves as passive recipients of literacy skills and knowledge. Gradually they begin to feel that they can be active agents in their learning process. This is an empowering discovery for the learners, and because it can be transferred to other contexts in their lives, it fosters self-directed life long learning. Additionally, since many ABE learners bring with them memories of schooling that are often not positive, the sense of agency that collaborative learning promotes provides them with a novel and positive experience that further facilitate their learning.

At the same time, the findings support the need to use a socio-cultural approach to understand the social nature of literacy learning. At the policy level, the results of this investigation can help to integrate the research discourse on literacy as a social construct, social practices, and multi-literacies with the policy language of educational outcomes, educational planning and administration. On the adult literacy practice side, this study increases our understanding of adult learning and adult development with an emphasis on andregogical practices and literacy that is situated in the lives of the learners. The study provides us with some of the fundamental elements of classroom practice that can facilitate learning. Adult learners need to be able to participate in the decision making
about how and what to learn. Teachers in turn need to adopt a teaching philosophy and leadership style that helps create decentred classrooms in which their role shifts from that of a transmitter of knowledge to that of an orchestrator of learning activities and an accessible learning resource. This teaching style better approximates informal learning, and it increases the chance of transfer of classroom learning strategies to real life contexts outside the classroom.

References